

IMAGERY IN WEBSTER'S PLAYS

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Abstract:

The present paper intends to portray that imagery in drama is not a linguistic device or an ornamentation super imposed on the language but an integral part of the whole dramaturgy. Therefore a complete exhaustive study of the use of imagery will trace it's correlation with the theme, plot, character, atmosphere and mood.

Keywords: Imagery, Character Portrayal, Interpersonal Relationships and Multi faceted.

The present paper does not aim at an analysis of imagery in Webster's plays to discover the personal moods and proclivities of the dramatist therein. This is not to say that correspondences between images and the dramatist's own private personality do not exist, however impersonal drama-writing may be. Nor does the author intend to study Webster's images in relation to Elizabethan imagery in general, to show the dramatist's borrowings and the modifications thereof affected by the borrower, though such a study has its own interest and significance. Therefore, it is irrelevant for the purposes of the present paper to work out how even the most brilliant figures on inspection turn out to be old proverbs., (H. T. Price, "The Function of Imagery in Webster", *PMLA*, vol. 70), or how Webster 'notoriously lifted his images from a large number of writers' (ibid.). Imagery in drama is not a linguistic device or an ornamentation superimposed on the language, but an integral part of the whole dramaturgy. Hence its full study will, of necessity, require an analysis of its correlation with the theme, plot, character, atmosphere, mood, style, etc. This correlation is not by a sort of alternation with the different elements of a play, but is continuous and simultaneous, though individual images do sometimes perform their function in regard to the elements of the plays by alternation.

Imagery in Webster contributes to the atmosphere and mood of his plays and is a part of their dramatic structure. We find in them a consistent use of a double construction-an outer and an inner. Webster gives us

figure in action and figure in language and fuses the two so intimately that the whole play becomes one entire

figure. His imagery is many-faceted—simultaneously pointing and developing the theme, the structure, and, in fact, the whole fabric of the plays. It is not possible to analyze the varied functions of imagery in the plays of Webster in a short paper like the present one. I have confined my study, therefore, to the function of imagery as an aid to and a device of character-portrayal in *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Webster deals with a centreless world where characters seem to wade through a chaos of rottenness, corruption, hypocrisy and an absence of values, all resulting from a despiritualized, Machiavellian and extremely materialistic civilization. The concern of the characters is material advancement and immoral pleasure to the flagrant violation and sometimes complete neglect of the established norms and values of life at all levels-familial, social, political, and religious. Their interrelationships are characterized by mutual distrust, hypocrisy, deception, treachery and lack of communication. The darkness which has engulfed them seems palpable because of its constant presence and all-pervasiveness, which is sometimes partly dissipated but never completely eradicated by flashes of spiritual illumination. Images used in *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* contribute to character-portrayal to a significant extent. The images, at one and the same time, throw light on the characters using them and point to the characteristics of the persons evoking them.

Webster has written tragic satires and has made use of commentators, the important ones being Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi* and Flamineo in *The White Devil*. Since these plays deal with rottenness, corruption and crookedness in a world where human values are flouted in all spheres, Bosola and Flamineo use images drawn primarily from low life and filth. Bosola comments upon the essential condition of the world of his time : "places in the court are but like beds in the hospital, where this man's head lies at that man's foot, and so lower, and lower". (DM I, I, 66-69).

Flamineo characterizes the way to preferment in such a world thus: "Where knaves come to preferment they rise as gallowses are raised i th' Low Countries, one upon another's shoulders." (WD, II, i, 320-23)

Whenever Bosola and Flamineo in the role of commentators talk of contemporary society, their images demonstrate detachment, irony, and even cynicism, which are signaled by the general application of these images as well as by the use of 'like' and 'such as'.

Imagery used by the characters throws light on those characters themselves. The predominant and most intense images, which are often repeated in various shades, relate to filth, corruption and decay, and are used by characters like Bosola, Flamineo, the Cardinal, Monticelso, Francisco, and Ferdinand. Images drawn from animals, poison, death, treachery, and deception are also used mostly by these characters. The imagery, on the one hand, reflects their inner rottenness of nature, and on the other, gives us a clear idea of their behavior and of the deeds they are engaged in. Bosola draws his images from such sources as dung-hill, horse-leech, sick man's urine, dead pigeon, ulcerous wolf, worm-seed, basilisk, etc. Flamineo's images relate to stibium, gallows, mistletoes, gadfly, lightning, madness, the fair exterior of prostitutes, wolf, and 'cursed dogs'. Ferdinand and the Cardinal, Francisco and Monticelso The tools of destruction—use images of lightning and thunderbolt, storm and shipwreck, preying birds, 'cut-work in guts', 'gamekeeping', 'ranging and bowling', 'basilisk's eye', blasting with quicksilver, etc. But the Duchess, Antonio, Cornelia, Marcello and Delio, who are virtuous characters caught in the toils of rottenness and murderous corruption, use mostly such images as are related to nature, cosmic forces, the sun, the stars, heaven, the music of the spheres, Venus' dove, Fortune's wheel, the theatrical nature of the world, the crucifix, etc.

The images in the two plays of Webster focus on the interpersonal relations of the characters and on their attitudes to each other. Flamineo knows his position in regard to Bracciano from the outset. He is in Bracciano's employ to assist him in his immoral sexual deal with Vittoria and thus to further his own prospects of preferment. When he is talking to Bracciano, therefore, his images are characterised by sexual provocativeness, lust, and deception as part of the sex game. These images, considered in sequence, give us a complete picture of the rise, growth, and end of the sex game, as well as of the changing relationship between Flamineo and Bracciano.

Flamineo advises Bracciano to pursue his game (I, ii, 5) promising him assistance as "prompt as lightning". He explains the coyness, in Vittoria as a means merely of increasing his "appetite", and brushes aside the Duke's apprehended difficulties in his pursuit of Vittoria as groundless :

"If the buttry-hatch at court stood continually open there would be nothing so passionate crowding, nor hot suit after the beverage". (I, ii, 23-25)

The removal of another difficulty (the presence of Vittoria's husband, Camillo) is envisaged in terms of images relating to his brainlessness, sexual disease and impotence:

"A glider that hath his brains perish'd with quicksilver is not more cold in the liver. The great barriers molted not more feathers than he hath shed hairs, by the confession of his doctor. An Irish gamester that will play himself naked, and then wage all downward, at hazard, is not more venturous. So unable to please a woman that like a Dutch-doublet all his back is shrunk into breeches." (I, ii, 27-34).

Thus, the difficulties being removed, the path for Bracciano's 'destruction' is made smooth and Flamineo ironically and yet aptly advises him : "Shroud you

within this closet, my good lord." Vittoria will not fail Bracciano, says Flamineo, as she is tired of the severely limited pleasures of married life :

"it's just like summer bird-cage in a garden—the birds that are without, despair to get in, and the birds that are within despair and are in consumption for fear they shall never get out."

(I, ii, 43-46).

After Flamineo has worked up Bracciano's amorous 'fire', he prepares him for the destruction of Camillo as well as of his own wife. Flamineo clearly knows the way to attain his goal:

As rivers to find out the ocean

Flow with crook bendings beneath forced banks,

Or as we see, to aspire some mountain's top,

The way ascends not straight, but imitates,

The subtle foldings of a winter's snake.

(I, ii, 348-52)

Once Bracciano's foot on the path of evil is firmly set, Isabella's images of a "unicorn's horn making a preservative circle for a spider to force it to obeying and thus keep Bracciano away from infected straying" (II, ii, 14-18) and of "cassia or the natural sweets of the spring violet which is not yet withered" (II, i, 166-168), are juxta posed with Bracciano's image of an "amorous whirlwind hurrying her to Rome" for destruction. In the same context Monticelso's images of a "sting placed in the adder's tail", the "blasting of a pretty flower," and "shipwreck" (II, i, 35-42), and Francisco's images of "hawking and soaring eagles," "winding-sheet", "wild ducks at the Tiber, and rutting and consequent melancholy of stags," (II, i, 84-94) foretell ominous and disastrous courses of action. Francisco has now pledged to reduce Bracciano to a "mistletoe on sere elms spent by weather,/Let him

cleave to her (Vittoria) and both rot together" (II, i, 398-99). And this is confirmed by

Flamingo's image of "compounding a medicine stronger than garlic, deadlier than stibium the cantharides which are scarce seen to stick upon the flesh when they work to the heart." This figure in word is followed immediately by the figure in action in the appearance of Dr. Julio, an instrument of destruction. Flamineo describes him as one who "will shoot pills into a man's guts, shall make them have more ventages than a cornet or a lamprey" (II, i, 299-300) and as one who is a cursed antipathy to nature—with his eyes bloodshot like a needle a churgeon stitcheth a wound with" (II, i, 307-8).

Flamingo's journey to preferment takes a winding and crooked course. Through his images of the winding rivers and serpentine ascent to high mountains, he comes to the realization that his goal is merely "like the wealth of captains, a poor handful,/Which in thy palm thou bear'st, as men hold water,/Seeking to gripe it fast" (III, i, 42-45).

He knows the danger and difficulty of the course adopted by him : But as we seldom find the mistletoe Sacred to physic on the builder oak Without a mandrake by it, so in our gain of quest. (III, i, 50-52)

But there seem to be no other avenues for preferment in the world of Webster. Flamineo has "to endure the strokes like anvils or hard steel/Till Pain itself make us no pain to feel" (III, iii, 1-2). Bracciano, in the scene at the house of convertites, 'rewards' Flatineo by chiding and threatening to torture him. Flamineo expresses his relationship with Bracciano (which, by extension, becomes the relationship between Flamineos and Braccianos in general) through the image of the "miserable courtesy of Polyphemus to Ulysses." Clearly, he knows that Bracciano has "reserved him to be devoured last" (IV, ii, 64-65). This explains why, from now on, his images relate mostly to politic behavior, tricks, maneuvering, caution, deception, etc. He advises Bracciano to "catch women as you take tortoisés/She

must be turn'd on her back, " (IV, ii, 151-52), and warns him against behaving "like a ferret to let go your hold with blowing" (IV, ii, 168). Flamingo's renewal and readjustment of his relationship with Bracciano (now that the "tide's turned the vessel") draws from him images of deception and ingratitude. The images of the wooden Grecian horse (IV, ii, 198-201) and the "barber-surgeon bird to the crocodile in the river Nilus" (IV, ii, 222-35), are the most striking examples. His relationship with Bracciano is now that of a man holding the "wolf by the ears" (V, i, 154). Similarly, his pretended and politic attachment to Zanche has made him a 'frighted dog with a bottle at's

tail, that fain would bite it off and yet dares not look behind him' (V, i, 158-60). But he counters Zanche's demand for a response to her love with the remark that "Lovers' oaths are like mariners' prayers, uttered in extremity but when the tempest is over, are soon forgotten" (V, i, 176-78). He knows his nurture now and is conscious of the wolf in him :

"Faith, like a wolf in a woman's breast; I have been fed with poultry" (V, iii, 56-57),

As he started ill, so he continued, and even when his end is near his images remain associated with poison, death, wolf and the raven', and the 'flaming firebrand' (V, iv, 35, 47-49). Flamingo's apparently static character of inner rottenness and Machiavellianism seems to have an under current, though a feeble one, of human goodness. This appears in his confession of the qualm of conscience, expressed in an image of emotive connotation : "We think caged birds sing, when indeed they cry" (V, iv, 123). His perspective of life now clarifies:

Are you still like some great men
That only walk like shadows up and down,
And to no purpose?
(V, iv)

In his habitual half serious and ironic tone he depicts the futility of human pride, grandeur, and glory in the image of "Alexander cobbling shoes, Pompey tagging points, Julius Caesar making hair buttons; Hannibal selling blacking, and August crying garlic, Charlemagne selling lists by the dozen, and King Pippin crying apples in a cart drawn with one horse" (V, vi, 107-21). His realization of the futility of life, and of the unavailing struggle of man with Fate increases, as his end approaches :

Fate's a spaniel
We cannot beat it from us,... (V, vi, 177-78)

He visualizes clearly the calm of death, "a long silence" and the "nothingness" of this life of worldliness. And as the filth and rottenness covering his conscience is thinned out by his experience he realizes the 'nobility of Vittoria whom he has always used as a tool for his advancement. The calm which he experiences in death is conveyed by a cosmic image :

Then cast anchor
Prosperity doth bewitch men seeming clear,
But seas do laugh, show white, when rocks are near
We cease to grieve, cease to be Fortune's slaves,
Nay cease to die by dying...
While we look up to heaven we confound
Knowledge with knowledge. O I am in a mist.
(V, vi, 249-53, 259-60)

When we look at Bracciano, we find that his course of love has developed into a distrust of Vittoria and a gradual disillusionment in lustful love. His images,

therefore, are of ruin and indignation. He will now “give her the bells to let (her) fly to the devil” (IV, ii, 81-82). He realizes that the bewitching Vittoria has been his ruin :

Thou hast led me, like a heathen sacrifice,
With music, and with fatal yokes of flowers
To my eternal ruin.

(IV, ii, 89-91)

Ultimately, indeed, she appears to him as a 'wolf'. His reference to the image of 'quicksilver' as a potent cause for gilders' madness, on the one hand demonstrates the maddening agitation of his mind, while, on the other, it foretells his own madness. His images from

now onwards express a wistful desire for his own death and the destruction of his adversaries. “Soft natural death” appears to be the only solution to the problem of life, because death, at least, cannot be affected by the “rough-bearded comet” the “dull owl beats not against (its) casement,” and “the hoarse wolf scents not (its) carrion” (V, iii, 29-33). But the feverishness of mind resulting from the rottenness of his past life breeds only the images of filth, devil, etc. Flamineo appears to him as a 'devil' whom he knows “by a great rose he wears on's shoe/To hide his cloven foot” (V, iii, 104-5), and as “dancing on the ropes...with a money-bag in each hand to keep him even” (V, iii, 107-10). Vittoria, likewise, appears to him as one whose “hair is sprinkled with arras powder, that makes her look as if she had sinn'd in the pastry” (V, iii, 117-18). The priest's arrival at Bracciano's death bed invokes to him the image of “six gray rats that have lost their tails, crawling up the pillow” (V, iii, 123-24), and before his exit from the world he demands that a “rat catcher” be brought.

The images used by Vittoria also correspond with the development of her character while, at the same time, throwing light on and signaling her relationships with other characters—notably, Bracciano, Francisco and Montcelso. In the beginning, when talking to Bracciano, she uses images of the shady yew tree, the grave “checkered with cross-sticks”, and “a whirlwind which let fall a massy arm from that strong plant” (1, ii, 231-35), which signal her favorable response to Bracciano's overtures and her fears of Isabella and Camillo, as potent hurdles in the way of her love. When talking to Francisco and Montcelso, she uses images of preying, shooting, filth, poison, horse-leech, wolf, etc., (III, ii, 24-25, 35, 40, 150- 51, 202-5). These throw light on the characters of these persons (who are vindictive, evil, and destructive) and their relationship with Vittoria is thus high lighted. Vittoria also uses the images of “diamonds and glassen hammers”, “feigned shadows of evils terrifying babes” (III, ii, 144-49) and “diamonds

through darkness spreading their richest light” (III, ii, 294), which show her courage before her adversaries, and her determination to live without fear. But when she has lived in the house of convertites for some time and her relations with Bracciano are strained, her attitude to life

undergoes a change, and disillusionment dawns on her. She then uses images of disease, decay, and death. She talks of “those sick o'th' palsy” (IV, ii, 110-11), of a “limb corrupted to an ulcer” and of going “weeping to heaven on crutches” (IV, ii, 121-23). The growing coolness of her attachment to Bracciano is signaled by the image of the “snowball” (IV, ii, 180-7). As the inevitable end of her life approaches, her images are primarily drawn from “gall and stibium” (V, vi, 60), “blazing, ominous stars” (V, vi, 132-33) and “a blackbird that would sooner fly/To a man's bosom, than to stay the gripe Of the fierce sparrow-hawk” (V, vi, 185-86). The progress of her character (from images of lustful joy and courage, through suffering, disillusionment and the apprehension of the inevitable danger to her life) is complete, in the process of a gradual clarifying of her perspective, by the image of her mystic journey beyond this world :

My soul, like to a ship in a black storm
Is driven I know not whither.

Since the characters of Francisco, Montcelso and Lodovico do not grow psychologically, their images throughout remain tied to treachery, deception, poison, murder, wolf, preying, shipwreck, and storm. Since they themselves create (and can never escape from) the atmosphere of rottenness and gloom in which they

live, their own images relating to rottenness, decay and darkness are very few. Characters like Camillo, Isabella and Cornelia, who are relatively virtuous, are very niggardly in the use of images. This paucity of imagery in the dialogue of these characters demonstrates their weak reaction to the world around them. But in extreme emotional situations they do use images which have profound meanings. Cornelia talks of “earthquakes” (1, ii, 216-18) and “mildew on a flower” (I, ii, 271-72) when her premonition of the ensuing ruin of her family is at its clearest. And when she has gone mad—and the state of her mind is hypersensitive—she uses images of “robin-red-breast, field mouse, and wolf”, which both characterize her own predicament and foretell a doom on others.

In The Duchess of Malfi, Bosola, like 'Flamineo, uses more images than several other characters put together. The very first image used by Bosola shows the cast of his mind ::

Blackbirds fatten best in hard weather;
Why not I, in these dog-days?

(1, 1, 37-38)

All the images used by him about Ferdinand and the Cardinal are drawn from filth, rottenness, corruption, crookedness, decay and destruction. Ferdinand and his brother are described as "plumtrees, that grow crooked over standing pools...o'er laden with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them" (1, i, 49-52). His own relationship with them is clear from what immediately follows: "I would hang on their ears like a horse-leech till I were full and then drop off" (1, i, 52-54). He knows the reward for service to these "plum-trees": "There are rewards for hawks, and dogs, when they have done us service; but for a soldier, that hazards his limbs in a battle, nothing but a kind of geometry is his last supportation" (1, i, 59-61). He is fully conscious of the socially and morally degraded world in which the lot of preferment-seekers is cast: "places in the court are but like beds in the hospital, eic.," (1, i, 67-8). Naturally, therefore, his attitude

towards Ferdinand and the Cardinal is one of bitterness and distrust. Knowing their capacity and will for destruction, the images he uses, almost inevitably, are those of thunderbolt and lightning (1, i, 246-7), of filth and "cow-dung" (1, i, 285-6). His images descriptive of the Old Woman, besides being related to crookedness, rottenness and poison, are also characterized by his own cynicism:

...in thy face here, were deep ruts and foul sloughs .

(II, i, 24-25)

I would sooner eat a dead pigeon, taken from the soles of the feet of one sick of the plague, than kiss one of you fasting.

(II, i, 39-40)

The most significant feature of his imagery is that not even a single image of filth or rottenness is used in regard to the Duchess or even Antonio, which signals their virtuous character. The Duchess acts as a catalytic agent to precipitate the qualm of Bosola's conscience. Once his conscience is awakened, the images used by him to describe either the Duchess or Antonio are cosmic and related to the higher values of life. Bosola's character, in other words, develops beyond the early 'dung-hill' and 'horse-leech' images to those in which he perceives a higher life, where the utter futility of worldly struggles and the hollowness of pride and power is highlighted:

Glories, like glow-worms, afar off shine bright,

But look'd to near, have neither heat, nor light.

(IV, ii, 144-5) We are merely the stars' tennis-balls, struck and banded

Which way please them ..

(V, iv, 54-55)

We are only like dead walls, or vaulted graves,

That ruin'd, yield no echo.....

O, this gloomy world!

In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness,
Doth womanish and fearful mankind live. (V, V, 97-102)

The images used by the Cardinal and Ferdinand show their static character, since throughout they use images of treachery, filth, destruction, poison and death only. Ferdinand's images in regard to the Duchess are mostly related to lust and destruction, which throws light on his lustful and incestuous infatuation for his sister, the frustration of which breeds in him a determination to destroy her. In hypertension of mind, he sees his sister as "laughing/Excellent hyena... and in the shameful act of sin" (II, v, 37-40). His choleric nature is reflected in his use of images of "bleeding", "wounds", "blasting", etc. Nemesis overtakes him, and in the end he suffers from lycanthropia, the Doctor's picture of Ferdinand—"as a wolf's skin was hairy on the outside/His on the inside" (V, ii, 17-18)—corresponding with what he has been throughout his life. Even in death, the image of this world which remains to him is one of filth and beastliness: of "the world as a dog-kennel" (V, v, 65-67).

The images used by the Duchess and Antonio are predominantly those of nature, the stars, the sky, the motion and music of the spheres, Venus' dove, etc.:

And may our sweet affections, like the spheres,

Be still in motion...

Quickening, and make

The like soft music.

(I, i, 481-4)

Venus had two soft doves

To draw her chariot: I must have another. (III, ii, 21-22)

Their virtuous lise at the beginning of the play (when they use mostly cosmic, religious images) soon encounters evil, after which they also use images of deception and rottenness which characterize the world in which their lot is cast:

...their false lights

are to rid bad wares off... (1, i, 431-33)

But such images are infrequent and there are no images of disease or decay in their dialogue. When, at the end, the Duchess attains to a new consciousness of a higher life and of the world beyond this one, she uses images drawn from the theater, heaven and Fortune's wheel:

I account this world a tedious theatre

For I do play a part in 't 'gainst my will.

(IV, i, 84-5)

Th' heaven o'er my head seems made of molten brass, The earth of flaming sulphur... (IV, ii, 25-6)

Our analysis of imagery in Webster's *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* must conclude that, while characterizing the mood, atmosphere and theme of the plays, imagery also contributes to character-

portrayal. Francisco and Monticelso, Ferdinand and the Cardinal use mostly static images, which demonstrates that there is no development in their character. These are evil characters and hence their images are consistently drawn from filth, decay, rottenness, poison, death, animal life, etc. But there is an inner development in the characters of Vittoria and Flamineo, the Duchess and Bosola, which is signaled by a corresponding development in their images. The images are a running commentary on the interpersonal relationships of the characters in the plays. They reflect the attitudes of the characters towards each other and, at the same time, throw light on their own personalities.

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