

First Line in Shakespeare's Plays; Technique and Meaning

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Giving readers the first initial attraction into the text looks a mandatory prerequisite in literature. The first few words, as expected, should galvanize attention and create the first impact on the reader and prepare for the following lines. The introductory speech is expected to brief readers and audience about the yet to unfold plot. The first line is supposed to lead readers into the atmosphere of the play and help them get wheeled into the events and above all, encapsulate, as much as possible, the tenure of the play by giving the preliminary dose supposed to form an embryonic of yet to cluster understanding of events or in other words try to offer a platform to weave a gradual crystallization of the nature of characters. Again the first line is supposed to help put the course of events on the expected track to make the best approach possible to the play. In Shakespeare's plays, , first lines are mostly telling because they key in events, characters and the plot itself with meticulous and careful choice of words.

As expected wording the first line is supposed to leave the reader automatically wheeled into the intriguing and complex world of Shakespeare's plays which often start by introducing the hero who, as events tell, could be heading for a no win situation or a decisive junction or even a whole reshuffling of chances and consequently the course of action. This technique should help galvanize reader's attention to help bring under focus the tenor of the play on one hand and provoke an anticipation process in the reader's mind by stirring further mental encounter with the title of the play and its affiliated ideas the first line gives. Readers could feel moving from no man's land, so to speak, to a well defined territory as far as coming to grip with events suggested in the first line are concerned.

In the play the first few words are set to suggest an event, an action in progress or an opinion or tell of a problem that could be moral or otherwise. Once the first character starts uttering the first sentence , a line of events seem traceable and leading to the very end ushered in by giving a chance for a new start to those who have survived the scenario of events implied in the wordings of the first line where the heroes or their proxies deliver their verdict on a course of events supposed to be foretold in the first line . what may add credibility to this suggestion is that some first line words do match and foretell others in the closing line of the play or at least imply a recurrence of ideas and this assumption will be elucidated and discussed in this paper.

Once the play opens audience get automatically wheeled into the atmosphere of the play by a spontaneous attempt to receive and perceive the first few words by the first speaker character who to stimulate their quest for a preliminary meaning of plot he makes what be a statement, an opinion, a query or what might be seen as a flashback. Viewers reception would immediately allow them to delve the atmosphere of events they are being briefed about with a heightened sense of expectations especially when the introductory line carries clear worry of yet to come events. Arising viewer's sense of fear implied in expectations serves to narrow down any margin of disinterest between viewers or readers on one hand and the play itself on the other. The opening statement initiates an address to others or a dialogue paving the way for the main theme to develop.

This paper deals with five of Shakespeare's plays namely Julius Caesar, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra, Hamlet and Othello and it attempts a close scrutiny of the first speaker's words , atmosphere, time, colour, diction, manners, and intonations the first line conveys. The objective sets to try locate and find a common ground or a panel of assessment to help get to an early tracking of the theme or themes concurrently woven so that a comparative look into the opening line of the plays mentioned is possible.

Julius Caesar starts with one of the tribunes, an official elected by the people in ancient Rome to defend their rights . ironically enough, this man who is supposed to be layman's mouthpiece is he himself trying to swindle them on their opinion of Caesar, whose victory procession is expected soon on the streets of Rome. Flavius, the tribune, is addressing crowds. The wording of the first line implies an improvisation and an open exercise of power. His speech reads:

Hence! Home, you idle creature, get you home

Using this archaic form of the verb 'go away' tends to affiliate readers and audience alike with a distinct Roman style of characters who are supposed and even should prefer, due to their ranks, speak in soldierly tone and thus incorporate others in a typically Roman milieu to bring Roman legend of power alive and vivid. Again lexicographically speaking he wants to stress: place, dimension and locality to employ and have news of Caesar's arrival invested on the spot for his own benefit. Alliteration as is the case in 'Hence! And 'home' could create a syntactical unit to emphasise authority and efficiency of words and content. This request go away leaves no room for doubt that Flavius wants his fellow countrymen to vacate the place to avoid eye contact an expected event and possibly bar them from a yet to be woven scenario of dramatic events until they get flushed into the open. This introductory line serves to support the establishment of a flowing syntax so that any exaggeration of its syntactical association could produce the effect needed. Flavius, in short, validates this assumption by showing a pure exercise of power where he wants a crowd to be kept in the dark 'idle creatures' a term that forcibly recalls the division of Roman social classes and its strata. He, Flavius, belongs to the upper class, meritorious and privileged belonging where power and decision making are monopolized. Caesar's triumphant return from his military campaign looks pregnant with unexpected and drastic developments as events later on unfold as the first line suggests. Is his triumph a harvest for Rome or is it to add more credit to his career imbued with victorious, a record that could bring with it more peerage envy than appreciation. The dialogue between Flavius, joined by Marullus and people on the street unveil a dormant desire to let people have a second thought about Caesar. A commoner wants to 'see Caesar and rejoice in his triumph' Marullus' address to the commoner crystallizes his ill thought of Caesar 'Wherefore rejoice? What conquest brings he home?'

Again his plea to commoners confirms that his objective is to drive a wedge between people and Caesar and thus pave the way for the yet to be known and very famous 'Ides of March' and its subsequent tragic development. His request to people in the first line is repeated later on when he again calls on commoners to 'go, go', the objective is destined to win public opinion or, in short, the first round against Caesar.

The first line does not only set action in motion but it marks the first step to the looming bloody confrontation and its aftermath. The request made to the crowd to go home suggests more than an oblivious attempt to push people into a position they know nothing about but while certainly they, the would be conspirators, would greatly bank on keeping the public temporarily marginalised only to stir them against Caesar in due course and. The conspiracy to murder Caesar will yet hatch in the darkness away from the public and any would be objective opinion that may see matters differently or get sympathetic to Caesar. The silent resentment against Caesar by the would be conspirators prepares the scene for Cinna's cry in public when he breaks out the news of the murder and the reason behind it. 'Tyrant is dead' is set to vindicate such a crime on national basis where, according to the killers, Rome is saved from tyranny and despotism. So the first line which implies a move to keep Caesar away from sympathizers and keep them in the dark serves its objective. Events as the first line tells move from camouflaged certainty of intentions to an outright and open development into an open and to a bloody outcome later on. Embryonic growth of the conspiracy tends to bar Caesar from the hero's welcome waiting for him where mood and atmosphere of the public look jubilant and joyful. Entry line is worded to help facilitate a move to events hatching in darkness and foretold in dreams. To further this point Shakespeare uses a distinctively Roman style for characters:

soldierly' style where by conventions a plain

manner of speech comes to be equated with

integrity of characters'

Flavius' introductory statement establishes a Roman fashion of speech that is delivered short and telling, a method serving not only to illustrate a profile of the turbulent and bizarre nature of Roman politics but also to highlight a Roman soldierly manner where less words should serve more action. Hence the first line ends

with only one word into the second line 'home' a start meant to imply a gathering storm in the horizon. Shakespeare's tactics uses the first line to address mostly uneducated audience. To help hook them into the atmosphere and the plot he employs alliteration 'Hence'! Home' to keep the demand recurrent and resounding in the ears and minds of spectators and readers alike. The first sentence ends with 'home' a recurrent alliteration, a stress serving poetic style to maximize effect. In *Antony and Cleopatra* the first words delivered by Philo conveys a sense of dependence on eloquence to make his point very clear. To press home his view about Antony's indulgence in his degrading relationship with Cleopatra. He makes a pause in a line equivalent to a syllable conveying a poetic sentiment to express full awareness of Antony's love for Cleopatra. He says:

Nay, but this dotage of our general's

O' verflows the measure:

The objective of the play looks laid out from the very beginning of the play where Shakespeare places Philo as a commentator to point out the consequences of serious derangement of ethical and moral values. Antony alluded at as 'our general' is seen as a man who is suffering from a major defect in his nature, a demi god known as a generous general and described as divinely endowed with nobleness and integrity. The first line flows into the second only to give a meaningful pause, a space for listeners to catch breath and even absorb the shocking news of a demigod transformed into 'clown'. The tactic employed in Antony and Cleopatra's entry shows unbelievable and inconceivable news given in doses. Philo's speech goes for eight lines. It ends when he points out the terrible outcome of a man who glows like plated Mars a man more degraded than a gypsy. There is no relaxation in the flow of clauses. Each is worded to second the previous and pave way for the next to accommodate the ideas the theme is going to consider.

In this play the first line draws the curtain on a serious event, a technique Shakespeare uses to forge a space to unveil the past by clarifying the speaker's point of view. Unlike the introductory line in Julius Caesar Philo shows deep resentment at Antony's unbecoming behaviour, military wise, right from the outset. The wording of the first line feeds into drawing the viewer from a twilight zone to a well defined one.

'Nay' by which the play starts is structured by hyperbole..

A move destined to ensure maximum shock at Antony's self degradation, the general's fall from grace. This genitive 'general' occurs in colloquial use to prepare for the closing words of his first speech. Antony , Philo concludes, has become:

The bellows and the fan

To cool a gypsy's lust.

Using genitive to refer to Cleopatra with the gypsy's lust 5 equates her, semantically speaking with Antony who is previously alluded at as the man who is suffering from the infirmity of age. 'Dotage of our general's' Philo's refrain to mention the names of Cleopatra and Antony is breach of tradition where he, Philo, is supposed to name them with full respect to names and titles, a move that may convey too strong a feeling of reservations even to mention utter their names. However, Shakespeare's technique does not leave a space for audience to start a guessing game. The first line draws contour of events very clear. Antony and Cleopatra's love has ostracized them from the rest and polarized an unfavourable stance against them Shakespeare has used a strong worded statement in a language as forcible as he could make to leave no doubt that Antony's infatuation with Cleopatra has gone beyond limits. The concluding line seconds this view which seems to reiterate the first statement about Antony. According to Dolores Mc Burton in her Shakespeare's Grammatical Style, she finds

The style of Antony and Cleopatra typically periodic:

Sentences with structure rather like an onion, whose

minor syntactic element surrounded the main clause

that lies at the center.[6]

Phil's statement that starts by reference to Antony ends with another reference to Cleopatra . First and last clauses seem to engulf yet other clauses and elaborate on them his main concern in the main clause is to convey that Antony's love for Cleopatra has rendered him to a mere clown. The resumed main clause has modified the first one in the first line complicated though the speech may seem the main clause remains simple and there is no implied meaning. The first line does look intended for description only. it does not luxuriate in extensive nor in boring details. It opens in forceful opinion . Antony is not anymore himself. There is no punning on words nor there is any discrepancy between surface appearance and what might be described as sordid reality. The first line in Antony and Cleopatra ushers in a quick movement leaving no pause nor relief for characters and audience alike.

Unlike *Antony and Cleopatra*, Hamlet goes for double approach. The hero is seen and rumoured to be on the verge of lunacy however such a claim is not irrefutable.

Midnight the time when the play starts veils people's moves and intentions. In Hamlet the image of the introductory scene looks relevant to Shakespeare's opening lines in both plays discussed earlier. However, it differs in terms of timing. The play opens at midnight, a neutral hour, between two days; the passing one and the coming day. such a timing impersonalizes issues and securely and elegantly it expresses a matter worth of unfolding. Bernardo commences the play by a shout into quiet and what looked like a peaceful night and a call for some to identify him or herself.

Who is there? [7]

Normally and naturally darkness could be open on all possibilities and unexpected surprises and so is the one asked to identify him or herself, he could be any one and could carry any unexpected approaches. As the play later on unfolds, action initiates from darkness into light. The ghost of Hamlet's father resides in darkness and comes out of darkness and so is the seemingly 'riddling unexplained' murder of Hamlet's father. The question by which the play starts should feed into stimulating an investigative and guessing process.

The answer to this query of who is there and before that who is the murderer is reminiscent of Philo's initial statement in *Antony and Cleopatra*. 'Nay' which speaks of a particularized power of revulsion and disdainfulness and it is also punctuates the forthcoming events. In Hamlet there is a sense of weirdness governed by eerie atmosphere The answer reads:

Nay, answer me, stand and unfold for Yourself.[8]

The timing of the start of the play at midnight is set to make people, naturally, realize that it is going to open on day light and hence, the imbalance of situation into which Hamlet is plunged after the mysterious death of his father is expected to get redeemed and tip in his favour. 'Who is there' feeds into neutral definition of the nature of the one being called upon to identify him or herself. The eerie atmosphere arises people's sense of expectation especially there is no one to focus spot light on, characters are silhouetted against any source of light and there must be torches to dissipate darkness so that an initial identification can be made. Language and costumes become means of identification. 'Who is there' a few usual and common words is a coherent phrase calling for elaboration , as is the case with murder where a bloodcalls for more blood. 'Who' is employed as punning on words as it is revealed later on in the play. When Polonius asks Hamlet about the books Hamlet is reading the dialogue serves to add more mystery to the play. Questions commences with who.

Polonius: What do you read, my lord?

Hamlet: Words, words, words.

Polonius: What is the matter, my lord?

Hamlet: Between who? [9]

The answer to ‘Who is there?’ could be any thing by any one, and the unknown killer could be anyone and the use of ‘who’ functions to make plain and obvious the play’s objective, murder and revenge, very clearly and right from the beginning. The call for identification forcibly draws attention, and even it leaves no breathing space for audience to ponder about any supposed answer. This short phrase corners thoughts, rises tension and triggers off awareness of a steady creeping of a process of illumination to help flush into the open a mysterious event, the murder of king Hamlet, the father. Timing and dialogue and atmosphere are expected to lead from darkness into light, a technique Shakespeare has employed in another play; Othello.

Night and darkness engulf Rodrigo, the character who kicks off events in Othello, where a major event that hatched in the darkness, the secret marriage of Venice’s most beautiful and respected lady to the Moor Othello, is going to be unveiled. The introductory line reads:

Tush, never tell me. I take much unkindly

That thou, Iago, who has had my purse

As if the strings were thine, should know of this.

The opening statement runs quickly into motion. Rodrigo, the Venetian gentleman, is out of his nature with the man who has access to his purse. The secret marriage has already taken place, most likely in darkness and now the play starts in darkness. Iago wants to rouse her father to break out news of the secret marriage of his daughter, Desdemona to the ‘thick lipped’ [11]. The first line is halved by a short sentence and a phrase. The first half expresses an accusatory setting and statement anticipating the witching of an ‘intruder’. The first few words weave a textual crux and an enigmatic tissue where the next phrase tires to modify it and to unfold its particularities. Using ‘Tush’ confronts readers with another negation, ‘never’ Rodrigo sounds very impatient and the two negations delve quickly into issues related to the unfolding event. The two words present a special resonance almost clustering to indicate anger at keeping the speaker in the dark about a hush marriage. His statement should correspond to Venice as a whole, the city that has been kept in the darkness about such a great social event. Rodrigo represents polarized Venetian mentality vis-a-vis aliens, that is likely to have similar distraught feelings about such an unexpected marriage that leaves locals in a similar position taken by Philo who viewed Cleopatra as nothing more than a gypsy woman. Europeans and Venetians alike viewed the Moors from religious and racial perspective. The moors:

Logically hopeless situation, and regarded as infidels

Whether they converted or not, [12]

Othello, top general of the Venetian army, is alien, a stranger in another literal term. Rodrigo’s address to Iago polarizes attitudes and implicitly recalls a line of demarcation already set between Moors, Turks, and Venetians i.e. between east and west. ‘Tush’ the introductory word makes a good start to key in a popularly chosen and reductive view of Othello’s background, the Moor who is seen and described as the ‘wrought man’ [13] and who, contrary to such held opinion and according to Desdemona, has his ‘visage in his mind’ [14]. Again ‘tush’ linguistically speaking, describes an insignificant item. Iago, the fox, has brought about and achieved negativity. Othello, the respected Moor, as events later on unfold, is brought down from the zenith of his glory and even was reduced to nothing, a man who is prey to the ‘green eyed monster’. The first line generates an

implicit understanding of a reductive and offensive nature by Iago and Barabantio at the same time. The first few words including 'never tell me' predict a wedge yet to be driven. The fair minded Othello has rivals to the hands of Desdemona and envious eyes on his military post at the same time. They can never accept that she could fall in love with what she feared to look on 15. The use of never sets to serve an already made decision by some that Othello can never be accepted by some Venetians and let alone his secret marriage and implicitly and above all Moors can never be integrated into European society. Such an undeclared view rests on east-west conscious tension that sometimes flares up into open conflict. Despite being of royal blood [15]

he, according to some has

Characteristics of the savage, a hyperbolic utterance

When roused and an unreasoning passion [16].

However he is still portrayed as the noble Moor 17 but for Iago and Roderigo he is nothing more than a thief who has stolen a lamb, a clear Christian connotation affiliated to Christ, especially when Turk related Moor is involved. So this rising tension is set to be woven right from the outset of the play, a magnet tragedies cluster events around.

In Macbeth, the opening words in the opening scene sets the tone in the whole action 18 three witches convene to prepare for another meeting they want it to happen only in treacherous whether conditions, an atmosphere affiliated to Macbeth's hideous and treacherous deed of murdering his cousin, King Duncan. The witches' objective lies in giving a prophecy to Macbeth, a Scottish general who is heading back home from a victorious battle, and renowned for bravery.

When shall we three meet again?

In thunder, lightning or in rain? [19]

The short sentence leaves no space for manoeuvring from the intended question and expected answer. The witch makes it clear that they need to meet again when nature changes drastically. The foretold meeting spot corresponds to strikingly similar description further into the play when Macbeth turns violent, like furious nature, targeting a defenceless man in his sleep, as is the case when violent nature catches man off guard. The witches' statement of the meeting keys in a storm of blood. When events gather pace the image of angry nature and strange things create the background for the unexpected murder. An old man says and describes an unnatural happening

A falcon

Was by a mousing owl hawked and killed.[20]

Rosse, a Scottish nobleman, describes yet further unnatural events.

And Duncan's horses..

Turned wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out

Contending against obedience, as though they make

War with man kind.[21]

Ross, describes the strange developments in the night of Duncan's murder:

The night has been unruly

And as they say [22]

Lamentings heard in the air: strange screams of death.

The obscure bird [23]

Violent storms show nature's different face where it looks like waging a war of terror against people. The first witch suggests that she and her sisters should meet when nature turns nasty and angry.

This reported recurrent image recalls the first witch's description of the face of nature they want to see at their meeting. They prophesied something great, a mystery Macbeth was not ready to solve. The short question by which the play starts forwards a combined event of nature and man. man has gone against three major laws: he, Macbeth has killed his cousin, an unarmed man, an old man, and above all, a king, seen as the face of God on earth according to ancient laws. A violent act like that corresponds to the image of angry nature which looks sympathetic to the old man, king Duncan. The plot which shows intrigues and conspiracies and dangers to kings could be set as a background to possible similar scenarios, an experience that England was yet to face.

Monarchy in England Scotland as is the case in most kingdoms looked to have been enshrined in the mentality of English people. Dethroning a monarch was a procedure or an act unthinkable of.

Duncan's murder is an act of betrayal and an act of armed insurrection against the king. Shakespeare presented the theme of betrayal because at the time England had to see the execution of:

Earl of Essex for leading a futile insurrection against

Elizabeth 1: in 1603 Sir Walter Raleigh was imprisoned

For his part in a plot to overthrow king James [24]

In the run up to the civil war serious controversy raged concerning the sanctity of the monarchy. Such events were topped by the famous Gun Powder conspiracy to blow up the parliament by Guy Fawkes who along with others was executed. It looked as if English monarchy was not secure from the turbulent atmosphere which flared up into open civil war later on between the king and parliament, a tumultuous period ended with the execution of king Charles the first in 1649 by the round Heads, followers of Cromwell.

Macbeth could have been intended to ring an alarm bell foretelling of the bloody consequences of rising against a monarch let alone murdering him, an act that is likely to create a fireball of nature's anger, so to speak, and a storm of blood, as is the case on the night of Duncan's murder and its bloody aftermath, where nature looks to have unleashed its fury, thunder and sounds of anger that are reminiscent of the ominous foretelling of the witches' next meeting place, thunder, lightning and rain. Witches' meeting in atrocious weather synthesises man and the element in a oneness of being where they, notorious for ominous happening, look to have been aided by nature's fury to bring about the maximum effect, fear of the unknown coupled with what could be seen as man's untamed nature. Like a wave of unstoppable storm, Macbeth's ambition led him to kill the king, seen as the face of God on earth, an action that pushed him to the eye of the storm which, mercilessly, swept many and eventually terminated his being and prepared the scene for new dynasty and a new phase in the history of Scotland.

Scanning the opening lines of the five plays there seems to be a consistent line supposed to keep readers and audience in a tense mood, a technique that could be identifiable with the mood of Europe in general. Giving that initial dose of worry looks a part of the dramatic technique that incorporate man into the rapidly changing Europe. The continent was gearing up for a full blown renaissance. Transitional period detaches man from the past and incorporates him into a new era was essential as a process of labour where pain of evolvment is inevitable and in such a case transition, means expectations.

Ample expectations at all levels mixed hope with worry, an image of everyday life that engendered survival of the fittest as the forcibly daily embraced philosophy norm. a new tomorrow was likely to

bring with it any thing from catastrophe to reward. Macbeth, Othello, Julius Caesar and unexpected surprises where the spirit of expectations present a panel for forthcoming action with bias delineating polarized attitudes. The three of them have lost their lives and so are Antony and Cleopatra. Hamlet's progress filters hope out of despair and vice versa. Change of fortune is ushered in right from the first line coupled with a gradual rewriting of events and ensuing in ends foretold in the first line. From unstable situation, the plays move to a stable one even at the cost of blood shed, a tax Renaissance attempted to help spare man paying it. Humanism had started to gain ground on European theatre of events and hence:

The nature of human life was a new theme in literature, and shows the renaissance concern with how to understand life and death in the modern world [25]. The plays that have been dealt with in the paper show meticulous concern with allocating man new space and being, a key question Shakespeare plays and plots could afford to answer.

Footnotes:

1. G. B. Harrison Shakespeare The Complete Works, Harcourt, Brace and World inc. New York 1989, p. 814.
2. S.S. Hussey, The Literary Language of Shakespeare, Longman, London, 1992, p. 45.
3. Ibid, p. 171.
4. Stanley Wells, ed. Shakespeare Studies, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, p. 62.
5. G. B. Harrison, ed. Cit. p. 1236.
6. William Shakespeare, quoted in S.S. Hussey, The Literary Language of Shakespeare, ed. Cit. p. 94.
7. Ibid. p. 889.
8. Ibid. p. 890.
9. Idem.
10. G. B. Harrison Shakespeare The Complete Works, ed. Cit. p. 1074.
11. Ibid. p. 1082.
12. Bloom, Harold, ed, William Shakespeare, Othello, Vinod Vasishtha publishers, New Delhi, 2007, p. 167.
13. G. B. Harrison Shakespeare The Complete Works, ed. Cit. p. 1074.
14. Ibid. 1076
15. Ibid. 1063
16. Ibid. 1066
17. Ibid. p. 1066
18. William Shakespeare, Macbeth, New York Press, London, 1995, p. 13
19. William Shakespeare, Macbeth, New York, Beyrut Lebanon, 2009, p. 5.
20. Ibid, p. 31
21. Ibid, p. 64
22. Ibid, p. 65
23. Idem

24. Stanley Wells, Shakespeare Studies, ed. Cit. p. 205

25. Ronald Carter, The Penguin Guide To English Literature: Britain And Ireland Penguin Books, London, 1995, p. 33.

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