The Persistence of Affect in the Iconicity of Dramatic Literature

Abstract

Dramatic literature uses the language of dialogue to represent human beings in action. Action is central to the drama's structure because it enables the drama to exist in time, its obligatory dimension. Since a drama's action comprises only a limited framework—that is, a closed set of structured interactions—it renders people only as measures of character, which is what one recognizes by observing a person's choices. Hence, dramatic action appears to originate in character-revealing choices.

However, affect persists at the cognitive core of these choices; that is, affect motivates the particular choices made. To choose literally means to "taste" the alternatives and—by some judgment (whether good or bad) born of affect and the imagination—make a decision between them. This decision is the choice that expresses character. Hamlet’s famous soliloquy, “To be or not to be” (III.1.93-98), is a prime example of a character tasting the alternatives. In that speech, it appears Hamlet makes no choices and, thus, takes no action. However, the affects of Fear, “conscience does make cowards of us,” Distress-Anguish, “the dread of something after death,” and Disgust, “sicklied o’er,” are persisting forces that hold sway over Hamlet’s judgment and induce his consequent choice “to be” over “not to be,” allowing the drama to proceed. At the same time, the persistence of these affects enables the audience to see and feel Hamlet’s choice; that is, as Fear, Distress-Anguish, and Disgust persist in the iconicity of the language they cast the appearance of character, which Hamlet calls cowardly but which an audience may judge hopeful or courageous.

This paper uses examples from dramatic texts (such as Hamlet’s soliloquy) to demonstrate how dramatic literature functions as a series of affect-induced choices that fuels dramatic action while simultaneously revealing character. The paper also demonstrates how scoring affect can reveal the time signatures of the characters and the drama.

Keywords: Affect, Drama, Action, Character, Choice