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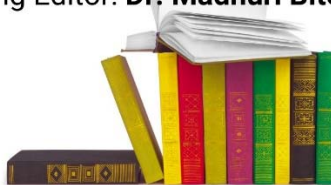
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Unfolding the Unfold: A Close Reading of the Word “Unfold” in the Plays of William Shakespeare

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Abstract:

The paper attempts to critically explore how Shakespeare employs the word “unfold” in the language of his plays. It proposes to be an eclectic, close textual reading of the selected plays of William Shakespeare. Through close textual reading, the paper attempts to understand the multiple semantic echoes of the word “unfold” in his plays. The focus of this paper is to delve deeper into the language of the plays to trace the conveying of an idea or a thought through the use of the word “unfold”. The craftsmanship of Shakespeare lies in the conscious calculative choice of words to drive the narrative forward. To create meaning, a word needs to be placed in context. The paper sheds light on the connotative meanings of the word “unfold” by placing it in the larger context of the play(s).

Keywords: unfold, close reading, language, context, semantic.

Introduction

Shakespeare is known as the man of the stage, but he is no less a man of language. It is a fact universally acknowledged that he did give thousands of new words to the English language. Shakespeare is as much a man of language as of theatre, this paper aims to focus on his mastery over the language and how he uses that his purpose. The paper places itself in the tradition of

critics like Frank Kermode, who in *Shakespeare's Language* writes, “...we want to know not what is just going on in a general way but what the words mean, to understand the life of them” (p. 15). The focus of this study is to interest itself with the language of Shakespeare, with a special emphasis on the employment of the word, “unfold” in his plays. The word “unfold” occurs in 20 plays of Shakespeare, and in each of them, he places it to deliver the unsaid to the audience. The paper engages in understanding the secondary meanings that Shakespeare attaches to the word “unfold” through his craftsmanship. It seeks to go beyond the etymological meaning of the word “unfold” through close textual reading of the selected plays. Moreover, it goes beyond the traditional understanding of the prefix -un. Josephine A. Roberts (1978) in her journal article “King Lear and the Prefixes of Inversion” argues that “Shakespeare creates in King Lear a language of inversion through frequent use of the prefixes un-, dis-, and in- within the speech of the major characters”. The paper tries to breakaway and go beyond the negative meaning that is attached to the prefix un-, by presenting instances from the plays where the connotative meanings hold a positive side to them. It sheds light on how Shakespeare inverts the language of inversion by placing the word “unfold” in myriads of contexts. The genius of Shakespeare lies in his ability to give the word “unfold” three-dimensionality. The meaning is not limited to its etymological meaning, instead it takes up multiple meanings when placed in the context of the text. The word invites the audience or the reader to participate in this interplay of meanings arising out of context. This paper attempts to present a detailed study of the semantic echoes of the word “unfold”, and extend the understanding of the word.

Research Methodology

The study will employ an eclectic critical framework. Russ McDonalds in *Shakespeare up close: Reading early modern texts*, emphasizes the aptness of using close reading, he writes, “Whether one looks behind them or rearranges them to form a group picture, the words of the work – and sometimes even smaller units of language – are always the inescapable reference

point. Close reading is the method for dealing with the inescapable.”¹ The analysis of the texts will be done through close textual reading and by placing texts in their historical and cultural context. McDonalds et al. (2020) in *Shakespeare up Close: Reading early modern texts* about the potentialities of language,

Language has the potential to generate new contexts even when it does not mean to: words, whether written or spoken, always exceed the instrumental need to satisfy the demands of communication. Moreover, close reading can heighten our sensitivity to extra-communicative contexts, whatever those contexts might be. Language does not lose its vitality once it has found a communicative form, and the closer we get to the words themselves – their components, origins, sounds, nuances – the clearer this fact becomes. The process helps us access the textual potentialities that our minds, prone to plucking synopses or information from what they read, habitually glide over. In this way, attention to literary particulars can extend to any use of language, which makes it a powerful tool in the classroom and beyond. (p. xx-xxi)

The paper explores the language of Shakespeare’s plays. Shakespeare's plays can be read in a variety of ways through the application of different critical theories and idioms like historicism, new criticism, feminism, psychoanalytical criticism, Marxism. However, this paper uses close reading as its critical framework. It uncovers the semantic nuances and potentialities of the word "unfold" and contribute to the existing understanding of Shakespeare's works among academics. Although the paper cannot escape the theatrical aspect of the plays, its scope for the present study is limited to the linguistic potential of the plays rather than the dramatic potential of the plays.

¹ (McDonald et al. *Shakespeare up close: Reading early modern texts*)

Looking at the Word

As Richard Lanham puts it, the age believed that words must be ‘looked at before they can be looked through’ (Lanham, 1976, as cited in McDonalds, 2001). In this case, the word that the paper looks at is “unfold” in the plays of William Shakespeare. The word “unfold” comprises the prefix un- and the base word ‘fold’. It is important to note here that the meaning of the word fold changes according to the part of speech it plays in a particular sentence. The denotative meanings of the word fold, when acting as a verb, are ‘bend (something flexible and relatively flat) over on itself so that one part of it covers another’ or, ‘cover or wrap something in’. The denotative meanings of the word fold, when acting as a noun, are: ‘a form or shape produced by the gentle draping of a loose, full garment or piece of cloth’, or, ‘a line or crease produced in paper or cloth as the result of folding it,’ or ‘a pen or enclosure in a field where livestock, especially sheep, can be kept.’ The word fold also acts as a suffix in words like twofold, threefold, and manifold to denote the quantitative quality of the base word. The denotative meaning of the prefix un- is ‘the absence of a quality or a state’. The aim of this exercise of breaking down the word unfold into its component parts was to trace the meaning that is generated from the very roots of the word. We know now that the word unfold denotes the negation of the whatever meaning the word fold takes up in the context of the sentence. However, that does not mean that the meaning formed from the word unfold is always negative. The word unfold develops multiple semantic echoes from the context, which shall be explored in this paper.

Close reading analysis of the word “unfold” in the selected plays

The first instance of the use of the word “unfold” comes from the play *All’s Well That Ends Well*. In Act I, Scene I, Paroles, the jester, disagrees with Helen’s defence of virginity, and the two dispute about it. Helen appeals on behalf of women, saying, “Unfold to us warlike assistance,” (Shakespeare, 2005, p. 7) in response to those who “attack their virginity”

(Shakespeare, 2005, p. 7). To "present" or "give" them support in resisting attempts to violate their virginity is what it means to "unfold" in this context. However, this stands ironical in the context of the play. Helen, who is in love with Bertram, is more insistent than resistant. Her appeal to unfold, i.e. to be presented with warlike assistance, is but a futile exercise. This here shows the irony of the situation.

“The irony here refers, like linguistic irony, to a doubleness of sense or meaning. It is as though there is the course of human events and intentions, involving our awarding of rankings and expectations, that exists alongside another order of fate beyond our predictions. This is an irony of situation, or an irony of existence; it is as though human life and its understanding of the world is undercut by some other meaning or design beyond our powers.” (Colebrook, 2004).

She wants that the assistance be unfolded to her, but it is only her hypocrisy that is unfolded in this exchange of dialogue. This scene shows the genius of Shakespeare in exposing the irony of the situation and dramatic irony, both simultaneously.

The following analysis comes from the play *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act V Scene II. Cleopatra attempts to conceal a portion of her wealth from Caesar, but her servant Seleucus betrays her. “Must I be unfolded with the one that I have bred” (Shakespeare 56). She responds to the betrayal by her servant and the one she has nurtured. Unfold here denotes a more profound significance to the current state of affairs. In addition to being a master, Cleopatra is also calling herself a mother. A mother who, in this instance, is destroyed by her child—the servant. She has been "unfolded." Her statement, "Must I be unfolded," has two meanings: first, it reveals herself to Caesar, and second, it alludes to her current annihilation as a mother and eventual annihilation as a being in the play. The “doubleness of meaning” (Colebrook, 2004,

p. 14) is at play here. It shows here the double negation of Cleopatra, as a being and as a mother. Here, unfold serves as a metaphor for her destruction.

In the following instance, the paper highlights how Shakespeare uses the word “unfold” in the characterization of the protagonist of the play, *Cymbeline*. In Act I Scene I, two gentlemen are seen talking about the recent happenings of the state. During that conversation, the first gentleman introduces the audience to Posthumus, the protagonist of the play. Responding to the accusation by the second gentleman that he praises the man too much, he says, "I do extend him, sir, within myself/Crush him together rather than unfold/ his measure duly." (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 5) In the original language, the terms "crush" and "unfold" allude to a metaphor involving fabric. Fabric can be precisely measured when unfolded or when it is squashed together. Shakespeare then uses that metaphor to reveal a part of Posthumus' personality, as he does in many of his plays where he introduces the protagonist through the mouthpiece of the secondary characters in the play, to the audience or the reader. “Where a concept, an idea, an emotion may be hard to grasp in language, then a metaphor, an offering of perceived resemblances, may enable us the better to ‘come to grips with’ the issue in hand.” (Punter, 2007, p. 13) This setting gives rise to the connotative meaning of the word unfold here, i.e., "to reveal or unfold the fabric of the Posthumus”.

The next play that the paper focuses on is one of the greatest plays of Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. The phrase "unfold" appears thrice in Hamlet. The first time it appears is in Act I Scene I. At this point pay attention towards the fact that in many of the instances that the paper cites come from the beginning of the play. Now, this is interesting to note that Shakespeare very carefully places the word unfold at the beginning of the play so that as the play unfolds so does the layers of meanings attached to the word “unfold” unfold. In Act I Scene I, when Francisco, the watch-guard, says, "stand and unfold yourself," a demand is being made here. A demand from Bernardo, who has come to keep watch is the subject of this reaction within the play's

framework. Shakespeare is also, nonetheless, demanding from the audience or the reader to conform to the unfolding of the subsequent course of events. In order to extract layers of meanings from the play, it signals the intra-communication within the play, and the inter-communication between the play, or the playwright i.e., Shakespeare, and the reader or the audience.

In the following examples the word unfold appears in Act I Scene V, where Hamlet is seen conversing with the ghost of his dead, or murdered father, as will be revealed or unfolded in the subsequent events. His father commands, "lend thy serious hearing/To what I shall unfold" (Shakespeare, 1998, p. 14). Unfold in this context signals multiple semantic possibilities. The possible meanings are, number one, the unfolding of the tale or the secret of Hamlet's father's murder, not just to Hamlet, but the readers or the audience are also privy to this information; next, with this revelation, the subsequent chain of action is also being unfolded; and this is how Shakespeare is using the word unfold to drive the narrative of the play forward. Here, with the placement of the word unfold, he signals the multiple unfolding that occur towards the end of the play, with the play ending in the unfolding of the tale again by Hamlet's friend, Horatio, bringing the play to the full circle. The unfold here also means destruction that we witness at the end of the play, the fabric of this tale is unfolded, and so are the people who lived in it.

The semantic echoes transition to another meaning of the word unfold that emerges in the plays of Shakespeare. In this instance, the word unfold and fold become a metaphor of birth and death. To give you an analogy, consider how a foetus lies folded inside the womb of the mother. However, once the foetus enters the world, it unfolds as it completes its gestation period. Shakespeare employs this metaphor in his plays: "fold" refers to returning to the fold, which is the earth, signifying death, and "unfold" refers to "coming to life", signifying birth. Here, the earth becomes a mother, the fold of the earth acting as the womb. This is seen in *Richard III*, Act I Scene III, when Queen Margaret exclaims, "Witness my son, now in shade

of death/whose bright out-shining beams thy cloudy wrath/hath in eternal darkness folded up” (Shakespeare, 1998, p. 25). She is speaking about her dead son. The audience or the reader can infer this from the image painted by the word of him ‘folded up’ in eternal darkness, signifying death. Shakespeare uses the metaphor of unfold and fold to allude to birth and death, respectively, in this passage, to bring your notice to the meaning of fold, signifying “a fold of earth” and how it plays with the antithetical meanings of the word fold and unfold. The unfolding leads back the humans that pervade the play back to the fold, i.e. the folds of earth, or shall we say, dust.

Lastly, this study aims to explore the case of *King Lear*. In *King Lear*, Act I Scene I, Cordelia, as she is bidding farewell to her sisters after her denouncement as a daughter by her father, King Lear, says, "Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides/ who covert faults at last with shame derides" (Shakespeare, 1998, p. 6). The word unfold holds layers to its meaning in this context. It foreshadows how the events will unfold to reveal the truth—in this case, which daughter truly loves the father. “During a performance of *King Lear*, for example, although the audience may not be consciously aware of it, the King’s style of speech shifts radically from the grand imperatives heard at his first entrance to the more vulnerable interrogative mood he assumes on the heath.” (McDonalds, 2001, p. 30). Furthermore, it signals how King's life is unfolded as the play unfolds—both literally, as seen in the storm scene when he hardly has any clothing on, and metaphorically, as he is reduced to the status of a beggar. He is torn, with no more fabric to cover him or folds to cover him. The metaphor of fabric is again invoked, which is not alien to a seasoned audience or reader of Shakespeare. “The visible change in fortunes and power is not merely reflected in the words but is communicated to the audience at least in part through the formal modulation of Lear’s speech”. (McDonalds, 2001, p. 44). Lear’s speech starts unfolding into a collection of distorted words with jumbled meanings that the audience or the reader is left to deal with on its own.

Conclusion

There are many more ways to approach the usage of the word unfold in the plays of Shakespeare, and the critical lens this paper takes is just one of many lenses through which this study can be looked at. The paper explores the origins and relational meaning of Shakespeare's words by putting them in the larger context of the play. It focuses on the creative potentialities of Shakespeare's language, precisely the word, unfold, employing close textual reading. The analysis focuses on the linguistic potentialities and possibilities of meanings in Shakespeare's language. It tries to uncover the unsaid between the said by tearing into the fabric of selected plays of Shakespeare. The present study gives a panoramic understanding of the ironies and metaphors used in the plays to convey the multiple semantic echoes that reverberate from the Elizabethan age to contemporary times.

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