



# A Study of Atmospheric Poetics and Dramatic Flow in Shakespeare's Dramas

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## Abstract

*This paper studies the application of atmospheric poetics in Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies. Two comedies and tragedies have been studied for detailed comparison. It explores how the atmosphere, ambience created, weather and sounds help to develop the plot and affect the characters' psychology. It studies how the atmosphere affects the readers and audiences' minds in comedy; Twelfth Night and The Comedy of Errors are chosen for study. In tragedy, Macbeth and King Lear are chosen for study. Shakespeare's backgrounds are not backdrops but reflect the mental states. Tragedy occurs at night and comedy occurs at daylight with decorative spaces. The soundscapes are also studied, where they produce dread in tragedy and laughter in comedy. The rhythmic flow of drama is studied in detail.*

**Keywords:** atmospheric poetics, tragedy, comedy, Shakespeare, dramatic flow, soundscapes

## Introduction

The study of atmosphere and ambience has drawn major interest lately. In literature, atmosphere is something negligible, as it elevates the plot to the next level. The author tries to build the ambience to convey the meaning of his literary text, be it a fiction, a poem or a drama. However, atmosphere plays a major role in drama as every scene begins with the description of atmosphere and ambience. Shakespeare cannot escape this study as his plays rely heavily on the atmosphere he builds in his plot. This paper studies how Shakespeare makes the

audience feel the meaning of the play even before the words are conveyed. It takes criticism beyond character study, plot and language. It is important to note how Shakespeare builds the atmosphere in tragedy & comedy.

## Atmospheric Poetics

Atmosphere in a geographical context means air. It is something revolving in the air. It obviously means the space, weather, and sound around us that affect our mood. In the contemporary context, atmosphere is something that refers to a tuned space. In other



words, a space with a specific mood. This is applied in literature as atmospheric poetics. It refers to how the author uses literary texts to create an environment. The reader or the audience watching the play feels the text through the ambience that is created. The author usually tries to build it through the weather, sound (which has now extended its study as soundscapes), lighting and darkness, the space and rhythm. The ambience affects the audience, readers and sometimes the actors on stage.

Atmospheric poetics studies how the atmosphere acts as the pre-cognitive force in shaping the meaning of the text in the minds of the readers. In drama, atmospheric poetics plays a prominent role as it helps in establishing the stage setting. Theatre and visual art are about sound, illumination, and the geometry of rooms & space. Shakespeare knew how to set the ambience for his every play. He created the mood and the climate he wished on the stage.

### **Shakespeare & Atmospheric Poetics**

Shakespeare has deliberately used atmosphere to achieve a dramatic effect in his plays. They help to create the emotional and dramatic flow in the play. The atmosphere acts on the characters & audience. He creates the mood even before the play begins. It is ideal to begin the atmospheric poetics only with Shakespeare's dramas. His environments act as agents influencing the characters' psychology. The atmosphere sometimes plays a major role in the characters' making their ethical choices. Shakespeare doesn't build any decorative atmosphere, but builds it with the emotion he wants to create. Shakespearean criticism has always concentrated on character, plot, language, and feminism. This study focuses on how he has used atmosphere to achieve the catharsis of emotion. It helps us understand how he builds meaning through the environment.

It is also directly related to the performance of actors on stage. Sometimes the written text and the performance are connected only through the atmosphere Shakespeare has built. This study helps us to understand the emotional flow and how it impacts the dramatic effect. Shakespeare has different themes when it comes to comedy &

tragedy. The madness in tragedy is portrayed through dread, which affects the audience. The chaos in comedy is portrayed through the rapid rhythm.

### **Tragedy**

Atmosphere plays a major role in Shakespearean tragedy. They act as an active dramatic force in the background, creating the dramatic effect. Shakespeare's characters' turmoil is often shown through the weather. It reflects their inner psychological state. The space he uses differs from closed to vast depending on the plot. Most tragic scenes occur in the darkness, and there is no light where their vices that are very deep cannot be seen by people outside. In tragedy, nature often reacts to the scene, reflecting the character's inner state. Soundscapes play a major role. Sounds like thunder, cries of owls affect the audience. Sometimes silence plays a heavy role on the audience to create the emotional heaviness. It is generally covered with fog, mist, and the entire space is unclear, making the environment obscure. Nature sometimes affects the characters' choices. It leads them to choose unethical choices, as it all becomes infectious. He creates an immersive, deep theatrical environment to reflect the character's deep desire.

### **Macbeth**

Shakespeare carries the infectious air throughout the play in *Macbeth*. The effect is carried right through in the air for the entire play. It controls the atmosphere in the play through weather, darkness, and soundscapes in the play. The weather is always rough with thunder and lightning. The opening scene with all the witches has heavy thunder and lightning, conveying the plot, suggesting that the play on stage is a tragedy, and something bad is going to happen. The opening dialogue, "*fair is foul, and foul is fair*" (Mac.) reflects the plot. It also makes clear that the play happens in a setting of fog and mist. The entire space is obscured. The weather creates moral confusion, affecting Macbeth & Lady Macbeth to make unethical choices. Nature is unstable like them, as Macbeth takes hasty actions. We bring in the black agent to further elevate the plot.



The play takes place in darkness at night. All tragic scenes occur at night because the vision is distorted. When Macbeth says, "*Stars, hide your fires; let not light see my black and deep desires*" (Mac.) Shakespeare uses atmospheric words to hint at the deep desire to kill King Duncan here. He wants the stars to burn off so that people will not see his desire. Macbeth is guilt-stricken by his intention, yet his action dominates his reflection. Shakespeare uses the atmosphere to convey this state of mind of Macbeth. The atmosphere keeps him in constant hallucination. The atmosphere helps to create the destructive flow in the play. Macbeth loses his moral consciousness.

Soundscapes also play a major role in creating the ambience. When Macbeth says, knocking, owls, crickets, voices crying "*sleep no more*" (Mac.), his mental state is reflected. After the killing scene, sounds play a major role in creating the ambience. The knocking on the gate affects the audience and mainly the character. The silence also plays a role in reflecting the emotional heaviness and the guilt.

### **King Lear**

The storm scene in *King Lear* heavily has atmospheric poetics in it to create the meaning. King Lear has been betrayed, and he has lost everything to his daughters. His inner mental state is agitated, and Shakespeare builds the weather to elevate the plot further. The entire weather affects the audience and the readers. King Lear shouts into the air, "*Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!*" (KL). He gets furious and asks the weather to be harsher on him. His daughters have been harsh on him, and that mental state is reflected in the weather. He challenges the weather. His loss of power is reflected when man can control only his belongings and not nature. The heavy wind, rain & thunder enacted with him and have been instrumental in making it more tragic.

The space created differs where Shakespeare creates an open heath as the setting for Lear's tragic scene. Unlike *Macbeth*, where a closed space is built, King Lear faces his tragedy in an open, vast space. The atmosphere is very cold like his daughters.

Soundscapes also play a major role in the drama. When Macbeth speaks in the open space, the sounds of thunder are heard than human speech. King Lear shouts into the storm, reflecting the turmoil.

### **Comedy**

Shakespeare creates a light atmosphere in his comedies, and the dramatic flow is created in a playful manner. All the scenes occur in bright daylight, and there is clear light! The space is almost decorative, happening at streets, markets or ports. The comedy centres around chaos & confusion, and the limited city space helps in creating the chaos.

The soundscapes of music, arguments, and laughter help in creating rhythm. The environment is always a festival surrounded by people densely moving around the scenes. The atmosphere is always joyful. When it comes to romantic comedies like *Midsummer Night's Dream*, moonlight and the forest scenes help to create the confusion and chaos. The weather is generally mild and not as harsh as tragedy unless the scene demands.

Music often interrupts the atmosphere to make the scene more achieve the comic atmosphere. The atmosphere is generally chaotic but culminates in harmony and resolution. The atmosphere triggers the humour in Shakespeare's comedies.

### **The Comedy of Errors**

Shakespeare uses the entire city of Ephesus as an agent to build all the intricate plot twists in his play. The city of Ephesus acts as a powerful atmosphere to augment the plot. It is described as a strange city, not safe. The rule that a stranger cannot stay in the city without support helps him build the story. The beginning storm & shipwreck scene helps to build the story for the separation of the twins. He uses the atmosphere's weather, thunder, and lightning, like a tempest, to hint at the story development, like his other comedy, *The Tempest*. When Antipholus of Syracuse says, "*They say this town is filled with cozenage*" (Err.), Shakespeare builds the tension and chaos to be created in the story. Later, he chooses markets, streets for the actions to take place. The encounter made by the twins at the market and



streets, and home builds the chaos. He creates a rhythm in the play that is very fast. Throughout the play, there is constant, rapid movement. The characters make quick entrances and exits, which creates confusion. This atmosphere creates the comic flow.

Speed dominates the flow. The atmosphere helps to build the repeated misunderstandings. There are characters doubling in the play, creating the chaos & the playful anxiety is achieved through the atmosphere. The audience is also caught in this rapid chaos plot, leaving no time but only to enjoy the comedy. Shakespeare also uses sounds predominantly in the play. There is always shouting, arguments across the streets.

Unlike *Macbeth*, which creates dread in the audience & readers, the knocking of the door here creates a comic flow. Shakespeare uses both open and closed spaces in comedy. The locked doors, mistaken identities, and homes are the closed spaces he uses in the play. The streets, markets are the open spaces used to create more comic anxiety. Shakespeare uses fast pace, sound, and a playful environment. The atmosphere here does not destroy but delights. The same madness is celebrated in the comedy. In the chaos, Shakespeare finds the final resolution.

### **Twelfth Night**

Like *Macbeth*, Shakespeare builds the atmosphere at the beginning of the play. The play begins with music. This soundscape conveys a melancholic tone. When Orsino says, "*If music be the food of love, play on*" (TN), Shakespeare conveys the sad, moody tone of Orsino even before his words convey the love unearned from Olivia. Like Ephesus, Illyria plays a closed space where the dramatic flow is built. The city itself is a dreamlike reality. Like his other comedies, Shakespeare brings storms, shipwrecks, heavy thunder and lightning to create the dramatic effect. Viola's male disguise creates a confused atmosphere to build the chaos and the playful tension. The atmosphere changes as the play proceeds; the melancholic one becomes comical through festivities and songs. The characters are

always joyful, drinking around and creating confusion. The comic flow shifts are maintained throughout the play. Malvolio's forged letter scene creates a rich atmosphere. The playful atmosphere is built in Olivia's garden, with the other characters hiding behind. Illyria is built as a strange place for Sebastian, hoping to venture. However, for Antonio, the same space is dangerous. He is a wanted person by the Duke in the same city. For Viola, Illyria is not found to be safe, and she disguises herself as Cesario.

### **Comparison**

Shakespeare builds entirely different atmospheres in comedy and tragedy. It changes with every plot he builds. In tragedy, Shakespeare builds a dark atmosphere throughout the play, and it is closed entirely. However, in *King Lear*, the space is not closed but vast and open heath. The weather also differs. In *Macbeth*, the vision is distorted by fog around and misty. There is thunder & lightning accompanied. Almost all scenes happen at night. In *King Lear*, there is a heavy storm, wind and thunder accompanied by rain. All these create a moral distortion and unethical effect among characters.

However, there can be distinguishing characteristics found in comedy and tragedy. They differ not only in plot but also in atmospheric design. Tragedies lead to ethical crises, whereas comedies give playful flow. The movement is very rapid in comedy. To create confusion, the characters make rapid entrances and exits. The rhythm is very rapid, and the dialogue is very quick. In tragedy, the speed is not as quick as in comedy. The soundscapes also differ. In tragedy, the sounds affect dread. There is a climactic catastrophe that creates heavy sounds around. There is also silence in the play that brings heaviness to the audience. In comedy, there is always laughter around the city, with public arguments, and Shakespeare uses wordplay. There are always festivities around the city. In comedy, he creates a harmless environment. The space is always open in comedy, and it is enclosed in tragedy. The overall atmosphere created is light and playful in comedy, and it is dark and intense in tragedy.



### Conclusion

Shakespeare has used atmospheric poetics as a primary tool to develop the plot and deepen the meaning of the play. The atmosphere Shakespeare creates conveys the meaning even before the text. The atmosphere reflects the protagonist's inner state in tragedy. The mental state, like the climate, is also agitated. He designs the atmosphere and weather system to affect the reader and audience emotionally. The weather is not merely background, but it is the primary instrument. Soundscapes play a major role in creating the ambience. Shakespeare shifts the atmosphere from chaos to a comical tone. Shakespeare turns the characters' internal mental state into external weather. This research suggests how setting acts as a powerful agent that builds the plot twists.

He uses different frameworks for the genre distinction.

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