Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN REASON AND EMOTION

In his opening lines to Demetrius, Philo complains that Antony has abandoned the military endeavours on which his reputation is based for Cleopatra’s sake. His criticism of Antony’s “dotage,” or stupidity, introduces a tension between reason and emotion that runs throughout the play (I.i.1). Antony and Cleopatra’s first exchange heightens this tension, as they argue whether their love can be put into words and understood or whether it exceeds such faculties and boundaries of reason. If, according to Roman consensus, Antony is the military hero and disciplined statesmen that Caesar and others believe him to be, then he seems to have happily abandoned his reason in order to pursue his passion. He declares: “Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch / Of the ranged empire fall” (I.i.35–36). The play, however, is more concerned with the battle between reason and emotion than the triumph of one over the other, and this battle is waged most forcefully in the character of Antony. More than any other character in the play, Antony vacillates between Western and Eastern sensibilities, feeling pulled by both his duty to the empire and his desire for pleasure, his want of military glory and his passion for Cleopatra. Soon after his nonchalant dismissal of Caesar’s messenger, the empire, and his duty to it, he chastises himself for his neglect and commits to return to Rome, lest he “lose [him]self in dotage” (I.i.106).

As the play progresses, Antony continues to inhabit conflicting identities that play out the struggle between reason and emotion. At one moment, he is the vengeful war hero whom Caesar praises and fears. Soon thereafter, he sacrifices his military position by unwisely allowing Cleopatra to determine his course of action. As his Roman allies—even the ever-faithful Enobarbus—abandon him, Antony feels that he has, indeed, lost himself in dotage, and he determines to rescue his noble identity by taking his own life. At first, this course of action may appear to be a triumph of reason over passion, of Western sensibilities over Eastern ones, but the play is not that simple. Although Antony dies believing himself a man of honour, discipline, and reason, our understanding of him is not nearly as straightforward. In order to come to terms with Antony’s character, we must analyse the aspects of his identity that he ignores. He is, in the end, a man ruled by passion as much as by reason. Likewise, the play offers us a worldview in which one sensibility cannot easily dominate another. Reason cannot ever fully conquer the passions, nor can passion wholly undo reason.

THE CLASH OF EAST AND WEST

Although Antony and Cleopatra details the conflict between Rome and Egypt, giving us an idea of the Elizabethan perceptions of the difference between Western and Eastern cultures, it does not make a definitive statement about which culture ultimately triumphs. In the play, the Western and Eastern poles of the world are characterized by those who inhabit them: Caesar, for instance, embodies the stoic duty of the West, while Cleopatra, in all her theatrical grandeur, represents the free-flowing passions of the East. Caesar’s concerns throughout the play are certainly imperial: he means to invade foreign lands in order to invest them with traditions and sensibilities of his own. But the play resists siding with this imperialist impulse. Shakespeare, in other words, does not align the play’s sympathies
with the West; *Antony and Cleopatra* can hardly be read as propaganda for Western domination. On the contrary, the Roman understanding of Cleopatra and her kingdom seems exceedingly superficial. To Caesar, the queen of Egypt is little more than a whore with a flair for drama. His perspective allows little room for the real power of Cleopatra’s sexuality—she can, after all, persuade the most decorated of generals to follow her into ignoble retreat. Similarly, it allows little room for the indomitable strength of her will, which she demonstrates so forcefully at the end of the play as she refuses to allow herself to be turned into a “Egyptian puppet” for the entertainment of the Roman masses (V.ii.204).

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, West meets East, but it does not, regardless of Caesar’s triumph over the land of Egypt, conquer it. Cleopatra’s suicide suggests that something of the East’s spirit, the freedoms and passions that are not represented in the play’s conception of the West, cannot be subsumed by Caesar’s victory. The play suggests that the East will live on as a visible and unconquerable counterpoint to the West, bound as inseparably and eternally as Antony and Cleopatra are in their tomb.

**THE DEFINITION OF HONOR**

Throughout the play, characters define honor variously, and often in ways that are not intuitive. As Antony prepares to meet Caesar in battle, he determines that he “will live / Or bathe [his] dying honour in the blood / Shall make it live again” (IV.ii.5–7). Here, he explicitly links the notion of honor to that of death, suggesting the latter as a surefire means of achieving the former. The play bears out this assertion, since, although Antony and Cleopatra kill themselves for different reasons, they both imagine that the act invests them with honor. In death, Antony returns to his identity as a true, noble Roman, becoming “a Roman by a Roman / Valiantly vanquished” (IV.xvi.59–60), while Cleopatra resolves to “bury him, and then what’s brave, what’s noble, / Let’s do it after the high Roman fashion” (IV.xvi.89–90). At first, the queen’s words seem to suggest that honor is a distinctly Roman attribute, but Cleopatra’s death, which is her means of ensuring that she remains her truest, most uncompromised self, is distinctly against Rome. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, honor seems less a function of Western or Eastern culture than of the characters’ determination to define themselves on their own terms. Both Antony and Cleopatra secure honorable deaths by refusing to compromise their identities.

**Motifs**

*Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.*

**EXTRAVAGANT DECLARATIONS OF LOVE**

In Act I, scene i, Antony and Cleopatra argue over whether their love for one another can be measured and articulated:

*CLEOPATRA:* [to Antony] *If it be love indeed, tell me how much.*
*ANTONY:* *There’s beggary in the love that can be reckoned.*
*CLEOPATRA:* *I’ll set a bourn how far to be beloved.*
ANTONY: Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth.
(I.i.14–17)

This exchange sets the tone for the way that love will be discussed and understood throughout the play. Cleopatra expresses the expectation that love should be declared or demonstrated grandly. She wants to hear and see exactly how much Antony loves her. Love, in Antony and Cleopatra, is not comprised of private intimacies, as it is in Romeo and Juliet. Instead, love belongs to the public arena. In the lines quoted above, Cleopatra claims that she will set the boundaries of her lover’s affections, and Antony responds that, to do so, she will need to discover uncharted territories. By likening their love to the discovery and claim of “new heaven, new earth,” the couple links private emotions to affairs of state. Love, in other words, becomes an extension of politics, with the annexation of another’s heart analogous to the conquering of a foreign land.

PUBLIC DISPLAYS OF AFFECTION

In Antony and Cleopatra, public displays of affection are generally understood to be expressions of political power and allegiance. Caesar, for example, laments that Octavia arrives in Rome without the fanfare of a proper entourage because it betrays her weakness: without an accompanying army of horses, guardsmen, and trumpeters, she cannot possibly be recognized as Caesar’s sister or Antony’s wife. The connection between public display and power is one that the characters—especially Caesar and Cleopatra—understand well. After Antony’s death, their battle of wills revolves around Caesar’s desire to exhibit the Egyptian queen on the streets of Rome as a sign of his triumph. Cleopatra refuses such an end, choosing instead to take her own life. Even this act is meant as a public performance, however: decked in her grandest royal robes and playing the part of the tragic lover, Cleopatra intends her last act to be as much a defiance of Caesar’s power as a gesture of romantic devotion. For death, she claims, is “the way / To fool their preparation and to conquer / Their most absurd intents” (V.ii.220–222).

FEMALE SEXUALITY

Throughout the play, the male characters rail against the power of female sexuality. Caesar and his men condemn Antony for the weakness that makes him bow to the Egyptian queen, but they clearly lay the blame for his downfall on Cleopatra. On the rare occasion that the Romans do not refer to her as a whore, they describe her as an enchantress whose beauty casts a dangerous spell over men. As Enobarbus notes, Cleopatra possesses the power to warp the minds and judgment of all men, even “holy priests” who “[b]less her” when she acts like a whore (II.ii.244–245).

The unapologetic openness of Cleopatra’s sexuality stands to threaten the Romans. But they are equally obsessed with the powers of Octavia’s sexuality. Caesar’s sister, who, in beauty and temperament stands as Cleopatra’s opposite, is nevertheless considered to possess power enough to mend the triumvir’s damaged relationship: Caesar and Antony expect that she will serve to “knit [their] hearts / With an un slipping knot” (II.ii.132–133). In this way, women are saddled with both the responsibility for men’s political alliances and the blame for their personal failures.
Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colours used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

SHAPE-CHANGING CLOUDS

In Act IV, scene xv, Antony likens his shifting sense of self to a cloud that changes shape as it tumbles across the sky. Just as the cloud turns from “a bear or lion, / A towered citadel, a pendent rock,” Antony seems to change from the reputed conqueror into a debased victim (IV.xv.3–4). As he says to Eros, his uncharacteristic defeat, both on the battlefield and in matters of love, makes it difficult for him to “hold this visible shape” (IV.xv.14).

CLEOPATRA’S FLEEING SHIPS

The image of Cleopatra’s fleeing ships is presented twice in the play. Antony twice does battle with Caesar at sea, and both times his navy is betrayed by the queen’s retreat. The ships remind us of Cleopatra’s inconstancy and of the inconstancy of human character in the play. One cannot be sure of Cleopatra’s allegiance: it is uncertain whether she flees out of fear or because she realizes it would be politically savvy to align herself with Caesar. Her fleeing ships are an effective symbol of her wavering and changeability.

THE ASPS

One of the most memorable symbols in the play comes in its final moments, as Cleopatra applies deadly snakes to her skin. The asps are a prop in the queen’s final and most magnificent performance. As she lifts one snake, then another to her breast, they become her children and she a common wet nurse: “Dost thou not see my baby at my breast, / That sucks the nurse asleep?” (V.ii.300–301). The domestic nature of the image contributes to Cleopatra’s final metamorphosis, in death, into Antony’s wife. She assures him, “Husband, I come” (V.ii.278).