Dear readers,

The main point of my paper is to show how light is used in this play to highlight Pentheus’ beliefs regarding Dionysus’ divinity. In the original passage we are introduced to an entire spectrum of light, from shadows, to sunrays, to complete whiteness. I tried to use each to describe how it relates to Dionysus’ superiority and how this corresponds to Pentheus’ views. Throughout the essay I tried to pick significant passages in which the idea of light and illumination versus darkness show major steps of Pentheus’ psychological transformation.

My main problems thus far have been using a concrete thesis, not going deep enough with analyses, and trying to complicate my thesis for some more depth and perplexity. When writing this essay, I felt as if I was not getting my ideas across in a uniform manner, and that the ideas didn’t have a clear enough focus or center. After receiving positive comments about my ideas, I was encouraged to go further and add more analysis and possibly complicate my thesis. I’m not sure if I have added still enough analysis, but I have tried to introduce a few new interpretations that hopefully have added more depth.

I love the passages that I have picked and I think they are very strong proof of my thesis. I think I did a good job of showing how light emphasizes Dionysus’ omniscience and how Pentheus’ beliefs are symbolized through the scenes with light. However, I feel my points may be kind of simple and my attempts to complicate my thesis and further develop my analyses may not have shown through as much as I would have liked. Adding an analysis of the whiteness of Dionysus’ skin and how fire contributes to the light spectrum I hope has added more to the essay, but I do not know if it reads across as well.

I think I have improved the structure of my draft so that the essay develops more as you read. One question I have for my readers is, does my essay read so that the ideas and progression of answering the motivating question develop smoothly? I tried to spend more time on each passage, really trying to analyze the text more closely and introduce new perspectives. Also, does the writing itself present well in an understandable and smooth manner?

If I were to continue to revise, I would work mostly on making sure my ideas are streamlined. I would also try to make sure everything flows well from introduction to conclusion, and make my conclusion stronger if possible. Lastly, I would work on developing even more interpretation into each passage and trying to make full use of each passage that I have selected.

Thank you,

Dee

Dee Luo

Professor Johnston

Image and Imagination

12 October 2012

The Spectrum of Light and Pentheus’ Symbolic Blindness

In Euripides’ *the Bacchae*, Pentheus, the king of the acropolis of Thebes, refuses to acknowledge the divinity of Dionysus, who is determined to prove to all of Thebes of his god status. Pentheus struggles with his own sanity throughout the play, experiencing confusing visions and seeing things that contradict with what others say to be true. In the first interaction between Dionysus, who is disguised as the Lydian Stranger, and Pentheus, Pentheus remarks on the Stranger’s appearance in regards to light and darkness. He says, “And you keep your skin white by deliberate contrivance, not exposed to the sun’s rays but protected by the shade…” (Euripides, 222 l. 457-458) Pentheus sees the Stranger’s face as in the shadows and not exposed to the light of day. How does the concept of light in this initial scene reflect the way in which Pentheus views Dionysus at points in the play?

In this scene, Pentheus cannot recognize Dionysus’ divinity behind his disguise. He sees the stranger as a mortal man who is quite inferior to him. His face is “protected by shade,” which literally and metaphorically prevents Pentheus from seeing not only Dionysus’ true form, but also his overwhelming divinity. Furthermore, Pentheus notes that Dionysus keeps his “skin white by deliberate contrivance.” White is not simply a form of brightness; it is the absence of all other color. Not only can this deliberate contrivance symbolize Dionysus’ clear divinity that is hidden behind the shadows of Pentheus’ ignorance, but it can also represent Dionysus’ ultimate superiority in this play. Any color will obscure whiteness. Whiteness, then, could be defined as the absence of any obscurity, the ultimate truth. From an audience member’s point of view, we cannot precisely claim what is reality versus what a character claims to be true. However, Dionysus’ whiteness could perhaps represent the ultimate truth, and that Dionysus’ reality is the true reality that must be seen by not only Thebes, but the audience as well. As the God in this play who has all power over Thebes, Dionysus does not simply possess divinity- he possesses knowledge and control to the highest extent.

During the initial dialogue between Pentheus and the Stranger, we are introduced to Dionysus through Pentheus’ eyes using the spectrum of light. We are also exposed to Pentheus in the state of developing ignorance. Pentheus forces his superiority upon the Stranger, who responds, “You don’t know what your life is—neither what you’re doing nor who you are,” (225, l. 506-507) addressing Pentheus’ deliberate obliviousness towards his treatment of Dionysus and his useless power as a mortal man. Pentheus further emphasizes this ignorance by answering quite literally, “I am Pentheus, son of Agave and of my father Echion.” (225, l. 508) Pentheus refuses to acknowledge any divinity in Dionysus and any connection to Dionysus that the Stranger claims to possess. When Pentheus asks the Stranger where Dionysus stands, the Stranger even bluntly states for him, “Right where I am. But because you’re so impious you can’t see him.” (225 l. 502) This mental blindness later in the play translates to a physical blindness that will distort perception and reality, corresponding with the spectrum of light we saw in the first passage.

The beginning of Act III highlights the height of Pentheus’ ignorance and symbolic blindness. The action being described in this scene actually occurs offstage; so all claims made are made by the Stranger. It is not proven whether or not the claims he makes actually occur, but we remember that Dionysus is the omniscient figure in this play and the whiteness of his skin reflects his ultimate truth, so we rely on his claims to analyze the passage. The Stranger explains to the Chorus Leader, “[…] Bacchus came and shook the palace, kindling a flame on his mother’s tomb. When Pentheus saw this, thinking the palace was burning, he rushed to and fro […]” (230 l. 622-625) With this hallucination, we must question the reality of Pentheus’ perspective. We begin to see Dionysus’ acts of revenge on Pentheus for his ignorance, and how this ignorance becomes something much more concrete. What began as a mental blockade has started to transform into a physical inability to see clearly. We also note in this passage the light on Semele’s tomb. Flames have the power to illuminate a scene. Dionysus’ birth began with a lightning bolt that induced Semele’s labor. The flame kindled on Semele’s tomb illuminates Dionysus’ divine nature from birth. Pentheus rushes to extinguish these flames, refusing to acknowledge any divine presence whatsoever.

The scene continues as Pentheus becomes more and more flustered with his confusion. The Stranger tells, “[…] he gave up his toil and darted into the dark house with his dagger drawn. Then Bromios […] made a light in the courtyard. Chasing eagerly after it, Pentheus rushed forward and tried to stab the shining [image], thinking he was slaying me.” (230 l. 627-631) This quote presents yet another comparison between Dionysus and his divinity to light. Pentheus rushes into the dark where he literally cannot see clearly. He stabs at a light which he believes to be the Stranger, but his sight deceives him and he stabs into nothing, falling down in exhaustion. He does not recognize this light as a sign of Dionysus, and instead insists on attacking it. These misleading sights correlate with Pentheus’ mental blockade and increasing stubbornness towards Dionysus, suggesting symbolism of his ignorance. Pentheus’ refusal to acknowledge Dionysus mentally has now brought him into a physical obscurity.

Continuing through Act III, we begin to see Pentheus’ psychological transformation. He admits to the Stranger while discussing the Bacchae, “You’re a pretty clever fellow and have been right along.” (238 l. 823-824) This marks the turning point in Pentheus’ beliefs. He begins to trust the Stranger and believe his words. After following the Stranger’s instructions to dress like a bacchant, Pentheus remarks, “And truly I seem to myself to see two suns… but *were* you a beast before? Because certainly you are a bull now.” (243 l. 918-923) indicating two points. Firstly, Pentheus is now questioning his previously obscured sights with his now clear perspective. As his psychological transformation progresses and his ignorance disappears, he becomes surer of his sight. Secondly, we again see a reference to the sun. The sun is a representation of light, and in turn, clarity. The Stranger then tells Pentheus, “So now, at last, you see what you ought to see.” (243 l. 924) An interpretation of the text could suggest that with Pentheus’ removal of ignorance and new beliefs, he is relieved of obscurity and can now see the light of Dionysus’ reality. However, Pentheus is seeing not only one sun but two, which could possibly suggest that Dionysus, gaining control over Pentheus, is distorting his sight even further. Nevertheless, the representation of the light through the suns in Pentheus’ view shows the transformation of Pentheus’ view of Dionysus’ truth and also reflects Dionysus’ unveiling power.

Pentheus eventually meets his fate as a result of his prolonged ignorance towards Dionysus at Mt. Cithaeron. Dionysus, wishing to expose Pentheus for his foolish stubbornness and pride, unveils him to the Bacchae, commanding they take revenge on him. This is perhaps Pentheus’ final epitome moment, where he clearly sees the magnitude of his error in his judgment towards Dionysus. Moments before the attack, Messenger #2 explains, “And while he was speaking these words a light of holy fire was towering up between heaven and earth.” (250 l. 181-182) This burst of light can represent several ideas. The light symbolizes the divinity and power of Dionysus to the largest extent seen in the play. Dionysus has been continually unleashing his powers as the plot progresses, and at this moment of final revenge upon the king of Thebes, a light that extends from earth to the heavens shows us his overwhelming power. We see another reference to fire, which illuminates the heavens, fully exposing Pentheus to Dionysus’ omniscience, and again bringing the audience back to Dionysus’ divinity since birth. Also, if we view the light as a parallel to Pentheus’ clarity and seeing Dionysus’ reality, we can interpret this moment as when Pentheus finally is able to see clearly through his error. Later during the attack he admits his error, saying to his mother, “Take pity, mother, and do not, because of my errors, kill your son.” (252 l. 1119-1121) The light symbolizes the absence of the mental blockade of ignorance that had previously darkened and distorted his vision. He finally realizes that Dionysus has outsmarted him and his death is a cause of his stubborn rejection of Dionysus. Unfortunately his moment of clarity arrives shortly before his gruesome death, and Dionysus succeeds in punishing not only Pentheus, but also Agave and the other citizens of Thebes for their ignorance towards his divinity.

In the original passage in which Dionysus and Pentheus meet for the first time, we are introduced to a connection between Pentheus’ view of Dionysus and the spectrum of light through the shadows on Dionysus’ face and the whiteness of his skin. Light is a powerful metaphor for several concepts in this play, most notably knowledge, divinity, and truth. Throughout we see passages in which the concept of light is used to illuminate Dionysus’ divinity and Pentheus’ transformation in realizing Dionysus’ truth. As Pentheus’ ignorance heightens, light seems to deceive him and he suffers from hallucinations, stranded in obscurity. By the end of the play when Pentheus comes to the realization that he has made a mistake by being stubborn, we see light illuminating the Dionysus’ power and Pentheus’ foolishness. Unfortunately, his realizations to his mistakes come to late, and Dionysus succeeds getting revenge on Pentheus as well as the rest of Thebes for their doubts.

Works Cited

Euripides. *Medea, Hippolytus, Heracles, Bacchae.* Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 2004. Print.