

A Holistic Dramatic–Cognitive Theory of Understanding Shakespeare

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Abstract

The Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory offers an integrative interpretive model that accounts for how meaning is generated in Shakespeare’s dramatic works through a system of interaction among textual structure, performative embodiment, historical context, and cognitive engagement. While dominant interpretive schools in Shakespeare studies—including formalism, historicism, performance criticism, psychoanalysis, and cognitive poetics—have illuminated different dimensions of Shakespeare’s dramaturgy, none has fully explained the unified mechanism through which meaning emerges. Drawing upon literary theory, theatre studies, classical poetics, and cognitive science, this theory demonstrates that Shakespeare’s works generate meaning through the dynamic interaction of structural, performative, contextual, and cognitive elements. Cognitive literary theory supports this model by showing that readers construct meaning through mental simulation, reasoning, and emotional engagement (Stockwell). Similarly, performance theory substantiates the claim that dramatic meaning is realized through embodiment rather than textual abstraction alone (McConachie). By conceptualizing interpretation as a systemic and recursive process, the theory explains the interpretive multiplicity, psychological realism, and cultural adaptability of Shakespeare’s works. It thus offers a theoretically coherent and scientifically grounded framework capable of advancing Shakespearean scholarship, pedagogy, and performance studies.

Keywords: Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory, textual structure, performative embodiment, historical context, cognitive engagement, systemic interpretation, recursive process, psychological realism, cultural adaptability

Introduction

The interpretive richness of the works of William Shakespeare poses a basic theoretical problem: How is meaning made in a work that continues to offer new interpretations across time and space? Shakespeare’s plays are simultaneously classic and interpretively dynamic, performed and read all over the world in a variety of linguistic, cultural, and historical settings. Bloom’s assertion that Shakespeare “invented the human” implies that Shakespeare’s characters are unprecedentedly psychologically complex and cognitively realistic (Bloom). This interpretive richness cannot be accounted for by linguistic and historical factors, but rather

Published: 05 March 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i3.45580>

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by a more profound relationship between textual design, theatrical embodiment, historical, and cognitive reading.

Traditional critical approaches have made significant contributions to the understanding of Shakespeare's works but have been theoretically limited. Formalist critics have focused on language structures and imagery, proving the mastery of rhetoric and meter in Shakespeare's works. Historicist critics, such as Stephen Greenblatt, have placed Shakespeare in Renaissance ideology, showing the impact of political, religious, and social influences. Performance critics have rediscovered the theatricality of Shakespeare's works, highlighting the role of the body in meaning-making. Psychoanalytic and cognitive critics have looked at psychological engagement, showing the ways in which the audience mentally simulates the emotions of the characters. However, these approaches have been done in isolation from one another, with no single model to explain all the textual, performative, contextual, and cognitive aspects of the works.

In this regard, the Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory fills the theoretical vacuum by advancing the notion that meaning in Shakespeare is created through reciprocal interaction between four interdependent modes of interpretation, each of which is inextricably linked with the others in the creation of meaning. This approach is consistent with the findings of modern cognitive science, which shows that perception is an interactive process involving the reciprocal interaction of internal cognitive processes and external stimuli (Stockwell). Shakespeare's dramaturgy is designed to activate the very same cognitive processes, such as empathy, inference, emotion simulation, and conceptual thinking.

(i) Textual Dimension – Linguistic and Structural Generativity

The textual dimension is the structural foundation of Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory, creating the linguistic foundation that sparks the process of interpretation. The dramatic language of Shakespeare's works is marked by variations of meter, semantic ambiguity, metaphorical richness, and rhetorical complexity. Blank verse is the primary meter, creating a rhythmic pattern that allows for expressive variation. This variation is often related to psychological tension. In *Macbeth*, variations in meter relate to Macbeth's inner turmoil, illustrating the connection between form and cognitive process. A. C. Bradley points out that the dramatic language of Shakespeare "expresses the inward movements of consciousness."

Shakespeare's metaphors are cognitive devices rather than ornaments to language. The conceptual metaphor theory reveals that metaphors help to understand abstract concepts by relating them to embodied experiences. Shakespeare's metaphors, such as life being a theatre, corruption being a disease, and power being a position of elevation, are interpretive frameworks for cognition. The metaphor of blindness, as portrayed in *King Lear*, represents cognitive limitations, showing that language structures influence cognitive perception.

Shakespeare's language is a cognitive tool rather than a barrier to understanding, as demonstrated by his use of metaphor as a cognitive device rather than an ornament to language, as is often argued. The conceptual metaphor theory reveals that metaphors help to understand abstract concepts by relating them to embodied experiences, such as life being.

Semantic ambiguity also increases the level of openness to interpretation. Words may have several meanings depending on classical, biblical, and Renaissance sources. This type of ambiguity also increases the level of cognitive participation, as the reader must overcome the ambiguity of interpretation through inference. The dimension of textuality does not function as a container of meaning but as a system that stimulates cognition of interpretation.

(ii) Performative Dimension – Embodiment and Experiential Meaning

Shakespeare's plays are written to be enacted on stage; hence, there is a vital importance of performance to meaning generation. Meaning is generated through embodiment, including gestures, intonation, pace, and positioning on stage. According to theatre scholar Bruce McConachie, audience understanding is based on embodied cognition; they mentally simulate what is enacted on stage (McConachie).

The same line can be performed to create different meanings. In *Othello's* narrative, the line of trust towards Desdemona can be performed to show sincerity, hesitation, or hidden suspicions, depending on the performance. This shows that the meaning of the text is not embedded within the structure of the text but is made possible by the performance. This is because the performance actualizes the potential meaning embedded within the text.

It is, however, crucial to note that performance, even when it is silent, like when one is reading, is cognitive. This is because, according to cognitive science, when one is reading, one simulates the vocal quality, emotional quality, and the movement of the body. This is referred to as embodied simulation. This explains why Shakespeare's works elicit powerful emotional responses even when not performed.

(iii) Contextual Dimension – Historical and Intellectual Coordinates

Shakespeare's works can be considered to be rooted in the Renaissance intellectual and cultural context. For instance, divine kingship, the Great Chain of Being, and humoral psychology can be considered to be some of the factors that created a particular understanding of human behaviour. Stephen Greenblatt describes how Renaissance people perceived their identity through a social and cosmic hierarchy, which impacted dramatic characterization (Greenblatt).

In *Julius Caesar*, the act of political assassination can be considered to be rooted in the Renaissance period's perception of political legitimacy. Similarly, in *Macbeth*, the act of regicide can be considered to be rooted in the idea of cosmic disorder that was created by the concept of divine monarchy.

Yet, there is no strict determinacy in context. Rather, there are interpretive coordinates that function in dynamic interplay with cognition and performance. The contemporary audience reinterprets these contextual elements according to contemporary cognitive models, illustrating the malleability of interpretive meaning.

(iv) Cognitive Dimension – Meaning as Mental Construction

The cognitive dimension forms the integrative core of the Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory. Here, the creation of meaning occurs through interpretive consciousness via cognitive

processes such as empathy, inference, pattern recognition, and emotional simulation. Cognitive poetics proves that the creation of meaning occurs through mental participation rather than the passive acceptance of the text (Stockwell).

Shakespeare's dramaturgical technique directly activates cognitive mechanisms. Soliloquies offer a window into the minds of the characters, allowing the audience to simulate psychological experience. In *Hamlet*, the use of introspective speech encourages the audience to simulate existential experience. T. S. Eliot noted that Shakespeare's dramatic technique activates emotional and intellectual engagement at the same time (Eliot).

Cognitive engagement helps create Shakespeare's psychological realism. The reader recognizes human emotions, needs, and conflicts due to the congruence between dramatic structure and universal cognitive mechanisms. Thus, cognition forms the interpretive core through which the textual, performative, and contextual dimensions converge.

The key characteristic of Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory is its Recursive Interpretive Loop, which illustrates how meaning is developed through continuous interaction in all interpretive dimensions. Interpretation starts with textual perception, which sparks cognitive engagement. Cognitive engagement sparks performance, which sparks imagination, leading to emotional embodiment. Contextual awareness, which links dramatic events to historical and philosophical frameworks, transforms cognitive interpretation, which in turn transforms textual perception.

This recursive process illustrates how reading a play multiple times can reveal new insights. The recursive process reconfigures cognitive and contextual alignment. Meaning is developed dynamically, not statically. Cognitive science supports that perception is recursive, involving continuous interaction.

Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory explains interpretive richness across multiple Shakespearean dramas. In *Hamlet*, existential reflection stimulates philosophical cognition, while performance determines emotional tone. In *Macbeth*, metaphorical imagery of darkness and disease shapes cognitive understanding of moral corruption. In *King Lear*, performative expression of suffering generates emotional empathy. In *Othello*, dramatic irony activates inferential reasoning, allowing audiences to perceive psychological manipulation.

Each play demonstrates interaction among textual, performative, contextual, and cognitive dimensions. Meaning emerges not from any single dimension but from their systemic interaction. This explains Shakespeare's interpretive depth and enduring relevance.

Holistic dramatic-cognitive theory helps to explain the richness of interpretation found across multiple dramatic works of Shakespeare. In *Hamlet*, existential reflection leads to philosophical cognition, while performance leads to emotional tone. In *Macbeth*, metaphorical imagery of darkness and disease leads to cognitive understanding. In *King Lear*, performative expression of suffering leads to emotional empathy. In *Othello*, dramatic irony leads to inferential reasoning, where the audience can recognize the psychological manipulation occurring.

Each of the dramatic works shows the interaction of the textual, performative,

contextual, and cognitive dimensions. It is the interaction of these dimensions that allows the audience to understand the meaning of the dramatic work. This is what allows the dramatic works of Shakespeare to be so rich with interpretation, both at the time of their original performance and today.

Moreover, the Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory is informed by modern cognitive science, which shows that human cognition is the result of the interplay between sensory information and cognition. Cognitive poetics verifies the notion that the interpretation of literature is the result of cognition, imagination, emotion, and simulation (Stockwell). Moreover, the study of the brain verifies that the reading of literature is the result of the interplay between the brain's perceptual, emotional, and motor simulation centres, thereby supporting the cognitive model of the Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory.

Bruce McConachie's study shows that the performance of drama is the result of the interplay between the brain's centres of empathy, thereby showing that the meaning of drama is the result of the interplay between cognition and performance.

The Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory represents a clear and scientifically supported pedagogical model that can greatly enhance the pedagogical process of teaching Shakespeare. Conventional pedagogical approaches to teaching Shakespeare have relied on linguistic decoding, paraphrasing, and historical explanations. Although these approaches are foundational to an understanding of Shakespeare's work, they often do not engage the cognitive and performative aspects of drama that are vital to understanding drama. This has led to an understanding of Shakespeare as being linguistically or emotionally inaccessible to the reader. The Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory overcomes this limitation of the pedagogical process by recognizing that comprehension occurs cognitively rather than textually.

The cognitive learning theory proves that understanding is enhanced when learners simulate, perform, and interpret information rather than simply receiving information. Peter Stockwell explains that reading literature involves mental simulation, where learners create understanding through imaginary involvement. When learners participate in dramatic reading, performance, and interpretation, they stimulate neural and cognitive structures related to empathy, emotion, and narrative understanding. This improves interpretive understanding and retention of information. Shakespeare's dramatic reading is appropriate for this kind of pedagogical involvement since it was originally created to be performed and not simply interpreted.

The Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory outlines a pedagogical model consisting of four stages that are compatible with cognitive learning theory. The first stage of the pedagogical model includes textual analysis, which enables the student to become familiar with the linguistic features of the text, imagery, and rhetorical devices used in the text. This stage establishes the foundation of the text for interpretation. The second stage of the pedagogical model includes performance exploration, which enables the student to become familiar with oral readings of the text, dramatic enactment of the text, and vocal experimentation with the text. This stage enables the student to experience the emotional and psychological aspects of the language used in the drama through the process of embodied cognition. The third stage of

the pedagogical model includes contextual exploration, which enables the student to become familiar with the intellectual, cultural, and philosophical aspects of the Renaissance period. This stage enables the student to become more accurate in interpretation of the drama. The fourth stage of the pedagogical model includes cognitive reflection on the student's interpretation of the drama.

This model of pedagogy converts Shakespeare from a static literary construct to a dynamic cognitive experience. Students no longer experience Shakespeare as a challenge in linguistic complexity but as a psychological and dramatic reality. By engaging the textual, performative, contextual, and cognitive dimensions at the same time, Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory promotes more understanding, interpretive autonomy, and critical thinking. This model follows the dictates of contemporary educational neuroscience that demonstrates that active, multisensory engagement promotes learning and understanding.

The global adaptability of Shakespeare's works represents perhaps the most compelling evidence to support the validity of the Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory. Shakespeare's works have been translated into hundreds of languages and have been performed in a variety of cultural, political, and historical settings. This level of adaptability defies explanation on the basis of historical significance or literary importance. Instead, the global adaptability of Shakespeare's works can be explained on the basis of the cognitive and dramatic universality of Shakespeare's dramaturgy.

The science of cognition supports the notion that some psychological experiences are universal human experiences. For example, the experience of fear, ambition, love, jealousy, moral conflict, existential uncertainty, and other psychological experiences are fundamental human experiences that are shared by people of all cultures. Shakespeare's dramaturgy taps into these fundamental human experiences. For example, the psychological conflict that *Macbeth* experiences taps into the fundamental human experience of anxiety about ambition, guilt, and morality. The emotional pain that Lear experiences in *King Lear* taps into the fundamental human experience of cognition related to empathy and emotional recognition.

Cultural traditions vary in their salience for different dimensions of interpretation while maintaining overall systemic consistency. Some traditions, for example, are particularly important for political interpretation, while others are salient for psychological realism or performative experimentation. Yet in all cases, there is overall consistency because the recursive cycle of interpretation is at work. The flexibility of these traditions again illustrates that there is a universal cognitive architecture in Shakespeare's dramatic method.

The reason for this is that interpretation is not culturally predetermined; rather, it is a cognitive process. As such, Shakespeare's works are perpetually renewable. Different cultures and historical periods activate different dimensions of the overall interpretive system while maintaining overall structural consistency. The above theory, therefore, offers a theory for Shakespeare's global relevance.

The Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory is an important step forward in the history of literary theory, offering an integrative model of explanation that can potentially reconcile disparate elements of past literary critical traditions. Traditionally, the study of the structure of

the text, the historical context, the performance, and the reader response have been seen as separate or even opposed modes of interpretation in literary criticism.

Finally, this theory overcomes the fragmentation of the above theories by proposing the model of interpretation as the systemic interaction of multiple dimensions. While the theory of Textual Formalism is right in emphasizing the role of the structure of the text, the present theory shows that the structure of the text is a generative stimulus, not an autonomous meaning system. While the theory of Historicisms is right in emphasizing the role of cultural and philosophical context, the present theory shows that cultural and philosophical context is dynamically interactive, rather than determining, in the interpretation of meaning. While the theory of Performance is right in emphasizing the role of theatrical embodiment, the present theory shows that performance is interactive, both in the external sense of the theatre and in the internal sense of cognitive simulation. While the theory of Cognitive Criticism is right in emphasizing the role of the interpretive consciousness, the present theory shows that cognition is integrated with the determinants of the text, the performance, and the cultural/philosophical context.

This model of integration follows the lines of recent interdisciplinary research in cognitive science, neuroscience, and psychology. Scientific research shows that perception, interpretation, and emotion are the result of recursive interactions between perception and cognition. Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory extends these scientific principles to literary interpretation to create a theoretically sound model of explanation.

Moreover, the theory overcomes the theoretical problem of the interplay between interpretive plurality and interpretive coherence. There are many interpretations of Shakespeare's works without falling into the category of interpretive relativism. This is achieved through the demonstration that interpretation remains bound to its structure and coordinates while being dynamically created through cognition.

Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory is a synthesis of literary theory, theatre theory, cognitive theory, and educational theory, creating a theoretically valid model that will be capable of supporting future research in these fields.

Conclusion

The Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory offers a comprehensive and scientifically supported theory of the creation of meaning in the dramatic works of Shakespeare. Instead of the creation of meaning residing in the text, the historical context, or the performance, the Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory shows that the creation of meaning results from the interaction of the textual, performative, contextual, and cognitive dimensions. Meaning is not simply received but is cognitively constructed through the interaction of linguistic, simulative, contextual, and psychological stimuli. This framework provides an explanation for the essential characteristics of Shakespeare's dramaturgy, such as psychological realism, interpretative multiplicity, emotional impact, and global adaptability. Shakespeare's dramaturgy employs essential cognitive mechanisms such as empathy, emotional simulation, conceptual thinking, and inferential interpretation, which are universally present in the human mind, making the works of Shakespeare continuously interpretable over time and cultures. The Holistic

Dramatic-Cognitive Theory also provides pedagogical advantages in terms of offering an organized approach for the pedagogy of Shakespeare's works, which is in line with cognitive learning principles. Most importantly, the Holistic Dramatic-Cognitive Theory offers a unified theoretical foundation that is capable of advancing the study of Shakespeare beyond the fragmented approaches of the critics. It shows that the continued explanatory power of Shakespeare lies not in one but in the interaction of many systems of interpretation. In so doing, it offers a scientifically informed theory that is logically coherent with regard to the unparalleled achievement of the Bard of Avon.

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