

17 What a Piece of Work is a Man

Any fans of Withnail and I will instantly remember that heartbreakingly closing monologue – Richard E. Grant, absolutely drenched, reciting Hamlet to the wolves in Regent’s Park in the pouring rain. It’s one of the most iconic speeches in British cinema, so I thought it would be the perfect real-world example of a long, word-for-word memorisation task.

What follows is the main body of Withnail’s “What a piece of work is a man” speech (the Hamlet quote he delivers). I’ve chosen it because it’s essentially a series of short lists and rhetorical questions, which makes it ideal for combining the three classic peg systems: the Rhyme system (1–10), the Shape system (1–10), and the full Major system (1–100). You’ll see exactly how I’ve linked each line or phrase to a peg image as we go through it.

Remember to list the thoughts or ideas of Hamlet as your scaffold for the speech.

Hamlet describes his latest mood to his ‘excellent good friends’ Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

1) I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth,

This is his first thought. Lately he has lost his mirth

2) forgone all custom of exercises,

Stopped exercising

3) and, indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition

This describes his general mood, and now he begins his list:

1. that this goodly frame, the Earth, seems to me a sterile promontory;

2. this most excellent canopy, the air,

look you, this brave o’erhanging firmament,

this mastanical roof, fretted with golden fire—

why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors.

Now he describes his thoughts on mankind and begins his final list

1. What a piece of work is a man,
2. how noble in reason
3. how infinite in faculties,
4. in form and moving how express and admirable
5. in action how like an angel
6. in apprehension how like a god:
7. the beauty of the world
8. The paragon of animals -

The list has built up to its climax, and now it drops into the dust

9. And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?
10. Man delights not me, no, nor women neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.

When I taught this in workshops, I would start with 'what a piece of work' and fit it into the 10 numbers of the Shape system. But here I could not resist the opening, and on gloomy days, I have been known to mutter to myself, 'I have of late lost all my mirth', and so I am going to use the full speech and all the numerical techniques, from which you can choose which images you prefer.

- 1) I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth,

In the Shape system, 1 is Pencil, in the Rhyming system, 1 is Sun, Gun, Fun, and in the Major System, 1 is Tie

The keyword here is mirth because Hamlet's first thought is that he has lost his sense of humour. 1 is a pencil in the Shape system. The brain likes naughty, and no one will know what your image is, so you could imagine a penis gone floppy. Not funny for a chap but memorable.

In the rhyming system, the image for 1 is usually "sun," but in this context, "fun" would be a great rhyme to pair with mirth. Tie is not a helpful image in this context.

Comparing these three systems is a good example of the idea of mixing and matching to give yourself the best image to fit in with the context of what you wish to remember.

- 2) forgone all custom of exercises

The Shape system, 2 is Swan, in the Rhyming system 2 is Shoe and in the Major System 2 is Noah.

I think here the Rhyming system wins, as you can most easily pair shoe with exercises.

Hamlet's second thought – he is not even exercising

- 3) and, indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition

Hamlet's third thought - his general mood –

In the Shape system, 3 is a Pregnant lady, in the Rhyming system, 3 is Tree, and in the Major System, 3 is Ma.

Finding an image for "disposition" was challenging, so I checked my personal Glossary for guidance. The secret is to break up a word to find solid nouns. I often use prefixes and for words beginning dis – I will use an image of the discus thrower or a disprin (for Americans, that is an English form of Advil and contains aspirin).

My images are Disc+Pose Sit Shun or Posy Shun

The discus thrower and pose work well here. If you need any more clues, add in sitting him down -sit – while soldiers march by at attention – shun. The latter is a really useful image for all the many words ending in 'tion'.

If those images don't work for you, try giving the discus thrower a posy of flowers to throw at the soldiers at attention. It all sounds complicated, but close your eyes and see the discus thrower throwing flowers; it takes no time at all and is a very vivid image for a difficult word. Now all you need to do is position your discus thrower by a tree for number 3.

Hamlet begins his first list about how depressed he is feeling.

4) that this goodly frame, the Earth, seems to me a sterile promontory;

Earth is the keyword, and the secondary word, describes it as a promontory

In the Shape system, 4 is a Sailboat in the Rhyming system, 4 is a Door, and in the Major System, 4 is Rye

Take a sailboat and sail around the Earth. Remember, it is Earth, not the world, so to make sure you get the right word, run aground on the earth and chuck earth off the boat.

Promontory, although it is not the keyword, is important and worth remembering at this point, as it describes succinctly how disparagingly Hamlet views the Earth. Although it is a nice, solid noun a visual clue is useful.

Promontory. A prom miss – I have used an image of a young lady going to her first prom in the word promise.

She is mounting – I have an image of the Cobb at Lyme Regis, used by Jane Austen in 'Persuasion' and in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman' by John Fowles. In 'Persuasion', there are some stairs that you need to mount to get to the top of the Cobb, famous because Louisa Musgrove fell down them, and it is a sterile promontory. The French Lieutenant's Woman famously paces along the top of the Cobb waiting for the French Lieutenant. The picture of the Cobb, stretching out into the sea, is a great image for a sterile promontory.

I don't think you will need it, but Maggie Thatcher is an ideal image for 'tory' or any other word ending in 'tory'.

5) this most excellent canopy, the air

Air is the keyword, and the secondary word, describing it is a canopy

In the Shape system, 5 is a Hook in the Rhyming system, 5 is a Hive, and in the Major System, 5 is Law

We are surrounded by air, but it is not easy to represent it by an image. I would suggest a hair dryer, which sounds like the word and works on the principle of blown air.

Take the hair dryer down from a hook (5)

Hamlet gives three beautiful metaphors for air: a canopy, a firmament (heavens or the sky), and a roof fretted with golden fire. Use the hair dryer to heat up a 'can of peas', cover them in fur and add mint, then turn the hair dryer up towards the roof, where it is now lighting up golden fire.

- look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this mastical roof, fretted with golden fire

Hamlet then adds his crushing real opinion

- —why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors.

Congregation is the keyword, and the secondary words describing it are foul and pestilent

A congregation in church, blow-drying their hair, consisting of fowls and pests and all vaping.

Now Hamlet describes his thoughts on mankind and begins his final list

1. What a piece of work is a man,

Man is the keyword, and the secondary words describing a man are a piece of work.

In the Shape system, 1 is a Pencil, in the Rhyming system, 1 is Sun, Gun, Fun, and in the Major System, 1 is Tie

Choose your image for a man. A penis, a gun and a tie are all nouns associated with masculinity. A man is also more likely to wear a tie to work, so that is a good clue to the rest of the line.

2. how noble in reason

Reason is the keyword and the secondary word, describing his reason is noble.

In the Shape system, 2 is a Swan, in the Rhyming system, 2 is Shoe, and in the Major System, 2 is Noah

Major system and N for Noah is good here, giving you 2 and a half the word noble. Picture Noah eating raisins.

3. how infinite in faculties,

Faculties is the keyword and the secondary word, describing them is infinite.

3 in the Shape system is Pregnant lady, Rhyming system is Tree, Major system is Ma

Dorothy Parker said “Ducking for apples -- change one letter and it's the story of my life.”

And I am reminded of that quote with the word ‘faculties’. In which case, I think that a pregnant lady and ma both help one remember the word ‘faculties’. ‘Infinite’ and I think of Jaws swimming round an Inn, perhaps with the terrified ladies inside.

4. in form and moving how express and admirable

Form and moving are the keywords and the secondary words, describing them are express and admirable.

4 in the Shape system is a Sailboat, 4 in the Rhyming system is Door, 4 in the Major system is Rye

Four sounds like form; that is a helpful clue. Picture a moving van boarding a sailboat. Then load the boat onto an express train, which is halted by Admiral Nelson. If you want even more action, you could have his column fall in front of the express train.

5. in action how like an angel

Angel is the keyword and the secondary word, describing it is action.

5 in the Shape system is a Hook, 5 in the Rhyming system is Hive, 5 in the Major system is Law

Ambrosia was the food of the gods and was often described as a form of honey and so hive would work well here, being suitable for a heavenly angel. Action gives an image of action man to me and so he could be feeding the angel honey.

6. in apprehension how like a god:

god is the keyword and the secondary word, describing a god is apprehension

6 in the Shape system is Cherry, 6 in the Rhyming system is Sticks, 6 in the Major system is Shoe

Apprehension gives me an image of an apple and a hen, so after giving the hen an apple you could follow it up with a cherry. Now feed the cherry to a god, Zeus perhaps.

7. the beauty of the world

World is the keyword and the secondary word, describing it is beauty.

7 in the Shape system is a Cliff, 7 in the Rhyming system is Heaven, 7 in the Major system is Cow

World and Heaven fit together and when I think of beauty, I see Sleeping Beauty, so either put her sleeping on a cliff or in heaven. If you can't remember world, think of her eating a Curly Wurley before she falls asleep.

8. The paragon of animals –

Animals is the keyword and the secondary word, describing it is paragon.

8 in the Shape system is an Hourglass, Marilyn Monroe or a Snowman, 8 in the Rhyming system is Gate, 8 in the Major system is Ivy

I am fond of using Marilyn Monroe for 8 as I have a vivid picture of going home after my first day at school and describing my teacher to my father. I said – to his delight - she has a shape. I sketched a figure 8 with my hands. It was the 50's and she wore a tight jersey and he found my innocent description very amusing – my mother, less so.

Paragon means ideal, model, nonpareil, and this is an easy image for me as I lived near a beautiful semi-circle of houses on Blackheath called the Paragon. However, for most people, paratroopers would work well, and they and Marilyn Monroe can be imagined parachuting down into a zoo which is where you will find a large variety of animals.

Hamlet has built up a list of brilliant descriptions of mankind. Now it is as if he has scrumpled up the paper with that list and dropped it in the dust.

And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?

Dust is the keyword and the secondary word, describing it is quintessence.

9 in the Shape system is a Balloon on a string, 9 in the Rhyming system is Line, 9 in the Major system is Bee or Pea.

Quintessence means essence. Think of a line of dust and 5 quins holding balloons march on to it and begin spraying the dust with scent.

Man delights not me, no,

nor women neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.

Me is the keyword and the secondary words, describing me is delights not.

10 in the Shape system is a Bat and ball, 10 in the Rhyming system is Hen, 10 in the Major system is Toes.

Take a hen on your knee (sounds like me) and feed it Turkish Delight tied up with knots. Walk into the snow (no) and give some to Norah Batty (from Last of the Summer Wine) to gnaw at. She smiles, goes to the seaside and sails off sewing.

The last section feels a little clumsy in places, but the lines are so memorable and powerful. They perfectly capture the essence of Hamlet's brilliant but despairing speech and his friends' reaction to it.

This is the skeleton of the speech, but once learnt, filling in the extra words will be no problem.