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Light, darkness and unnatural happenings in Macbeth.



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# Introduction

Shakespeare uses characters such as Macbethto explore human nature and many of the political and social issues of his time. However, the play *Macbeth* does not rely solely on the characters to investigate these issues, instead, Shakespeare employs specific imagery to accomplish his purpose.

The first scene of *Macbeth* strikes the keynote of the play. The desert place, the wild storm, and the appearance of the witches prepare us for a drama in which a human soul succumbs to the temptation of evil. We hear of a battle that is even now being fought, we hear of the meeting place of the witches and, most significantly, we hear the name of the man they are planning to meet. No sooner has the name "Macbeth" been uttered than the calls of the attendant spirits are heard and the witches hurry off. The action of the scene is over with the naming of the man against whose soul these ministers of darkness are plotting.

The imagery in *Macbeth* is thus an inherent part of the dramatic structure, the function of the images is to forebode and anticipate. The imagery turns the imagination of the audience in a particular direction and prepares the atmosphere so that the state of expectation and feeling, necessary for the full realisation of the dramatic effect, is reached. In relation to *Macbeth*, the whole play may be regarded as an ‘image’ of fear (Spurgeon, 1935).

# Light and Darkness

Imagery of light and darkness is used to highlight the opposition between good and evil in the play. Traditionally, darkness symbolises evil and death while light represents goodness and life. ‘Angels are bright’ while the witches are ‘secret, black and midnight hags’, ‘instruments of darkness’. Speaking of new honours, Duncan proclaims: ‘Signs of nobleness, like stars shall shine/ On all observers’. Macbeth, prompted to thoughts of murder, exclaims: ‘Stars hide your fires/ Let not light see my black and deep desires’. Similarly, Lady Macbeth, when planning the killing of Duncan, cries: ‘Come thick night/ And pall thee in the dimmest smoke of hell’. This failure of nature in Lady Macbeth is marked by her fear of darkness; later in the play 'she has light by her continually'. On the night before the murder, Shakespeare adds to the atmosphere of impending evil when Banquo tells Fleance: ‘There’s husbandry in heaven/ Their candles are all out’. Significantly, too, when Banquo is being murdered the light is extinguished, symbolising yet again the presence of evil.

Darkness, even blackness, broods over this tragedy. Much of the action in *Macbeth* takes place at night. The murder of Duncan occurs at night, and the meetings with the witches are held in gloomy caves or in bleak moors. Duncan’s murder is followed by darkness at noon: ‘by the clock ‘tis day, and yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp’. The vision of the dagger, the murder of Banquo, the sleep-walking of Lady Macbeth, all come in night-scenes. The Witches dance in the thick air of a storm, or receive Macbeth in a gloomy cavern. The blackness of night is to the hero a thing of fear, even of horror. The faint glimmerings of the western sky at twilight are menacing: it is the hour when the traveller hastens to reach safety in his inn, and when Banquo rides homeward to meet his assassins; the hour when 'light thickens,' when 'night's black agents to their prey do rouse,' when the wolf begins to howl, and the owl to scream. Macbeth bids the stars hide their fires that his 'black' desires may be concealed; Lady Macbeth calls on thick night to come. The moon is down and no stars shine when Banquo, dreading the dreams of the coming night, goes unwillingly to bed, and leaves Macbeth to wait for the summons of the little bell. When the next day should dawn, its light is 'strangled,' and 'darkness does the face of earth entomb.' In the whole drama the sun seems to shine only twice: first, in the beautiful but ironical passage where Duncan sees the swallows flitting round the castle of death; and, afterwards, when at the close the avenging army gathers to rid the earth of its shame.

# Blood

The atmosphere of *Macbeth*, however, is not that of unrelieved blackness. On the contrary, *Macbeth* leaves a decided impression of colour; it is really the impression of a black night broken by flashes of light and colour, sometimes vivid and even glaring. There are the lights and colours of the thunder-storm in the first scene; of the dagger hanging before Macbeth's eyes and glittering alone in the midnight air; of the torch borne by the servant when he and his lord come upon Banquo crossing the castle-court to his room; of the torches that flared in the hall on the face of the Ghost and the face of Macbeth; of the flames beneath the boiling caldron from which the apparitions in the cavern rose; of the taper which showed to the Doctor and Gentlewoman the wasted face and blank eyes of Lady Macbeth. And, above all, the colour is the colour of blood.

As Macbeth goes about his ‘bloody business’ he hallucinates, seeing a dagger: ‘And on thy blade and dudgeon guts of blood’. After he has done the dreadful deed, he is so appalled by the sight of his blood-stained hands that he cries out ‘Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather /The multitudinous seas incarnadine/Making the green one red’. Macbeth’s guilt-ridden mind readily expresses itself in such images. After the banquet he realises the depths of evil in which he has plunged and the road forward leads to more murders: ‘I am in blood /Stepp’d in so far, that, should I wade no more, /Returning were as tedious as go’er’/.

The image of blood is continually reinforced throughout the play. The Witches, after their first wild appearance, have hardly quitted the stage when there staggers onto it a 'bloody man,' gashed with wounds. His tale is of a hero whose 'brandished steel smoked with bloody execution,' 'carved out a passage' to his enemy, and 'unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps.' And then he tells of a second battle so bloody that the combatants seemed as if they 'meant to bathe in reeking wounds.' We have the dreadful images of Lady Macbeth praying to the spirits of cruelty to thicken her blood that pity cannot flow along her veins and Macbeth, gazing at his hand, and watching it dye the whole green ocean red; of Lady Macbeth, gazing at hers, and stretching it away from her face to escape the smell of blood that all the perfumes of Arabia will not subdue. The most horrible lines in the whole tragedy are those of her shuddering cry, 'Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?'

It is not only at such moments that these images occur. Even in the quiet conversation of Malcolm and Macduff, Macbeth is imagined as holding a bloody sceptre, and Scotland as a country bleeding and receiving every day a new gash added to her wounds. When Macbeth, before Banquo's murder, invokes night to scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day, and to tear in pieces the great bond that keeps him pale, even the invisible hand that is to tear the bond is imagined as covered with blood. The world of Macbeth is indeed a sinister world and the imagery of blood which permeates the play adds to the atmosphere of horror and violence.

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# Violent Imagery

In a tragedy where murder plays such a significant part in the action it is appropriate that violent imagery should pervade the text. The vividness, magnitude, and violence of the imagery in some of these passages are characteristic of *Macbeth* almost throughout; and their influence contributes to form its atmosphere. Images like those of the babe torn smiling from the breast and dashed to death; of pouring the sweet milk of concord into hell; of the earth shaking in fever; of the frame of things disjointed; of sorrows striking heaven on the face, so that it resounds and yells out in grief; of the mind lying in restless ecstasy on a rack; of the mind full of scorpions; of the tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury;—all keep the imagination moving on a 'wild and violent sea,' while it is scarcely for a moment permitted to dwell on thoughts of peace and beauty. In its language, as in its action, the drama is full of tumult and storm. Whenever the Witches are present we see and hear a thunder-storm: when they are absent we hear of ship-wrecking storms and direful thunders; of tempests that blow down trees and churches, castles, palaces and pyramids; of the frightful hurricane of the night when Duncan was murdered; of the blast on which pity rides like a new-born babe, or on which Heaven's cherubim are horsed. There is thus something magnificently appropriate in the cry 'Blow, wind! Come, wrack!' with which Macbeth, turning from the sight of the moving wood of Birnam, bursts from his castle. He was borne to his throne on a whirlwind, and the fate he goes to meet comes on the wings of storm.

In the second scene of the play, the savage imagery of war is given full rein in the description of battle given by the bloody sergeant. He describes Macbeth’s sword as: ‘his brandish’d steel/ Which smoked with bloody execution’. Macbeth’s violent nature is clear from the ferocity of his attack on the enemy, attacking him ‘til he’d unseam’d him from the nave to the chaps, and fix’d his head upon our battlements’. Later the sergeant imagines Banquo and Macbeth: ‘Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds/Or memorise another Golgotha I cannot tell’. As Golgotha means ‘the place of skulls’ and memorise means to repeat, this is very powerful imagery, clearly conveying the violence of the attack. The fainting sergeant says ‘my gashes cry for help’. This foreshadows the later image of a bleeding Scotland:‘each new day a gash/ Is added to her wounds’ These atmospheric images convey violence and rapid movement, appropriate in a play of tumult and disorder.

There are many verbal images of violent motion in the play. Lady Macbeth talks of dashing out the brains of her smiling infant had she so sworn as Macbeth: ‘I would, while it was smiling in my face/Have pluck’d my nipple form his boneless gums, And dash’d the brains out’. The night of Duncan’s death is rough and unruly. We hear of sorrows striking heaven in the face, of the mind being tortured as if stretched on a rack of heaven’s cherubim honed on the storm, of Macbeth’s deed being blown in every eye. Violence and disorder are evoked by Macbeth in the rhetoric of the cauldron scene: ‘Though you untie the winds and let them fight/ Against the churches’. The final image is the physical bloody illustration of evil uprooted, as Macbeth’s severed head is displayed on a pole: ‘Behold, where stands the usurper’s cursed head! the time is free’.

These violent images create a nightmarish atmosphere and convey evil and horror. Throughout the play Shakespeare uses imagery to create a powerful atmosphere of evil and violence. All these agencies—darkness, the lights and colours that illuminate it, the storm that rushes through it, the violent and gigantic images—conspire with the appearances of the Witches and the Ghost to awaken horror, and in some degree also a supernatural dread. And to this effect other influences contribute. The pictures called up by the mere words of the Witches stir the same feelings,—those, for example, of the spell-bound sailor driven tempest-tossed for nine times nine weary weeks, and never visited by sleep night or day; of the drop of poisonous foam that forms on the moon, and, falling to earth, is collected for pernicious ends; of the sweltering venom of the toad, the finger of the babe killed at its birth by its own mother, the tricklings from the murderer's gibbet. In Nature, again, something is felt to be at work, sympathetic with human guilt and supernatural malice.

# Animal Imagery

The animal imagery of *Macbeth* reinforces the atmosphere of terror. Macbeth pictures the black agents of night rising to devour their prey as he plans Banquo’s death. There are images of a ‘hell-kite eating chickens’, a devouring vulture, a mind full of scorpions, a wren fighting for the life of its young, small birds fearing snares, horses eating each other, and a bear tied to a stake fighting off savage dogs. "The raven himself is hoarse/ that croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan under my battlements" observes Lady Macbeth after receiving word from the `messenger of Macbeth that he was Thane of Cawdor and would become king of Scotland by the three witch's predictions. This is also where Lady Macbeth decides that killing Duncan would be necessary to fulfil the witches’ prophecies. The raven is thus used to represent the death and destruction that will result in Duncan's demise.

Shakespeare refers to the process of ‘seeling’ in the play, a term used to describe the process in hunting whereby the bird was temporarily blinded by sewing together the eyelids. Once blinded, the bird is starved, watched by day and night, denied sleep; until he finally surrenders, and begins to take food, and to submit to caresses from his master. It is used by Shakespeare to describe physical or moral blindness, sometimes reinforced by the idea of cruelty. We imagine Macbeth, blinded by ambition, succumbing to temptation from the witches, the instruments of evil. The most famous and most complex example is in *Macbeth*; moving from the concrete to the abstract: ‘Come, seeling night, Scarf up to the tender eye of pitiful day, And with thy bloody and invisible hand/ Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond/ Which keeps me pale!’. Other animal imagery includes the owl that clamours all through the night; Duncan's horses devouring each other in frenzy; the crying of crickets; the croak of the raven; the home-coming of the rooks; all are ominous and reinforce the violence and disorder that permeates the play.

# Disease

The imagery of disease acts as a metaphor for evil and corruption. The idea of corruption spreading in Macbeth like a disease first appears in Act 1, scene 3, in one of Macbeth’s first soliloquies. He states that the thought of murdering Duncan is weighing on his mind so greatly that he is unable to function normally. Soon after, Lady Macbeth, in a soliloquy of her own, points out that Macbeth’s only “illness” is his ambition. Despite the fact that he covets the throne dearly, he does not want to usurp Duncan. Unfortunately, as the disease of Macbeth’s mind spreads, it takes on the new form of evil. For example, by Act 2, scene 1, his “heat oppressed mind” sees apparitions of the dagger he will use to murder Duncan. Soon after Duncan is slain, Lennox, unaware of this dreadful deed, describes how the earth was “feverous.” Not only does the natural order reflect the moral order in the play, the imagery of a feverish land also heralds the starting point of Scotland’s downfall under the rule of Macbeth as king.

In Act 3, scene 4, Macbeth has prepared a banquet that is seemingly in honour of Banquo, whom he has just murdered. During the banquet, Banquo’s ghost comes back to haunt Macbeth for his actions. Macbeth, unaware that he is surrounded by several Lords, openly expresses his shock when he sees Banquo’s ghost. Lady Macbeth quickly comes to her husband’s aid, saying that he is merely plagued by a common infirmity that causes him to hallucinate. Although this revelation is entirely false, it does have some ironic connotations: Macbeth is ill with the disease of evil. As the play progresses, the imagery of the diseased Macbeth becomes more evident. In the beginning of Act 4, scene 3, Malcolm and Macduff, lament the fact that Scotland is as ill as its ruler, Macbeth, who has now earned himself the terrible title of “tyrant.” Malcolm even goes so far to vividly describes how his country, personified as a being, bleeds under Macbeth. This metaphor of a diseased country is extended as Macduff introduces the idea of healing Scotland, upon learning that his family has been killed. He ominously vows to slaughter Macbeth, thus curing his homeland with the medicine of revenge.

Even Lady Macbeth has been affected by the spread of the disease. On a literal basis she has actually suffered a mental breakdown due to the heavy load on her conscience. Figuratively, however, she is not suffering from a sick body, but a sick soul. She is merely living in the horror of the recollection of the evil deeds that she has committed. For this reason, the doctor’s diagnosis is that her only hope rests on divine healing rather than physical recuperation.

The Scottish nobles continue the imagery of disease to stress that their opposition to Macbeth’s “distempered cause” is justified. In Act 5, scene 2, Malcolm has been identified as the medicine for the sick country. Moreover, his men are ready to shed their blood as “purge” for Scotland’s affliction. Back in Macbeth’s camp, the tyrant asks a doctor to cure both the ailing Lady Macbeth and Scotland and to find out the cause of their troubles. Ironically, Macbeth is unaware that, in fact, he himself is the root of both of their ‘infected minds’. As we have seen the use of imagery in Macbeth is effective in creating suspense and establishing the atmosphere of evil lurking, and the imagery of disease as a metaphor for evil and corruption is appropriate for several reasons. Firstly, Macbeth’s slow descent down the moral ladder is similar to a disease slowly and malignantly spreading through a body. Secondly, just as Macbeth is unable to rid himself of the thought of killing Duncan, a disease is often uncontrollable once unleashed. Finally, the metaphor is extended as Malcolm (and to a lesser extent Macduff) is seen as medicine or a healer who cures Scotland of its infirmity.

# Clothing

Garment metaphors and similes are introduced at crucial moments in the play and given special emphasis. Having being greeted as Thane of Cawdor by the witches, Macbeth expresses his incredulity by means of an image of borrowed clothes: ‘The Thane of Cawdor lives: why do you dress me/ In borrow’d robes’. Macbeth is reluctant to accept any honour to which he is not entitled and the imagery underlines the transformation of character that takes place as Macbeth later murders Duncan for his crown. As Banquo watches Macbeth, dumbfounded by the apparent truth of the witches’ claims, he remarks: ‘New honours come upon him/ Like our strange garments, cleave not to mould/ But with the aid of use’. Macbeth uses the same kind of image himself when recognising whether he should kill Duncan or not: ‘I have bought/Golden opinions from all sorts of people/Which should be worn now in their newest gloss’/Not cast aside so soon’. In her contemptuous retort, Lady Macbeth replies in kind: ‘was the hope drunk/ Wherein you dress’d yourself’. Macduff, sceptical about Macbeth’s suitability for kinship, remarks to Ross, who is going to Scone: ‘Well may you see things well done there! Adieu/ Lest our old robes sit easier than our new! ’. Later, when it is clear that Macduff’s doubts were justified, Angus vividly describes the tyrant’s insecure reign: ‘now does he feel his title/ Hang loose about him, like a giant’s robe/ Upon a dwarfish thief’.

The garment imagery reflects the discrepancy between Macbeth’s moral sense and his ambition; the smaller body in the clothes symbolises Macbeth’s moral inadequacy, while the larger garment represents the wearer’s ambition too great to be fulfilled. It is interesting to note that, by the mid-sixteenth century, gaudy dress had become a code for registering elite status (Whigham, 1984). People often tried to scale the social ladder with their garments which caused disorder in the social hierarchy. As a result, statutes were proclaimed to restrict the wearing of particular garments to elite members of society and those who flouted the statutes were apprehended and punished (Hughes & Larkin, 1969). Thus, in Renaissance society, the largeness of what you wear is a code of your social status and a symbol of your place in the hierarchy. Therefore, too large a garment might be a representation of pretence to be what one is not, or an indication of an ambition to do what is beyond one’s power.

The garment imagery also underlines the conflicted character of Macbeth. On the one hand, he is a brave and trustworthy soldier. After learning the news from the bleeding captain about ‘brave Macbeth’, Duncan praises him ‘Oh valiant cousin! Worthy gentleman!’. Furthermore, before he is going to kill Duncan, Macbeth reveals his inherent good nature in the soliloquy of Act 1, Scene 4 when he tries to talk himself out of the murder. On the other hand, Macbeth has unlawful ambition. This inner conflict is what critics call ‘the tension between a deeply moral intellect and an utterly amoral will’ (McElroy, 1973). Macbeth is not suited to murder but his ambition, activated by the three witches and Lady Macbeth, eventually outweighs his moral considerations. We can thus argue that Macbeth’s loose garment is symbolic of the ambition unfit for the wearer; the smaller man symbolising morality and the larger garment the wearer’s unlawful ambition.

 Robes reflected status in Renaissance times.

# Conclusion

We might ask ourselves now, why is the imagery so important in Macbeth?

Well, firstly, the Globe theatre audience know the meaning, for example, of the abuse of apparel; it is a symbol of unwanted ambition and disorder in the hierarchy and the audience know that the wearer ought to be punished. The garment imagery thus triggers in the audience’s mind a picture of disorder in the universe and the hope of punishing evil and regaining order. The imagery thus functions as a way of involving the audience in the play and keeping them interested.

Furthermore, it is worthwhile remembering that a significant proportion of the audience in the Globe Theatre were confined to the open area or pit directly in front of the stage. These poorer audience members were referred to as the groundlings. They often stood for up to three hours in the pit watching a play. There were no seats, it was crowded and although the groundlings were only paying a penny for their place, most were only earning ten pennies a week so it was vital that Shakespeare made it interesting, otherwise the audience would not hold back in voicing their displeasure.

Finally, the imagery not only offers important clues to what Shakespeare sought to represent in *Macbeth*, it also helps us gain a better insight into the meaning of the drama. The use of imagery creates "a play about the disintegration of the state of man, and the state he makes his" (Rossiter, 1977). Without this masterful imagery, it is unlikely that Shakespeare would have been able to create as clear a picture of the corrupt and diseased Macbeth and the sickening and far-reaching consequences of his treacherous deeds.

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