



Imagery in *Macbeth**

One critic characterizes *Macbeth* as a tragedy of “the setting in of darkness upon a human soul.” The play’s imagery keeps this spiritual darkness constantly before us, from Macbeth’s first encounter with the witches to the moment when Macduff triumphantly displays Macbeth’s severed head.

Let us look at *Macbeth* to see how Shakespeare’s patterns of images help to create the brooding atmosphere of treachery that permeates this savage drama. One of Shakespeare’s poetic techniques is to set up pairs of images that appear contradictory. Entering with Banquo after their triumph in battle, Macbeth speaks his first words:

“So fair and foul a day I have not seen.”

He could mean simply that a “fair” victory was won in “foul” weather, but the audience has already been prepared for a more complex reading of this image by the witches’ incantation in Act I, Scene i.

“Fair is foul and foul is fair. Hover through the fog and filthy air.”

Clearly, Shakespeare intends more than an extended weather report. “Fair is foul” can apply both to the day and to Macbeth; both, beginning in glory, are to take a sharp turn for the worse with the intrusion of demonic forces.

Shakespeare uses such opposites to create a world which, like Macbeth himself, is not what it seems. In this world, seeming loyalty masks murderous intent, and a wife advises her husband to

“... look like the innocent flower, But be the serpent under it”

In this world, as Macbeth says,

“False face must hide what the false heart doth show.”

These images suggest that our senses are not to be trusted, and Shakespeare hammers this point home in many ways. Macbeth sees a dagger where there is none, pointing the way to Duncan’s chamber. Neither the guests at the banquet nor Lady Macbeth see Banquo’s ghost, but to Macbeth it is most certainly and terribly present. Driven by her guilt to avert her eyes from the world she and her husband have made, Lady Macbeth is haunted by her dreams as she paces the castle corridors and scrubs at a spot of blood that only she can see. Macbeth scornfully dismisses the report of the soldier who has seen the “immovable” forest of Dunsinane advance upon the castle, but the report is true. The prophecies of the witches turn out to be deceptions, true in the most literal sense but ultimately misleading — false assurances uttered to bring Macbeth to destruction.

All these images suggest that in this play reality is concealed from the characters — good and bad alike — who grope through the darkness. And Shakespeare uses the image of darkness, or gloom, repeatedly and to great effect in *Macbeth*, since most of the play’s action takes place (or seems to take place) at night.

These images of darkness reach a memorable peek in Act I, Scene v, when Lady Macbeth, planning Duncan’s murder, calls out:



“Come, thick night, And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry, “Hold, hold!”

And later, Macbeth – with Banquo’s murder in mind – invokes the same power of night to hide his foul deeds.

“Come, seeling night,
Scarf up 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! Light thickens, and the crow
Makes wing to th’rooky wood.
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
Whiles night’s black agents to their preys do rouse.”
(Act III Scene vii)

Of the many patterns that charge the play with its poetic energy, we will consider only one more that, like the others we have examined, suggests a world in which things are not what they seem. Images of stolen, borrowed, and badly-fitting clothes refer to Macbeth and the titles he wins during the play. Macbeth’s first reaction, when told he is Thane of Cawdor, establishes this image:

“The Thane of Cawdor lives: why do you dress me
in borrowed robes?”

And Banquo, noting Macbeth’s preoccupied reaction to the news, says:

“New honors...
Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mold
But with the aid of use.”

In other words, a new title, like new clothing, feels strange until it has been worn long enough to fit properly.

As the drama ends, Malcolm’s armies encircle Macbeth’s castle, and Angus sounds the theme again, but this time with a different emphasis. Of the desperate and embattled Macbeth, he says:

“Now does he feel his title Hang loose about him, like a
giant’s robe
Upon a dwarfish thief.”

This brief discussion touches upon only a few of the images in *Macbeth*. As you read the play and see it acted, notice how Shakespeare furnishes and colors the world of *Macbeth* with a thickening of the dramatic atmosphere, so that “fair is foul,” night overrides the day, and truth plays false with man’s ambitions.

*Handout from an unknown teacher.

