

Symbolism in “Macbeth”

Symbolism is a literary device that describes the practice of representing places, people, ideas or objects by attributing them to the characteristic of another object. Most thrilling plays include symbolism; “Macbeth” is not exceptional. “Macbeth” is a tragic play that captures the reader’s attention by detailing Macbeth’s engagement in evil to gain power. It is a story of greed for power. In “Macbeth”, Shakespeare uses symbolism to stimulate the reader’s interest, generate ambiance and donate to the subject of the play. Symbolism in the play illustrates the main theme of immorality. Shakespeare communicates to the readership through symbols to stimulate interest and elicit responses. These symbols include “sleep” that represents vulnerability and innocence, darkness that represent evil and blood.

Shakespeare uses the word sleep a number of times to symbolize different events and feelings throughout the play. For example, he uses the word sleep to symbolize vulnerability or risk of getting attacked. When one is asleep he, or she is not aware of what is happening around. When Lady Macbeth and Macbeth plot to kill Duncan, he is asleep, and this symbolizes his vulnerability. “When in Swinish sleep, their drenched natures lies as in a death, what cannot you and I perform upon the unguarded Duncan” (.1.7.77). When she says this, Lady Macbeth assures Macbeth that Duncan’s keepers are sound asleep, and Duncan is vulnerable to attack.

When Lady Macbeth and Macbeth murder Duncan, they do not get any sleep all along the play because they feel guilty of their action. Shakespeare, in his play, says, “Which shall to all our nights and days to come, give solely sovereign sway and Masterdom” (1.5.68). This shows the vulnerability of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to tragedies after killing the King of Scotland. Both murderers will not enjoy sleep for the rest of the tragic play. Above and beyond

this, Shakespeare uses sleep to symbolize peace and innocence. When Macbeth murders Duncan, he hears a voice telling him that he has murdered sleep. In this case, sleep represents Duncan's innocence and killing him Macbeth murders sleep.

Shakespeare uses blood to reveal the feelings of Macbeth about murder. For instance, blood symbolism exposes Macbeth's apprehension before he murders Duncan. In his hallucination, Macbeth sees a dagger floating before him as it guides him towards Duncan's chamber. "And on thy blade and dudgeon gout of blood, which was not so before, there is no such thing, it is the bloody business which informs thus to mine eyes" (2. 1.46). After Duncan's death, the blood symbolizes Macbeth's guilt and horror over the murder. Macbeth laments that the blood that he sees during the hallucination plucks his eyes thus signifying the extent of apprehension. He is not only horrified but also guilty. His apprehension is self accusatory. Macbeth likens his guilt to a marshland; he has waded so deep into this marshland that it is hard to go back as much as it is hard to continue. This metaphor drives Macbeth from denial to acceptance.

In addition to representing Macbeth's change of attitude from remorse to acceptance, blood symbolism also represents the attitude of Lady Macbeth towards change. She, without effort, washes the blood with water, taking no notice of the guilt. This represents her nonchalant attitude towards Duncan's death. However, her second rejoinder towards blood reveals shock over her spouse's cruelty. When she sees the guards that her spouse has killed, she faints. The guards are lying in a pool of blood, underlining Macbeth's cruelty and malice. Her fainting at the sight of blood shows her change from a plot activator to an astonished observer. The murder haunts Lady Macbeth as much as it does Macbeth. She attempts to change and cure her guilt. She spots a spot of blood on her hands and tries to wash it off unsuccessfully. This shows how hard it

is to clear her conscience. In resignation, Lady Macbeth says that her hands will never be clean, indicating the permanent state of the guilt.

Shakespeare uses the witch symbolism to represent darkness and immorality of the human soul. Shakespeare depicts the witches as agents of chaos because of the darkness around them. They meet in the cave, an appropriate setting because caves symbolize the underworld. Additional to this, they meet at midnight in terrible circumstances. They, therefore, represent the evil that happens throughout the tragic play. Macbeth describes the witches as being black, secret and midnight hags. Apart from the witches' meetings, the darkness hosts other evil activities such as the killing of Duncan. Darkness also symbolizes Macbeth's inclination towards immorality. He only faces his activities in the comfort of darkness that hides what he is doing. "Stars conceal his fires, let not glow see him black and dark requirements" (1. 4.50). Throughout Duncan's assassination, Lady Macbeth appeals to the dark to hide the murderers as well as hiding the act from paradise.

In conclusion, symbolism plays a crucial role in representing the evil in Shakespeare's play, "Macbeth". Shakespeare uses it in several ways to relate the overall theme of immorality to the actions of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Darkness represents the evil that is evident throughout the play. Blood represents the guilt that consumes Macbeth and Lady Macbeth before and after committing murder. Sleep represents the innocence of Duncan as well as the vulnerability to attack and tragedy. These symbols portray the theme of immorality to allow the audience to understand and involve themselves into the tragic play.