

# The images of darkness and disease in macbeth essay sample

[Literature](#), [Drama](#)



The images of darkness and disease in Macbeth are very important in creating the atmosphere and mood of the play. Shakespeare uses verbal imagery as well as the physical images acted out in the play to affect the audience; these effects were enhanced by the fact that Macbeth was first performed in front of a small audience and lighting would have been provided by candlelight. Threatening darkness seems to envelop Macbeth who appears oppressed by fear and danger and obsessed with thoughts of Duncan's death. Macbeth combats his fears with thoughts of more violence. The imagery of dark and light relates to the metaphorical fight between good and evil. Macbeth symbolizes a disease affecting Scotland.

Throughout the play, the use of imagery connected with darkness and disease help to create the atmosphere of surrounding evil:

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

Lines such as these, as much as the appearance of the witches and the terrible acts committed, give the play its increasing sense of a world besieged by appalling injustice. These lines also appeal to our sense of sight i. e. " Scarf up the tender eye..." and, " Light thickens". They make you think of light thickening and night cancelling out the light. Night's black agents could refer to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. " Light thickens, and the crow /

Makes wing to the rooky wood” brings more thoughts of darkness into the play, because crows and rooks are dark and sometimes associated with evil beings.

The most important scenes in Macbeth occur in darkness e. g. the murder of Duncan, Banquo, the visit to the witches etc. These scenes show that Macbeth is a dark play; it is also shown by the repeated images of darkness and night. Nearly all of the characters mention darkness at some point in the play, when Lady Macbeth considers murdering Duncan (Act 1, Scene 5) she says, “ Come, thick night...” she means that she wants the night to cover up the evil deeds, and Banquo, shortly before Duncan’s murder (Act 2, Scene 1), says, “ There’s husbandry in heaven / their candles are all out.” This shows that there are no stars in the sky. Macbeth in Act 1, Scene 4, says the most famous reference to darkness, “ Stars hide your fires, let not light see my black and deep desires.” Macbeth feels guilty and wants nobody good to see his evilness.

When Macbeth describes the murder of Duncan he says:

his gashed stabs looked like a breach in nature

for ruin’s wasteful entrance

This metaphor brings to mind the destruction of Scotland and the entrance of anarchy and devastation to overturn the natural order of nature. This violent imagery would startle the audience into thought. It makes us think about

things far removed from life and Shakespeare gains a degree of influence over his audience.

This imagery of dark and light, clearly relates to the metaphorical fight between good and evil, which is also shown by word pictures where darkness “struggles” with light. For example when Duncan links nobility with the stars:

which honour must

Not unaccompanied invest in him only, But signs of nobleness, like stars,

Macbeth almost immediately says in an aside, “Stars, hide your fires...” (So that his, “black and deep desires,” cannot be seen,) so that the audience

can see that he is even plotting to become King just after he has been praised, setting in stone that he is evil. Also early in the play, in Act 2, Scene 4, Ross says to the old man, “...dark night strangles the traveller’s lamp”.

The traveller’s lamp is a metaphor of the sun, and, when it has been covered by darkness, it symbolizes the battle between light and darkness with darkness, temporarily winning. Although later in the play light dominates again once Macbeth is killed:

As calling home our exil’d friends abroad that fled the snares of watchful tyranny; Producing forth the cruel ministers

Of this dead butcher and his fiend-like Queen

Macduff symbolizes the light conquering darkness when he is fighting with Macbeth; some people also think that Macduff and Macbeth represent God and the Devil, Macduff is a representation of God and Macbeth the Devil. Macbeth being unable to utter Amen in Act 2, Scene 2, can further back this up.

There are many scenes in the play, which would have benefited from being lit with candles, Duncan's death, the banquet scene, Lady Macbeth sleepwalking, and Macduff's family being murdered. The candles would have given bright spots, but with deep shadows and peoples faces would be half lit and half in shade giving each scene a forbidding or ominous feel.

There is an additional string of imagery in the play, which deal with disease. In Shakespeare's time most people were scared of illness and disease because of lack of knowledge. Witches were blamed for creating evil spirits that were believed to cause disease. There is a very strong theme of witchcraft in Macbeth, and the witches are the first to mention disease in the play. The witches stop a sailor from sleeping because his wife wouldn't give the witch some chestnuts; they appear to be enjoying themselves:

Weary sev'n-nights nine times nine

Shall he dwindle, peak and pine

Perhaps a parallel could be drawn between this and Lady Macbeth's inability to sleep, it could be a curse inflicted upon her by the witches. In another disease reference there is a good contrast between King Edward of England

and Macbeth, which shows Edward as a miraculous healer (“ To the succeeding royalty he leaves the healing benediction”) but shows Macbeth as a disease affecting Scotland (“ Let’s make us medicine of our great revenge, to cure this deadly grief”). In the banquet scene, Macbeth tells his guests that he has a, “ strange infirmity” after he sees the ghost.

This lie shows us that people would relax more around him if they knew that the fit he had just had was a lifelong thing that hadn’t affected him badly. Macduff compares his revenge on Macbeth to medicine at the end of Act 4, “ Let’s make us medicine of our great revenge, / to cure this deadly grief”, this means that when he takes revenge on Macbeth, it will be a cure for Scotland. The Elizabethans believed that a persons character was also very closely linked to diseases they had or have, in Macbeth’s case his fiery temperament could have been linked to a disease causing yellow bile, whereas Banquo’s temperament could be related to blood which bring about jolly, optimistic feelings. They also thought the elements were involved, Fire with anger, Air with Sanguine, Water with sluggishness and Earth with sadness.

Darkness and disease are images that feature throughout Macbeth and they help to create the mystical mood. They are likely to affect the audience by dampening their spirits. The disease theme helps to illustrate the differences between Edward the Confessor, who can cure disease, and Macbeth, who is seen as the source of Scotland’s “ ill health”. The witches are seen as instrumental in the development of disease. There are so many references to darkness and light it would be impossible to count them all, the theme is integrated into every act and nearly every scene. Darkness and disease

permeate every corner of the play just as much as they shroud the evil elements of the scenes in Macbeth.