

How does the  
characteristic imagery  
of macbeth contribute  
to the creation of  
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Macbeth is a famous Shakespearean tragedy written around 1606.

It is based on a true story but is generally interpreted as a moral tragedy rather than a history. It traces Macbeth's fall from 'prosperity to adversity'<sup>1</sup> after his encounter with the witches. Macbeth was extremely ambitious and this characteristic is what made him Thane of Cawdor and the noble soldier that was presented at the start of the play. That same characteristic was what later led to his demise.

Shakespeare wrote his plays in poetry and used a variety of linguistic devices to conjure up images in the mind of the reader. These images weren't just picked at random. Instead, they were used throughout the play and varied each time so that they echoed the previous image. The range of images running through the play build up to a number of key themes on which the play is based. The play portrays the pursuit of power at all costs.

From this main theme arises a number of different, subsidiary themes. For the characters, there are problems regarding power, ambition, treachery, deception, murder, and betrayal. In the background, there is a constant battle between good and evil, showing a 'reversal of values and of unnatural disorder'<sup>2</sup>. Throughout the play, the line 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' is continually echoed. It is varied slightly but constantly implies that moral law boundaries are not rigid, and that good and evil are interchangeable.

This introduces the final theme that there is a difference between appearance and reality. The weather is an important aspect of the play as it creates a foreboding atmosphere. In Shakespeare's time, the weather was said to reflect nature. With the opening scene depicting the three witches on

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a moor in the middle of a storm, it would have suggested something unnatural taking place to the audience. From the start, disturbing weather seems to prophesy that something evil is about to take place.

The witches cast a spell to meet Macbeth ' In thunder, lightning or in rain'. They comment on ' the fog and filthy air'. Not only does the bad weather create a disturbing atmosphere, but it also indicates confusion due to the murkiness of the weather. The weather appears to dull the senses and deceive people's perception of reality. On the night of Duncan's murder, there is once again a storm brewing like a premonition of evil.

The next morning, Lennox describes the night before as being ' unruly'. There was said to be a strong wind, which sounded like, ' strange screams of death'. This implies a turbulent atmosphere and a sense of terrible confusion. The imagery of the weather helps to develop the theme of unnatural disorder, by building up to a major event through atmosphere. The contrast between dark and light runs through the play.

Many of the ' evil' deeds take place at night and quickly become associated with evil and death. Consequently, light becomes associated with life, virtue, and goodness. In act 1, sc. iv when Duncan announces that Malcolm is to be his heir, Macbeth immediately thinks of murder. He asks, '..

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. Stars, hide your fires! Let not light see my black and deep desires' He recognises that his thoughts are evil and associates them with night and the colour black. When Lady Macbeth hears of the witches' prophecy, she also thinks about murder. In her soliloquy, she echoes Macbeth by saying, 'Come, thick night.

' Duncan's murder takes place at night so that the dark can conceal Macbeth's deed. The next morning, Ross describes the weather, as the 'dark night [that] strangles the travelling lamp' and the 'darkness [that] does the face of the earth entomb. The absence of light is portrayed as threatening and engulfing. The suggestion is that the evil of the night before has won over Macbeth, and is lingering into the next day. This strand of darkness is continued in act 3, sc.

ii just before Banquo's murder. Shakespeare builds up a dark and supernatural atmosphere by talking about 'black Hecate', 'night's yawning peal,' and 'night's black agents. ' Then following Lady Macbeth's 'Come, thick night', Macbeth echoes, 'Come, seeling night,' and refers to the, 'pitiful day. ' This insinuates that Macbeth is becoming increasingly evil by discrediting 'goodness'.

We can tell that Banquo's murder also took place as it was getting dark, from Macbeth's comment that, 'Light thickens. ' Soon after this, Macbeth went to see the three witches. He linked them with evil by referring to them as 'black, and midnight hags. ' At first, Lady Macbeth is bold and calls upon evil spirits to make her unfeeling. In her soliloquy in act1, sc.

v, she calls out, '.....

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..... Come, thick night, And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,' However, by act 5 she has realised the extent of the sin she committed.

She no longer calls upon dark spirits but instead, feels the need for light at all times. We are told this by her Gentlewoman who remarks that, ' she has her light by her continually. ' Light is portrayed as protecting and soothing. This strand of dark and light runs throughout the play, adding to the idea of a constant battle between good and evil. This idea is very important to the play as it helps invoke empathy in the reader, by portraying Macbeth as if he was caught up in this battle. As Lady Macbeth said in act 2, sc.

ii, ' That death and nature do contend about them, Whether they live or die. ' It seems to be that once the witches targeted Macbeth, he couldn't resist the temptation. From then on, good and evil were fighting for his soul. As the play progresses, evil seems to be winning as Macbeth refers to day, or ' goodness' as being ' pitiful'. He has experienced both good and evil but prefers evil.

The lines at the end of act3, sc. ii, ' Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond Which keeps me pale! ' have a double meaning. They could refer to his relationship with Banquo or a person's duty to goodness. He could be asking the devil to take his soul, as he no longer wants anything to do ' goodness'.

Macbeth works on many different levels because all of the themes are interlinked.

As Macbeth becomes increasingly evil, nature becomes increasingly disturbed. Wholesome and nourishing actions become depicted as evil or contorted. Nature is seen to be disturbed from the start. The atmosphere and mood along with the witches insinuate something unnatural.

This feeling is deepened as the witches' powers are confirmed when they meet Macbeth on the moor. Their supernatural abilities not only draw in Macbeth, but entice the reader as well. During Lady Macbeth's soliloquy (in which she asks to be hardened), she calls upon evil spirits and asks for unnatural things to be done to her. She wants to be made without feeling or conscience. Anything that is supposed to be good is depicted as evil.

Lady Macbeth refers to 'the milk of human kindness' yet later the image of milk seems more malevolent in 'take my milk for gall.' When she is convincing Macbeth to carry through the murder, the image of milk was once again used. This time it was the image of breast-feeding a child as Lady Macbeth said that she would, 'Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless, And dash'd the brains out'. The crime that Macbeth commits is a convulsion of nature and is described as unnatural by witnesses. Macbeth himself says that Duncan's wounds 'look'd like a breach in nature.

'When Macduff saw Duncan the next morning, he exclaimed, 'Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope The Lord's anointed temple, and stole thence The life o' the building!' Sacrilegious is a synonym for unholy. In

Shakespeare's time, everything followed a divine order. God was said to rule  
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everything and the King was his representative on earth. He controlled all humans, animals, and nature.

God's universal order would be preserved as long as people chose to follow God and obey his laws. This included honouring the King and following his commandments. The murder of Duncan would seem incredibly sinful as not only was a life being destroyed, but also, it was a blatant sin against God. The crime that Macbeth commits is not only immoral, but it is unnatural too. When Macbeth returns after killing Duncan, Lady Macbeth casually remarks that, ' A little water clears us of this deed. ' Water is supposed to symbolise purity yet here it is being used to clear them from suspicion.

Drinking is supposed to be a vital and sustaining part of life but the imagery in the play is used to contort its purpose. The ringing of the bell to inform Macbeth that his drink is ready seems like an innocent and normal action yet it conceals the signal for Macbeth to carry through the murder. This caring action of calling someone to drink is twisted into the image of a death toll. After Macbeth comes to power, the sin he committed seems to contaminate Scotland like a disease.

The Thanes and his former friends desert him as the natural course of life becomes distorted. They want to restore Scotland to the way it was before. The Lords begin to doubt Macbeth's capability as a king. This excerpt from Act 3, sc.

vi shows the things that they had been deprived of due to Macbeth's unnatural crime. ' Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights, Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives, Do faithful homage and receive free  
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honours All which we pine for now. ' Sleep is supposed to be replenishing yet there is imagery throughout the play of people unable to sleep or of people being haunted by nightmares. The strand starts when the witches target a sailor condemning him to sleeplessness.

Macbeth soon complains of the same problem after murdering Duncan. Glamis hath murder'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor Shall sleep no more, Macbeth shall sleep no more! ' Macbeth is deprived of ' nature's second course' because of his evil deed. By taking away Duncan's life, Macbeth has sacrificed his right to many of the natural things in life often taken for granted, such as sleep. The people closest to him are also suffering from his destructive behaviour. When he complains of sleeplessness, it is Lady Macbeth who is found sleepwalking three acts later. Before the murder, it is Banquo who ' would not sleep' and is haunted by the ' three weird sisters'.

This shows that Macbeth's actions did not just affect himself, it also contaminated the people around him. Eating, another sustaining action, is also distorted by Macbeth. He hosts a banquet after his coronation yet the ghost of Banquo, whom he had just ordered to be killed, comes back to haunt him. The meal, which is meant to be social and pleasant, is ruined by Macbeth's strange behaviour. In act 5, sc.

v he claims to have ' supp'd full with horrors' once again misconstruing the image of food. Ageing is also a natural process yet Macbeth feels self-pity because he has all the pains of ageing yet he doesn't get to experience any of the joys. This scene serves to show that he has some regret for his actions. These disturbances in nature help to show how thin the line between



good and evil are and that everything in nature is interconnected. You cannot change one thing without changing something else too.

It shows Macbeth's self-pity that he has sacrificed his life and soul so that Banquo's children may become king. Clothing is important as it reinforces the idea of appearance and reality. The images of clothing in Macbeth symbolise honours and titles. The role of kingship is constantly referred to as a garment to be worn. This is shown in act 5, sc. i, when Angus describes Macbeth as a 'dwarfish thief' in 'a giant's robe.

' This enforces the view that the Thanes suspected Macbeth of obtaining the crown through foul means. He is depicted as being unworthy of the garments or honours placed upon him. In act 1, sc. iii, Macbeth asks the witches why they dress him 'in borrow'd robes'. Therefore, from the start, Macbeth himself associates clothes with honours. When Macbeth is debating with Lady Macbeth about what to do with Duncan, he refers to the praises of other people as, 'Golden opinions.

.. [to] be worn now in their newest gloss. At the end of the play, these 'golden opinions' are discarded as people see the cruel and evil person Macbeth has become. At the end of the play, the image of Macbeth in ill fitting clothes is continually echoed symbolising that Macbeth has not lived up to people's expectations of him.

At the start of the play, Macbeth is compared to an eagle and a lion. These are noble yet powerful creatures. Macbeth's fall can be traced not only in the imagery of nature, but in people opinions of him as well. Just before

Duncan's murder Lady Macbeth told him to be the 'serpent'. This image is of <https://assignbuster.com/how-does-the-characteristic-imagery-of-macbeth-contribute-to-the-creation-of-atmosphere/>

something cold blooded and sly yet still powerful. At the very end just before his defeat, Macbeth compares himself to a bear.

This was seen as a contemptible animal that was locked up and taunted. As Macbeth became increasingly evil, the animals he was compared with became increasingly lower ranking in importance. Through the comparisons with animals, you can trace Macbeth's demise and his respectability sinking lower and lower. Despite the range of animals he was compared with, they were all powerful in their own way. At the start, he is illustrated as predatory but honourable. As he begins to plot with Lady Macbeth, he is portrayed as cunning and deceptive.

At the end, he compares himself to a bear. The image of a bear tied to a stake stirs empathy in the reader. Macbeth seems to be helpless and trapped and is being taunted and attacked from all sides. He cannot defend himself and can only fight at this point.

Blood imagery was used throughout the play as a physical reminder of Macbeth's evil. Just after Duncan's murder, Macbeth was terrified by the sight of the blood, saying that no amount of water could possibly clean his hands. This is echoed in act 5, sc. i when Lady Macbeth says, 'all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. After the murder had passed, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth seemed to have switched role. The sight and the smell of Duncan's blood had driven Lady Macbeth insane, whilst Macbeth was describing the image of being in 'blood stepp'd in so far'.

This enhances the image that Macbeth is so evil that there is no way his soul could ever be pure. The blood also makes us picture the colour red which <https://assignbuster.com/how-does-the-characteristic-imagery-of-macbeth-contribute-to-the-creation-of-atmosphere/>

combines with black (as mentioned above) to form a wonderful blend of colours for the underlying theme of the play. The image of blood is very important to the play because it acts as a physical reminder of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's sins. They show that although sins can be covered up, they cannot be completely forgotten.

The imagery in Macbeth is what makes it an exceptional play. The imagery and key themes all intertwine and blend together to link up the whole play. The atmosphere and key themes do not rely on a single image but on a range of different images to invoke emotions of fear, horror, and pity in the audience. The fact that Shakespeare uses strands of imagery is one of the reasons that his plays are so popular. They make his plays unique and interesting and help his audience to understand and to empathise with the characters.