

Blood imagery in macbeth

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Imagine a war without guns, missiles, or bombs. A war with swords, daggers, and arrows. A war with blood, gallons and gallons of blood flooding the battlefields. Set in eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon Scotland, this would be the typical battle scene in Shakespeare's bloody tragedy, *Macbeth*. In *Macbeth* Shakespeare presents a bloody tale of an age-old struggle for power when Macbeth, the play's protagonist, and his wife plan to kill Duncan, Scotland's current beloved king, after hearing a prophecy told by three evil witches proclaiming Macbeth to be the new king.

The higher Macbeth rises to the throne the deeper he slips into a bottomless pool of the blood of those who dared stand in his way. Throughout *Macbeth*, Shakespeare uses images of blood as a means of symbolism, using multiple recurrences of blood imagery to promote the primary feelings of "fear, honor, and pain" (Spurgeon 115). As symbol blood ultimately "covers everything Macbeth has touched" in many ways "both qualitative and quantitative" that "real blood" is unable to do (Mack 53).

As the play progresses the symbolism changes and transforms from honor to betrayal and ultimately to guilt and revenge. Macbeth begins as a courageous hero in the midst of battle. A "bloody man" in King Duncan's court tells a story of a bloody battle in which Macbeth fulfills the role of the hero (1. 2. 1). On the verge of bleeding out the Captain manages to "paint Macbeth's valor" despite his blood flooding the King's court ("Character Profile" 193). Images of the Captain, a man mortally wounded protecting Duncan's son Malcolm in battle, smothered in his own blood gives a symbol of an honorable death.

While the Captain lay dying, he still goes on about Macbeth unseaming an opponent from “ the nave to th’ chops,” building King Duncan’s trust in Macbeth (1. 2. 18-23). After the three witches visit Macbeth and Banquo, Macbeth tells his wife, Lady Macbeth, of the promises the witches mentioned. Hearing her husband’s prophecy to be king, Lady Macbeth begins plotting the murder of the current reigning king, Duncan. She calls upon spirits to “ make thick” her blood and stop the “ access and passage to remorse,” so that she can murder Duncan without regret (1. . 44-45). Wishing her ability to regret her actions to be replaced with “ direst cruelty” leaves Lady Macbeth believing that she and her husband will be able to kill Duncan with no remorse (1. 5. 44). While Macbeth contemplates his wife’s treasonous plan, he sees a dagger before him covered in “ gout” of King Duncan’s blood (2. 1. 46). The blood and dagger are not real, though Macbeth believes they are, instead, they are a vision that Macbeth sees before the “ bloody business” (2. 1. 48).

These blood images convey a symbol of betrayal as well as treason. Murdering Duncan involves Macbeth betraying his trusting cousin and committing treason against Scotland. Immediately after Macbeth kills Duncan, he is “ rigid with horror at his “ blood-stained hands” (Spurgeon 115). The “ endless red of the blood” on his hands is all Macbeth can focus on (Campbell 130). Seeing the blood on his hands begins amplifying the guilt, sending him into shock, forcing Lady Macbeth to smear the “ grooms with blood” (Campbell 130-131).

Lady Macbeth plans to shift the light of guilt from her and her husband to the guards who were supposed to keep watch over the noble king. Using

Duncan's blood to "gild" the guard's faces Lady Macbeth transforms blood into a physical symbol of guilt (2. 2. 55). Lennox, a Scottish nobleman, reports on the scene of Duncan's death describing the guard's faces to be "badged with blood" and their daggers "unwiped" (2. 3. 104-105). Because they are covered in the king's "golden blood" the alleged murderers are "steeped in the colors of their trade" (2. 3. 114-117).

Bloody stains of the hands and hearts of Macbeth and his wife and the blood that covers the faces and weapons of the guards become a physical symbol of guilt. The guilt of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is hidden from others while the guilt of the guards is painted on their faces. Macbeth is fully aware that he is totally consumed by the blood of his murderous deeds. He states that his hands are stained with blood from the murder of Duncan. As the play progresses, the guilt of Macbeth multiplies as the amount of blood on his hands continues to grow, becoming a symbol of Macbeth's guilt.

Each death at the hands of Macbeth causes the stain of red to expand from his hands and spread all over him, "from head to foot", symbolizing his growing guilt that becomes more inescapable (McElroy 46). As time goes on after the murder, Lady Macbeth begins to slowly unravel into insanity. She is haunted by memories "deeply etched in fear" (Campbell 131). One of these memories is the scene of Duncan's death she recalls the shock of the "old to have had so much blood in him" as well as the idea that her hands will never be clean (5. 1. 42-43).

Walking in her sleep, Lady Macbeth finds a spot on her hand that she is unable to wash clean, a symbol of her eternal guilt. Bloody memories push Lady Macbeth into the waiting hands of insanity through the guilt that she

feels. Images such as “ the blood upon her hands,” and Duncan “ bleeding so much blood,” feed Lady Macbeth’s guilt, causing it to continue to grow from guilt to deeply embedded fear, and finally to pure insanity (Campbell 132). With the murderous and wicked deed of the evil tyrant and his wife come plans of revenge and vengeance.

Malcolm and Macduff, both having had horrid injustices done unto them, plan to take action to seize the throne from the wicked tyrant, Macbeth. With Malcolm’s father’s murder and the massacre of Macduff’s family, the two men have burning passions for vengeance. In the country near Dunsinane, Scottish nobleman, Menteith, tells that Malcolm and Macduff are coming to Scotland with Malcolm’s uncle Siward and the English powers. He explains that “ revenge burns” in both Malcolm and Macduff and that they come for revenge for Scotland, Duncan, and Macduff’s family (5. . 2). The bloody deeds of Macbeth drive Malcolm and Macduff toward their goal of reclaiming Scotland. Malcolm describes the bloody state of Macbeth has driven Scotland as a country that “ sinks beneath the yoke” (4. 3. 39). He claims Scotland “ weeps”, “ bleeds” and “ each new day a gash / Is added to her wounds” (4. 3. 40-41). The personification of Scotland as a living being adds to the imagery of cuts and bloody gashes, upholding Malcolm’s need to avenge his father’s death and reclaim his father’s throne.

The gruesome murder of Macduff’s family provided him with “ the most natural of motives for revenge” and brought Macduff to the “ impersonal role of Scotland’s avenger” (Felperin 104). In the final act of Macbeth blood comes to symbolize a mean for revenge. It is the bloody acts of the evil Macbeth that drive the good men of Scotland to revolt against Macbeth’s

rule, and ultimately in the reclaiming of their homeland and the death of Macbeth at the hands of Macduff. The final scenes of Macbeth transform the symbol of blood to one of revenge.

It is bloody acts that lead both Malcolm and Macduff to seek revenge against the tyrant alongside the noblemen of Scotland who wish to regain their homeland.

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