

The way the theme of the supernatural is presented in macbeth and the withered ar...

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



Explore the way the theme of the supernatural is presented and developed in the texts you have studied.

The play, 'Macbeth' was written by William Shakespeare in the early 1600's and is a gothic tragedy filled with elements of the supernatural. Shakespeare was an extremely popular playwright of the day and was part owner of the Globe Theatre. King James I loved the theatre and adopted the Globe Theatre; the players became known as the King's Men. Shakespeare wrote 'Macbeth' with James I in mind as James was terrified of assassination attempts and was also intrigued by the supernatural and witchcraft and had written a book about the supernatural called 'Demonology.

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James I interest in witchcraft was not unusual; during Shakespeare's time, there was a powerful belief in the supernatural and its ability to turn events on their head. 'Macbeth' would have appealed to a large audience. The theatre in Shakespeare's day was like a courtyard. At the back of the courtyard was a stage with curtains for the actors and a trap door for ghosts to emerge and the dead to disappear.

Most of the lighting was natural as the plays took place outside. Theatre was extremely popular in Shakespeare's day and was a fun-filled, rowdy experience which spoke about issues of the day.

'The Withered Arm', a short story, was written by Thomas Hardy in 1888 but is set earlier in the decade. Hardy wrote about life in rural South-West England. Two hundred years after Shakespeare, the belief in the

supernatural was beginning to abate but in pockets of rural England, superstition remained very powerful and shaped the destinies of the community. It is this rural community and its working people which interested Thomas Hardy. He believed in the supernatural, as did his family who sought advice regularly from a fortune teller they called The Planet Ruler.

In the opening scene of Macbeth, the audience witness a desolate scene with three witches huddled together. The atmosphere on the stage is gloomy, eerie and portentous. Accompanied by thunder and lightning, Scene 1 creates a dramatic opening to the play. The Witches' speech is full of cryptic language and confusing phrases. Speaking in short rhyming verse that sounds like a chant or a spell, the witches talk about 'when the battle's lost and won' and 'fair is foul and foul is fair'. Here they are presenting contradictory riddles which the audience cannot yet work out. Perhaps the battle refers to Macbeth's initial battle which he wins but many die, so they have also 'lost.'

Perhaps the phrase also points to the final battle at the end of the play when Macbeth is killed by Macduff. The 'fair is foul' riddle may be referring to Lady Macbeth who appears genteel but is actually conniving and manipulative. There are echoes of Lady Macbeth's own words which she speaks in Act 3 when she says 'Look like the innocent flower/But be the serpent under it.' It is this deceit that leads to Duncan's death. The general ambiguity of the Witch's speech prefigures what is to come. This is a play about certainty and doubt, real and unreal and the natural and unnatural. The witches'

prophecies come to dominate and predict the direction of the play. The supernatural in 'Macbeth' then, is central.

Shakespeare stages Macbeth's visit to the witches in a dark cave with a cauldron in the middle. Again the atmosphere is portentous and the witch's presence is accompanied by thunder, creating tension and fear. The witches begin to make their spell by dropping ingredients into the cauldron accompanied by chanting riddles; 'toad, that under cold stone/ days and nights as 31 swelter'd venom got.' Here the witches refer to a toad sweating out poison.

The ingredients are all parts of animals which are poisonous, which taken together make a monstrous person; 'eye of newt, toe of frog/ wool of bat and tongue of dog.' As well as 'liver of blast feaming jew.' Shakespeare seems to be saying that Macbeth has lost all his humanity and himself is half monster. The audience at that time would have been fearful of the witches spell as they were seen as the devil's servants.

Only two scenes later, the 'weird sisters', as they refer to themselves, meet on the heath as agreed. Again, the atmosphere is portentous, deserted and thunderous. This time, however, Macbeth and Banquo meet them. Banquo cannot believe what he sees: "so wild in their attire/ that look not like the inhabitants o' the earth/and yet are on't?" They have a strange appearance; they have beards, yet appear to be women and are in human form but are distorted. Because the witches seem unearthly, it questions the audience as to who they really are. Do they have supernatural powers? Where do they come from? The audience would be curious about the witches but also wary

of the witch's appearance. The Witches make their prophecies: Macbeth will be Thane of Cawdor, then King and Banquo's descendants shall reign.

When the Witches literally vanish, both Banquo and Macbeth are left confused " Whither...? Were...?", ' Have we...?' They are both understandably disorientated by the apparition and begin to wonder if what they have seen is true. They surmise that the witches could not be real and they must have ' eaten on the insane root.' Banquo is wondering if they have eaten a plant like hemlock which would make them hallucinate and therefore logically explain the Witch's presence. Yet, when Macbeth does become Thane of Cawdor, the power of the Witch's next prophecy begins to play on his mind. His greatest desire is to be king yet he is not heir.

Macbeth immediately ponders ways and means of becoming king and the audience are forced to think about the role of fate. Does Macbeth need to act to make the prophecy come true or will it come true anyway? Even Macbeth wonders why he is believing in the witches: ' Why do I yield to that suggestion/ whose horrid image doth unfix my hair'. The witches unnerve him and he realises that there is something ' other' about them but he is vain and they flatter him so his mind is set on becoming King.

On one hand, Macbeth doesn't believe in the witch's prophecy and believes if he is to become King then it will happen. On the other hand, Macbeth is desperate to become King. Macbeth is in two minds, because he knows to kill a King goes against all natural order, and humane behaviour. The witches haven't actually told him to do anything. He has interpreted their words and placed a moral value on them. Much of Macbeth was written with James I in

mind, which is flattering towards him. James I attended witch trials himself and was a believer in witchcraft as illustrated in his book 'Demonology'. The destructive influence of the witches on James I would not have been lost. There is a clear message to the audience that to kill a King is unnatural.

'The Withered Arm' also has supernatural happenings which shape the direction of the story. This time however, the setting is a small, rural, superstitious community in fictional Wessex. The protagonist Rhoda is inclined towards superstitious beliefs. Like the Witches in 'Macbeth', she exists in isolation from the community in a 'lonely spot high above the water meads.' There are mutterings amongst the community that she is a Witch and she is inclined to believe this. Rhoda is uneducated, of a lower class and has had a hard life. She is described as 'the thin worn milkmaid.' It seems that Hardy is associating lack of education and social status with a stronger belief in superstition. For example, Gertrude, who is of a higher social standing and 'wears gloves, a white bonnet and a silver-coloured gown' does not believe in superstitious beliefs initially; it is desperation that makes her give them a try.

For example, Gertrude's closet is full 'of mystic herbs, charms, and books of necromancy, which in her schoolgirl time she would have ridiculed as folly.' Gertrude also confides in Rhoda that she 'does not much mind it', referring to her arm, but she does mind the effect it has on her relationship with Farmer Lodge. 'It looks almost like finger marks; she said; adding with a faint laugh, 'my husband says it is as if some witch, or the devil himself, had taken hold of me there and blasted the flesh.' Gertrude's arm has been '

blasted'. This implies that her arm has been grabbed so fiercely that it has made her flesh explode, and that there is hardly anything left on her arm. Farmer Lodge assumes that only a witch could have such supernatural power to destroy Gertrude's arm. Gertrude, unlike Rhoda then, is quite happy, at least initially, to seek much more logical explanations for her 'withered arm' and can brush off suggestions that the supernatural was involved.

Macbeth's desire is to be King but Duncan is in the way. Rhoda's desire is to be with Farmer Lodge but Gertrude is in the way. Macbeth kills Duncan and Rhoda becomes obsessed with Gertrude: 'Rhoda Brook could raise a mental image of the unconscious Mrs Lodge that was as realistic as a photograph.' It is this obsession with Gertrude and her fully realised mental image of her that leads to the dream: 'Gertrude Lodge visited the supplanted woman in her dreams.' Yet Hardy suggests to the reader that this is more than just a dream; she has conjured Gertrude's presence who sits on her heavily and mocks her making the wedding ring 'glitter in Rhoda's eyes.' Gertrude is wearing the same 'silk dress and white bonnet' but her 'features' are 'shockingly distorted, and wrinkled as by age.'

In retaliation Rhoda 'seized the confronting spectre by its obtrusive left arm, and whirled it backward to the floor'. There is a contrast between Gertrude's clothes and her face. Gertrude's wedding ring is glittering and her silk dress is almost heavenly. However her face is 'wrinkled' and 'shockingly distorted', making her appearance more ghostly and otherworldly. This is the primal moment of the story. Rhoda cannot comprehend the thought that it was only a dream: 'that was not a dream - she was here'. In fact, Rhoda is

tortured throughout the story that she has 'malignant powers' and is responsible for Gertrude's suffering.

Like Macbeth, there is confusion over dreams and reality and like Macbeth, communities really believed in the power of the supernatural to upturn the natural order of things. In 'The Withered Arm' it is open to interpretation as to what is happening. Has Rhoda's imagination got carried away with her or does Hardy want the reader to believe that she has conjured a witch? Hardy himself believed in the supernatural and it was believed that mental acts (such as Rhoda's thoughts) could conjure witches. Why does Hardy show Gertrude as physically 'distorted'? Is this the dark side of Gertrude that is witch-like or does it anticipate what is to come? Gertrude loses her looks and becomes less attractive to Farmer Lodge in direct proportion to the withering of her arm.

In the hierarchies of medieval England, God was at the top of the chain and the King was underneath. People believed in the supernatural and thought that if the country was ruled by a fair and just King, there would be symmetry in nature; crops would grow, the weather would be good. If this is upended so is the natural order of the universe. As soon as Duncan is killed by Macbeth, Shakespeare signifies the disruption to the natural order by staging storms and earth tremors. This effect was created on stage by loud bangs and puffs of smoke. Shakespeare creates a dramatic effect for his audience. Shakespeare had to rely on the audience's imagination. Duncan is murdered offstage, which raises the tension and prevents the audience

feeling too much pity for Duncan, and instead the focus is on Macbeth's panicked state.

As well as bad weather, the night fails to turn back into day and an Old Man notes strange things happening: 'A falcon, towering in her pride of place,/ Was by a mousing owl hawk'd at and kill'd.' This is another sign of supernatural happenings after an interference with the orderly nature of things. An owl should fly down to get its prey and is a bird of the night and a falcon is associated with royalty and the day. Perhaps this image is actually about Macbeth's (owl) murder of Duncan (falcon). Furthermore, King Duncan's horses 'Turn'd wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out.' The implication is that the horses have turned on their master in the same way that Macbeth (who was loved by Duncan) turned on the King. Ultimately, the horses eat each other as there can be no positive conclusion to such disruption. Shakespeare's message to his audience is that any dealings with the supernatural will only lead to disaster.

Both Macbeth and Gertrude become increasingly desperate as play and short story develop. This leads to them both being tempted by the supernatural. Macbeth returns to the Witches and Gertrude visits Conjuror Trendle and dabbles in supernatural healing. Whilst Gertrude's path does not lead directly to murder, she still concocts potions and follows Conjuror Trendle's advice. Trendle is a mystic or a white wizard; he is a local man who lives on his own. Hardy knew of such people in the Dorset villages where he grew up and Conjuror Trendle is based on a man called the Planet Ruler whom his Aunts used to visit. On her initial visit to Conjuror Trendle, Gertrude is told to

look into the white of an egg and see if she can 'define the shape that it assumed.' Hardy never tells the reader if Gertrude deciphered anything but keeps the suspense and the reader's suspicion alive. Did Gertrude see Rhoda? Community gossip keeps the belief that Rhoda is a witch very much alive and the gradual deterioration of Gertrude's arm 'was owing to her being 'overlooked' by Rhoda Brooke.'

Six years later Gertrude revisits Conjuror Trendle. The advice is gruesome: to 'touch the limb of the neck of a man who's been hanged.' Conjuror Trendle tells Gertrude that he used to send many people to do this as it 'will turn the blood and change the constitution'. But then he says that he hasn't given this advice in a while 'The last I sent was in '13 - near twelve years ago.' This suggests that perhaps superstitious beliefs are gradually dying out and people are less inclined to indulge in such gruesome practice. When Gertrude carries through the act, Hardy builds up suspense and anticipation - she hears 'persons approaching behind her' as 'she bared her poor curst arm'.

As she lays her arm 'across the dead man's neck', there are two shrieks, one from Gertrude and one from the owner of the 'approaching' footsteps, Rhoda Brook who is standing next to Farmer Lodge. It is their child. Rhoda exclaims: 'This is the meaning of what Satan showed me in the vision! You are like her at last!' Here, Hardy creates symmetry between this scene and the dream scene where Gertrude appears looking wrinkled and haggard. Gertrude has become that witchly presence. Rhoda says that 'Satan' showed her the vision. In the Old Testament, the book of Zechariah, there is

a reference to what many Christians believe is the anti-Christ or the devil. We will recognise him as the devil because “ his arm will be totally withered”. Maybe then Hardy is saying that Gertrude is the devil in Rhoda’s dream and has now become it.

After the murder of Duncan, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth become increasingly disoriented and confused; real and unreal are almost interchangeable. When Macbeth murders Banquo, he is haunted by Banquo’s ghostly presence at his own feast. Lady Macbeth explains to him: ‘ You lack the season of all natures, sleep.’ Macbeth has indeed been robbed of peaceful sleep since his murderous rampage began but it is more than this; Macbeth’s nature has become vile and twisted through his crimes and all sense of reality has distorted. When Macbeth visits the Witches for the final time, he hears three prophecies which will seal his downfall. All depends on Macbeth’s interpretation of what the witches tell him. He is told that ‘ none of woman born/Shall harm Macbeth’ and ‘ Macbeth shall never vanquish’d be until/Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill/Shall come against him’.

The meeting takes place within a dark cave and the audience are again invited to unravel the riddles. Macbeth fails to heed the imagery and metaphors from the witches. Earlier the three witches met Hecate, who berated them for giving Macbeth prophecies without consulting her; ‘.... How did you dare/ to trade and traffic with Macbeth.’ Hecate tells the witches that she is ‘ for the heir/ this night I’ll spend/ to a dismall and fatal end.’ Hecate is to spend the night plotting unpleasant outcomes for Macbeth. She

commands the witches to meet her with their ' charms and everything beside.' Macbeth will then ' come to know his destiny.'

One Witch conjures an image of a sow devouring her piglets; a metaphor for how Macbeth is ruling Scotland. Macbeth does not see this and will later order the murder of Macduff and his family. The third Witch shows ' a Child crowned, with a tree in his hand'. The child represents the son of King Duncan whose army will camouflage themselves with branches of trees as they approach Macbeth's castle. This is, the audience can decipher, how the wood will move. The witches vanish in a puff of smoke and, on the stage, would disappear through the trap door. Macbeth remains convinced that he is safe; Macduff is born of woman and a wood cannot walk. Macbeth's naked ambition becomes his undoing. The Witches never make Macbeth do anything; his interpretation of their prophecies leads to the bloodbath and his ultimate down.

To conclude, ' Macbeth' and ' The Withered Arm' both use the supernatural as the driver behind their stories. Both stories are interested in the relationship between the supernatural and fate and the choices that characters make. Macbeth turns to the supernatural because the Witch's flatter him and he is eager to be King. Macbeth turns from a noble soldier into an evil murderer and tyrannical King simply because he chose to act on the Witch's prophecies. Rhoda is a pitiful character; life has been unkind to her and she is demonised by her community. With no other outlet, Rhoda cannot help but believe the gossip and fears she may indeed be a witch. Gertrude, like Macbeth turns to the supernatural through desperation. Her

withered arm is affecting her relationship with Farmer Lodge and she demonstrates that she will do anything to save her marriage to him. The rubbing of her arm on a freshly hanged young man's neck is a truly macabre act. The act is so shocking that it leads to her untimely death. In the same way that Macbeth acts on the Witch's words, Gertrude acts on Conjuror Trendle's words. In both cases, following the path of the supernatural leads to misery and death.