

THE IMAGERY IN MACBETH



UNIT 8

Introduction

Students are expected to discuss language, including imagery, in examination questions; this unit provides some ways into this. Although it is useful to introduce concepts such as ‘metaphor’ and ‘simile’, it is also worth bringing out that as well as figurative imagery, there is plenty that is purely literal, such as much of the blood imagery.

Spiritual and Moral

The spiritual and moral dimension comes through strongly in the imagery, mainly because Shakespeare’s choice of images is traditional rather than original. Some of them are based on accepted folklore (e.g. the references to owls and ravens) but many of the image patterns echo those used in Christian liturgy and the Bible.

Leland Ryken notes this, in *Triumphs of the Imagination* (IVP 1981)...

“ The image pattern that broods over the play dramatises the special kind of guilt that attaches to the act of murder. The play captures the mysterious and profound principle of the sanctity of human life and the guilt that inevitably follows from its violation...

The play is Christian in its thematic design. Macbeth’s famous aphorism, ‘It will have blood, they say: blood will have blood’ (Acts III scene 4, line 121), is paralleled by the biblical principle, ‘Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed’ (Genesis chapter 9 verse 6). The archetype of the blood that is shed in murder is nearly as pervasive in the Bible as in Shakespeare’s play, beginning with the blood of Abel that cries from the ground (Genesis chapter 4 verse 10) and stretching to the spilled blood of the saints and martyrs in the book of Revelation.

As Ryken points out, this is the way in which Shakespeare underlines the sheer horror of murder. Other image patterns emphasise spiritual and moral aspects, too, in similar ways. The use of light and darkness is perhaps the most obvious.

Using the Unit

There is no need to do work on every possible image pattern, though practice on one or two key patterns will help students to be aware of the significance of any imagery in the play. This is particularly important in preparation for examinations in which they are expected to comment generally on a passage – including its language.

Aims

- To explore Shakespeare’s use of imagery in the play.
- To trace the source and consider the effectiveness of his imagery.

This unit links with Unit 9: *The Language*.

There are also some excellent activities suggested in the Cambridge School Shakespeare edition of *Macbeth* (ed. Gibson) – see pages 163, and 168-169 in particular.

Although students can work on any of the topics on their own, perhaps as the basis for a unit of coursework, it is suggested that they discuss a particular topic in pairs or small groups, leading to wider discussion by the whole class. Resultant notes can provide an outline for written work, if wished, but the assignments are best used, initially, for oral work. As with any work on Shakespeare's language, the experience of reading or reciting the text out loud can make the play come alive in a powerful way.

It is worth pointing out to a class that in Shakespeare's time it was not possible to use much in the way of lighting or scenery on the stage. Atmosphere, however, could be evoked by colourful language. Shakespeare took full advantage of this and often employed particular images repeatedly to bring out themes in the play. They draw attention to the events, indeed the language is part of the action.

The imagery is often based on traditional symbolism. Because of the Christian background

that Shakespeare grew up in, it is hardly surprising that much of the imagery and symbolism has echoes of that in the Bible. The student sheets contain five examples of image patterns in *Macbeth* that are worth considering, but these are given as examples only. Teachers (or students) may well want to follow up other themes that are presented in image patterns. These are particularly relevant as preparation for tackling passage questions in an examination.

Lists of references are worth making on some of the following themes...

- dreams and visions
- meals and hospitality
- noise
- disease and medicine
- children
- equivocation
- growth
- order and chaos
- sleep
- time

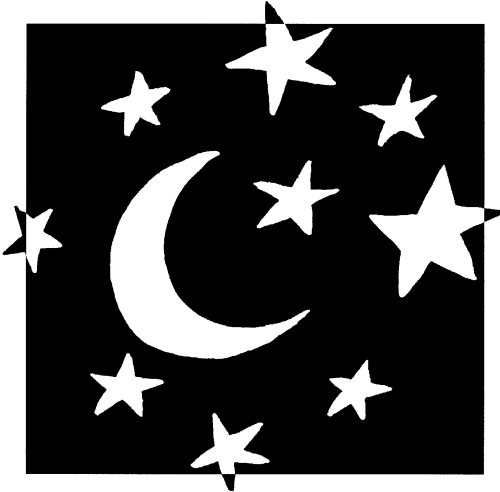
Point out which of these images draw on the Bible and which are based on traditional folklore.

THE IMAGERY IN MACBETH



UNIT 8

8.1 Light and darkness



Light and darkness have always been symbolic of good and evil. Shakespeare would have been familiar with words in the Bible such as the ones in these two passages:

Men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light (John 3:19-20).

He that loveth his brother abideth in the light... but he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth (1 John 2:10-11).

Macbeth begins to follow 'the instruments of darkness' (I.3.123) when he calls on the night to hide his very thoughts:

Stars, hide your fires.
Let not night see my black and
deep desires (I.4.50-51).

Lady Macbeth echoes these thoughts:

'Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry "Hold, hold"' (I.5.50-53).

Look up the following passages and make notes on the light imagery:

- Act II scene 1, lines 1-5
- Act II scene 4, lines 6-10
- Act III scene 2, lines 46-53
- Act III scene 3, lines 5-8
- Act V scene 1, lines 1-21
- Act V scene 5, lines 21-22, 48-49

Notice how the images often perform more than one task.

a) They emphasise that many of these events take place at night (originally, Shakespeare's plays were performed out of doors in daylight).

b) They are a powerful suggestion of the contrast between good and evil.

How far are Macbeth and Lady Macbeth examples of the people referred to in the Bible as those who 'loved darkness rather than light'? Support your answer with references to the text.

8.2 Washing and water

Look at these words of the Captain in Act 1 scene 2:

Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds
Or memorise another Golgotha,
I cannot tell (I.2.39-40).

a) How do you think these words of the Captain prove prophetic for:

- Banquo?
- Macbeth?

b) Look up Act II scene 2, lines 49-50, 63-66, 70-71. How do Macbeth and Lady Macbeth differ in their attitudes to washing their hands? (Compare this with Matthew 27:24, where Pilate washes his hands.)

Then look at Act V scene 1, lines 23-54. What do you think is being suggested about Lady Macbeth? Find some other examples of images of cleansing in the play.

c) Consider these words:

I am in blood
Stepped in so far that should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er (III.4.136-38).

Macbeth has reached a point of no return. The river he feels he is crossing is seen to be one of blood, not water. Compare this with the references in Act I scene 2, lines 39 and Act II scene 2, lines 63-66.

This could be seen as a gruesome parody of Christian baptism (see in the Bible, Mark 1:5 and 1 Peter 3:21); or of the Christian idea of being cleansed by the shed blood of Jesus (for example, Revelation 7:14). Macbeth is becoming immersed in evil rather than being cleansed.

d) Find other references to water in the play (for example, rain or the sea) Do they have any symbolic meaning?



8.3 Blood

This is a key image in the play. The word 'blood' occurs over one hundred times. As we have seen, it is often used alongside 'water'.

a) Look again at the references to blood in Act II scene 2, lines 47 to the end. How often do they represent guilt do you think? How far is water a sufficient means of cleansing?

b) Consider the speeches in Act II scene 3, lines 89-111. What does the imagery show about Macbeth's state of mind, and what feelings are created in the mind of the audience?

c) The appearance of Banquo's ghost can be a powerful visual reminder of Macbeth's guilt. Look at Act III scene 4, lines 74-83, and try to put Macbeth's speech into your own words. What feelings come across most strongly?

d) 'Blood will have blood' (III.4.122). See how this is finally true in the retribution that comes to Macbeth. Read Act V scene 8, lines 1-16, and note as many references to blood as you can. What do you learn about Macbeth from the way he talks?

Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed
(Genesis 9:6).

8.4 Clothing

Why do you dress me
In borrowed robes? (I.3.106-107).

a) In what senses does Macbeth 'borrow' Cawdor's robes? Note how he begins to be like Cawdor, as well as gaining his title.

b) Note the effect of the 'new clothes' on Macbeth, for example in Act I scene 3, lines 142-44. They bring

dangerous hopes as well as honours (I.7.32-36). Macbeth, like the tailor in the Porter's speech (II.3.10-11), gives in to the temptation to steal other clothes. For the nation, however, the new clothes may prove less than comfortable (II.4.38). Eventually, Macbeth finds that the clothing does not fit:

He cannot buckle his distempered
cause
Within the belt of rule...
Now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a
giant's robe
Upon a dwarfish thief
(V.2.15-16,20-22).

c) Consider the speeches at the end where Macbeth wants to be in armour (for example, Act V scene 3, lines 33 and 48, Act V scene 5, line 51). Is this further pretence on his part, or is he abandoning the 'borrowed robes' and becoming himself again?

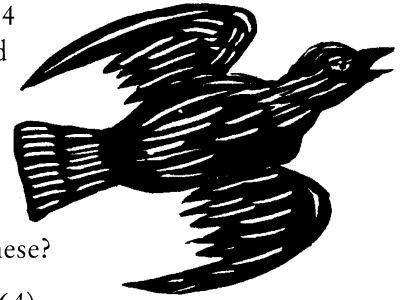
d) Look up references in the Bible to the putting on of clothing, as representing the difference between a good and an evil life. For example: Isaiah 61:10, Luke 15:22, Colossians 3:8-14, Revelation 6:11. How does Shakespeare use this theme and how does he vary it?

8.5 Birds and Animals

What do some people say when they see a magpie – or two? How are ravens regarded in folk-tales and songs? (Does anyone know the nursery rhyme that starts: 'A farmer went riding on his grey mare...'? The last verse of this begins: 'A raven cried "croak" and they all tumbled down...')

In popular superstition, hearing a raven was a sign of impending doom. Shakespeare reflects this in Act I scene 5, line 36. Other birds of carrion, such as magpies and crows, were used to

foretell the future. Act III scene 4 lines 124-25 refer to 'augures and understood relations' being possible by watching such birds. What do we understand by the word 'augur'?



a) What do you associate with these?

- the serpent (Act I scene 5 line 64)
- the wolf (Act II scene 1 line 53)
- the owl (Act II scene 2 line 3)
- a lamb (Act IV scene 3 line 54)

b) Look at Act II scene 4 lines 10-21. What is unnatural about the behaviour of these creatures, and how does it echo events in the nation?

c) List all the references to birds and animals in Act III scene 2, and say what you think each reference adds to the mood of the scene.

d) What kinds of creatures do the witches mention in Act IV scene 1, and how do the ingredients that go into the cauldron suggest evil?

e) Look at the bird references in Act IV scene 2 lines 32-36, and in Act IV scene 3 lines 219-20, and suggest why there is a connection.

f) Think of other references to birds and animals in the play, such as:

- house martins ('martlets') in Act I scene 6 lines 4-9
- dogs in Act III scene 1 lines 92-100
- fierce animals in Act III scene 4 lines 100-101
- bear-baiting image in Act V scene 7 lines 1-2

Discuss in small groups what you think these images contribute to the play, and why Shakespeare has used them.