Blood Imagery In William Shakespeare’ Essay, Research Paper

Andrew Ott Macbeth Imagery Paper May 22, 2000 Blood Imagery in William Shakespeare’s Macbeth William Shakespeare wrote the Tragedy of Macbeth in approximately 1606 AD. He loosely based it on a historical event occurring around 1050 AD. Macbeth is the story of a nobleman, who, while trying to fulfill a prophecy told to him by three witches, murders his King to cause his ascension to the throne of Scotland. After the King’s murder, Macbeth reigns as a cruel and ruthless tyrant, who is forced to kill more people to keep control of the throne. Finally, Scottish rebels combined with English forces attack Macbeth’s castle, and Macbeth is killed by a Scottish Thane named Macduff who has sacrificed everything to see peace return to Scotland. In the play, the word “blood” is mentioned numerous times. Shakespeare’s use of this particular word is significant; he uses it to develop the character of Macbeth and the unfolding events of the drama. The powerful symbolic meaning of blood changes from the beginning to the end. Near the beginning of the play, after Macbeth and the Scottish army defeated the rebel Macdonwald’s army, a bleeding sergeant comes on stage. The sergeant then proceeds to describe the battle and how bravely Macbeth and his friend Banquo fought, “For brave Macbeth-well he deserves that name- / Disdaining fortune, with his brandish’d steel / Which smok’d with bloody execution, / Like valor’s minion carv’d out his passage?” (Act I, Scene 2, Lines 19-21) Blood is symbolic of bravery and courage in this passage. Blood shed for a noble cause is good blood. However, Macbeth’s character changes throughout the play are characterized by the symbolism in the blood he sheds. Before Duncan’s murder, Macbeth imagines seeing a dagger floating in the air before him. He describes it, “And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood, / Which was not so before. There’s no such thing: / It is the bloody business which informs / Thus to mine eyes.” The blood imagery in this passage obviously refers to treason, ambition, and murder. This is a stark contrast to what blood meant earlier in the play. Blood, once seen as a positive value, is now associated with evil. This imagery also shows the beginning of Macbeth’s character transformation from a personage of nobility, honesty, and bravery to that of treachery, deceit, and evil. After Macbeth murders Duncan, he begins to realize the severity of his crime as he tries to wash Duncan’s blood off his hands, “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No; this hand will rather / The multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red.” (Act II, Scene 2, Lines 71-75) This passage illustrates the act of murder has changed Macbeth’s character. No longer does the blood connote an image of ambition; it now symbolizes guilt, remorse, and an entry into the gates of hell from which no one can return. Macbeth laments that not even all the water in the ocean will wash the blood off his hands, he is beginning to realize the magnitude of his crime, and that he has done something truly evil. This same blood symbolism continues when Macbeth, shortly after he sees the ghost of the murdered Banquo at his feast, goes into a state of shock and has to be escorted back to his chamber by Lady Macbeth. He tells Lady Macbeth before he goes to sleep, “All causes shall give way: I am in blood / Stepp’d in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o’er:” (Act III, Scene 4, Lines 159-161) We now find that Macbeth has entered so far into hell and the world of evil, it is impossible for him to return to righteousness. He will be forced to kill more and more people in order to retain control of the throne. The sins he has committed have not onlyperverted his virtuous life, but have condemned him to an eternity in hell. There is no chance of redemption; he has permanently allied himself with the forces of evil. Like her husband, the once ambitious Lady Macbeth finally realizes the significance of associating herself in the murder plot, and the severe repercussions it will bring. Tormented by nightmares, she sleepwalks through her bedroom and cries, “What, will these hands ne’er be clean??Here’s the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of / Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.” (Act V, Scene 1, Lines 40, 46-47) The blood imagery exhibits Lady Macbeth’s guilt over Duncan’s murder. Her hallucinations of blood on her hands and her constant efforts to wash it off demonstrate that the agony of having guilty feelings is causing her to go insane. We later learn that this guilt strains her mind to the point that she commits suicide. In the play’s final scene, Macduff confronts Macbeth to avenge the murders of his children and his wife at Macbeth’s hand, and to see Malcolm established as the rightful King. As Malcolm sees Macbeth, he exclaims, “I have no words: / My voice is in my sword, thou bloodier villain / Than terms can give thee out!” (Act V, Scene 8, Lines 8-10) Macbeth and Macduff then engage in a fight to the death with Macduff eventually emerging victorious. When Macduff, mentions blood, it speaks to justified bloodshed, and revenge. Shakespeare uses this blood imagery to enhance the audience’s understanding of Macbeth’s character. The audience has now witnessed the complete transformation of Macbeth. He begins as a noble, just and brave person, to becoming evil, ambitious, and treacherous during Duncan’s murder, to his final feelings of remorse for his crime and finally, to the realization that he will be punished for his sins.