Color Imagery In Macbeth Essay, Research Paper

Color Imagery in Macbeth

A Tragedy of Many Shades

Does William Shakespeare write with blood pouring from his pen? Do the violent images that his colors produce play a role in the tragedy, Macbeth? It is Shakespeare’s creative mind that produces each drop of blood that is evident with every new line of thought. Within Macbeth, an entire spectrum of colors helps develop and reveal the plot as each color brings a new meaning. William Shakespeare understands the importance of violence and bloodshed to assist in creating a suspenseful atmosphere, which will bring to the surface true emotions of guilt, regret, and remorse. He also knows that color images that are light in color easily associate with things that are wholesome. Contrary to light, shades of nightfall or darkness are indicative of wickedness. Shakespeare writes with a sense of realism that allows him to touch the emotions of any audience, whether they are living on the desolate poles of the earth or within a mighty nation. The common struggle between good and evil or light and dark is a thought of universal understanding and sympathy. Through color imagery, the characters leap from the stage of fiction into the reality of the audience. In Macbeth, the color images of light, darkness, and blood reveal, conceal, and control the emotions and actions, whether good or bad, of the characters.

The image of daylight in Macbeth magnifies emotions and actions that are heavenly and pure. Shakespeare uses the stars of twilight often to reveal the honorable morality within his characters. According to Caroline Spurgeon, “light stands for life, virtue, goodness and darkness for evil and death (324).” The first instance of this occurs when King Duncan promises that all that deserve reward will receive reward for their heroic effort in the wars. “But signs of nobleness, like stars, shall shine on all deservers (1.4.41).” The comparison between ‘stars and nobleness’ aids the audience in the comprehension of light, even from the fire of a star, and is continuously in existence with feelings of righteousness. Shakespeare, again, creates a relationship between daylight and wholesome action when he allows Macbeth’s emotions toward Malcolm to be public, “Stars, hide your fires, Let not light see my black and deep desires (1.4.50).” Macbeth’s desires are to eliminate Malcolm and all that stand in his way of the throne. Through his words, Macbeth constructs another bridge between light and morality. Macbeth is asking for “a kind of moral anesthesia (Jorgensen 87).” Throughout the play, daylight controls every intension of the characters and reveals that only heavenly virtue can exist during the hours of daylight. The play moves in one direction constantly and daylight acts a precursor to protect the characters from unholy crimes. Macbeth word’s in act three sums up the basic understanding of the role of light within the play, “Good things of day begin to droop and drowse (3.2.52).” In one line of poetic genius, Shakespeare makes the obvious contrast between night and darkness being evil, and day and light linking with good. This contrast between light and dark is reiterated more than four hundred times throughout the play (Muir 49). In Macbeth, William Shakespeare constantly keeps the play moving in one direction by creating unique circumstances, such as light and dark, to control the character’s thoughts and actions.

Shakespeare uses darkness to portray several emotions and actions, but first and foremost, he uses darkness to foreshadow the acts of treachery and murder. Nearly every evil intension, action, or thought is preceded by the element of darkness. Shakespeare allows Lady Macbeth to provide the first idea of darkness as a foreshadowing device for evilness. She calls for night before the murder of King Duncan, “Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark to cry ‘hold, hold’ (1.5.49-50).” This line really serves two purposes, but the first is for night to come, so that the murder can occur. Lady Macbeth’s words suggest to the audience that her desires of murder can and will take place only under a dark sky. The darkness of night is present in many scenes throughout Macbeth. “Duncan arrives at Inverness as night falls; he is murdered during the night; Banquo returns from his last ride as night is again falling (Muir 48). This constant idea of night coming, then someone committing a gruesome crime helps the audience predict and interact their thoughts with the direction of the play. Another instance of darkness foreshadowing the future arrives when Ross speaks of darkness. “Darkness does the face of earth entomb, when living light should kiss it (2.4.9).” Ross believes that darkness controls every emotion and action on earth that is impure and it is bitter irony for it to associate and follow such beauty that is day. Fleance also exemplifies Ross’ sentiments with “There’s husbandry in heaven, Their candles are all out (2.1.4.).” We learn that the scene is now set for treachery and murder (Spurgeon 330). It is not a coincidence that Shakespeare uses ‘living’ as an adjective for light. The audience learns that light represents good and being alive, but also understands that death and sinful actions are representative of darkness. There are always two sides to every coin, no matter what the circumstances. Shakespeare develops and strengthens every scene by using darkness to precursor the evil intensions of his characters. Darkness continues to expose violence and sanguinary acts that occur during Macbeth.

The image of darkness also conceals the actions and emotions of the characters within Macbeth. It is not only a physical darkness, but also a moral darkness that hides the evil from the Macbeth’s souls (Holland 57). The idea that evil deeds can only be done in darkness or night runs constant with the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Before most of the crimes or thoughts of the characters occur, the characters ask for darkness to conceal the evilness within their body. An example of the concealing affect of darkness draws closer as Macbeth speaks of his malicious thoughts, “Let not night see my dark desires (1.4.51).” He again wishes for night to screen his thoughts from anyone, including himself, who might uncover his treacherous intensions. From now on, the idea that only in darkness can such evil deeds be done is ever present with both Macbeth and his wife (Spurgeon 330). Lady Macbeth invokes darkness to come so she and her husband may murder King Duncan. “Come think night, (1.5.50).” Lady Macbeth senses that under the cover of night, all deeds and thoughts will be hidden. Her husband, Macbeth, also begs for the blanket of night to conceal the murder of Banquo, “Come, seeling night, scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day (3.2.46).” Shakespeare uses the premonition of darkness and evil to conceal the thoughts and actions of the characters unvaryingly. Again, the audience learns of the relationship between concealment and darkness when Ross speaks of the fatal acts and deeds that continue to occur at nightfall. “Darknight strangles the traveling lamp (2.4.7).” The ‘traveling lamp’ is representative of the sun and with each sinful allegiance during the night the days seem to shorten. From the introduction to the witches, to the destructive guilt of the Macbeth’s, darkness conceals every act, thought, or even regret of the characters.

The last significant use of darkness is to provide the characters with opportunity to commit murderous actions. It is not a coincidence that every murder takes place at night or in the shadow of darkness. The Macbeth’s inflict their damage to King Duncan while he sleeps at night. According to the stage directions before the scene of his murder, “It is nighttime, and they are attended by servants with torches (1.6).” Also, in scene seven of act one, Macbeth sits in a “torchlit room.” The cover of night provides Macbeth with the best opportunity to kill the king. Another example of the cover of night allowing opportunity for murder arrives with the unjustified death of Banquo. “The west yet glimmers with some streaks of day (3.3.5).” In this instance, the murders are questioning themselves about committing such a horrible crime without the element of darkness in full bloom. Lady Macbeth reveals her downward spiral into death through her vivid memories of the murders. Her sleepwalking and hallucinations occur at night. The darkness eventually causes her to experience a slow, agonizing death. The villains of Macbeth manage to use darkness to commit the every violent act of mischief.

Shakespeare also empowers the image of blood to create a deadly atmosphere that surrounds the characters, as well as provide them with a means to release their emotional regret or guilt. The atmosphere that surrounds the characters drowns the thoughts and actions through an extremely violent picture of blood. The first character toward whom our attention is directed (aside from the witches) is the bloody sergeant. In the opening words of the play’s second scene King Duncan asks about a sergeant when he says, “What bloody man is that (1.2.11)?” This ‘bloody’ man allows the reader to understand that violence and the image of blood will constantly create a drowning atmosphere. The play has a whole river of blood as when Macbeth says, “I am in blood/stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more,/ Returning were as tedious a go o’er (3. 4. 135-137).” Macbeth is so deep in blood with his actions that it is as difficult to repent, as it is to continue. There not only is a river of blood, but also an ocean of blood as Macbeth looks at his bloody hand and groans:

“Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this Blood

Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather the

Multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green one

Red (2. 2. 59-62).”

Macbeth wonders in agony if an entire ocean will wipe the blood from his hands, but he answers his own question replying no, that the blood on his hands will make the whole ocean turn red. The whole world of Macbeth bleeds as the reader sees when Macduff cries, “Bleed, Bleed, poor country (4.3.31)!” From beginning to end, Blood fills the air and delivers a powerful atmosphere that shapes the emotions and actions of the characters.

Shakespeare also uses the image of blood to represent death. Ross refers to Duncan’s murder as a “Bloody deed (2.4.22).” This reference occurs after the murder, so the audience makes a connection between blood and death. Macbeth tells the ghost of Duncan to leave and haunt him no more because he is dead, his “Blood is cold (3.4.93).” This means he no longer has the warm blood that is characteristic of living creatures. As the audience can imagine, the picture of Duncan’s dead body has a profound effect on Macbeth’s thought process. Duncan’s blood is calling for Macbeth’s blood, or Duncan’s death is calling for Macbeth’s death. Another image of blood and death comes from Donalbain who says to his brother, “the near in blood, the near bloody (2.3.127).” They fear that death will capture their last breath because of their relations to Duncan. Throughout Macbeth, blood and death continue to appear synonymous together as they provide the emotions of each character to surface.

The image of blood also creates an open channel for the characters to release any feelings of guilt or regret. The first instance of guilt, through blood, comes as Macbeth regrets his evil deed. “Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return to plague th’ inventor (1.7.9-10).” Macbeth, realizing the significance of the treacherous act, deeply feels the burden of another’s blood. He, looking at his bloody hands moments after the murder of Duncan, says, “ This is a sorry sight (2.2.18).” Once again, Macbeth’s remorse rises to the surface through the image of blood. Lady Macbeth also feels the sadness of regret as she too gazes at her hands. “Here’s the smell of the blood still: all the/ perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand (5.1.48-49).” The remorse within Lady Macbeth leads her into a fatal downfall. This burden causes her to have vivid hallucinations of the thick blood that covers her hands. “out, damned spot! Out, I say (5.1.33-34)!” She remembers the blood that engulfs her limbs after the murder of Duncan. The denial and regret that associates with blood controls the hearts of the characters within Macbeth.