Sex And Darkness In Macbeth Essay, Research Paper

Sex and Darkness in Shakespeare’s Macbeth

Shakespeare’s Macbeth presents more than the simple tale of a murder and revenge. Macbeth wants to be king, and Duncan stands in his way. However, Macbeth hesitates. His wife, Lady Macbeth, must urge him on strongly, like a rider whipping a horse. Macbeth does not want to commit the murder because it creates a conflict in his unconscious mind. Specifically, the act of plunging a knife into Duncan’s breast is like the sex act, making the murder a homosexual act for Macbeth. For Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, it is a reversal of the normal sexual roles. She has plays the dominant, male role, forcing her husband and Duncan both to take the submissive, female role. She is much stronger than her husband, and she uses her strength to force him into the act of murder.

Most of the action in Macbeth takes place in the darkness that comes just before dawn. The murder, the nightmares, and the confession all take place in the hours of the night when most people are sleeping, either alone or with a lover. When the blood begins to flow, it becomes a metaphor for sex. Lady Macbeth displaces her desire to destroy her husband onto Duncan, and Macbeth displaces his desire to dominate his wife sexually onto Duncan. The poor victim of these psychological mechanisms, Duncan, is killed more like the victim of a rape than the victim of a murder. When his blood flows, and his life ebbs away, Lady Macbeth feels a sexual orgasm, and Macbeth feels the loss of his erection at the end of the act.

Macbeth is trying to prove his manhood by committing the murder, and Lady Macbeth is unconsciously expressing her desire to possess the power of a man, which Freud called “penis envy.” The murder causes a greater conflict for Lady Macbeth because of her deep psychological problem, which is that she cannot accept her position in the world as a member of the weak female sex.

Lady Macbeth feels dirty after the murder because she has unconsciously engaged in a forbidden sexual act. By watching her husband plunge the knife into Duncan, she has experienced the erection and the orgasm of a man. She also experiences the let-down that follows. She tries to wash off the blood, the same way that most people take a shower after making love. She cannot remove the blood because she cannot remove her feeling of guilt. When she cries, “Wash your hands, put on your nightgown, look not so pale” (V.ii.60-63), she is unconsciously contrasting the pale dead man, who has lost all his blood, with the rush of blood that makes a lover look red and flushed with passion.

Macbeth keeps his sanity because he is weak. Since his wife forced him to commit the murder, he bears less of the guilt in his own mind. Lady Macbeth’s strength allows her to plan the murder and urge her husband to carry it through. Her ego is satisfied with this act of male sexual power. However, this strength comes from the instinctive level of the id, and her superego fails to control its destructive power. After killing Duncan, she turns the power of her own id against herself, becoming insane because she has not successfully repressed her id. The superego, or conscience, crazy with guilt, runs away like a horse without a rider.