

Symbols in Macbeth: Unveiling the Darkness Within

Shakespeare's **Macbeth** is a masterpiece of psychological drama where symbols reveal the inner workings of characters' minds and foreshadow their fates. Throughout Act 2, Shakespeare employs powerful imagery that illuminates the moral decay and psychological torment experienced by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth after their murderous deed.

As we explore these symbols, we'll uncover how Shakespeare uses them to externalize guilt, illustrate the disruption of natural order, and portray the psychological disintegration of his characters. These symbols don't merely decorate the text—they are essential to understanding the play's exploration of ambition, violence, and the consequences of disrupting the natural order.



Blood

Represents guilt, violence, and the stain of murder that cannot be washed away. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth become obsessed with blood on their hands.



Sleep

Symbolizes peace and innocence that Macbeth "murders" after killing Duncan. His inability to sleep reflects his tortured conscience.



Darkness

Represents evil, secrecy, and the moral blindness of the characters. Macbeth repeatedly invokes darkness to hide his terrible deeds.



by Matthew Lee

Blood: The Stain of Guilt



Visible Guilt

Blood physically marks Macbeth after Duncan's murder, making his guilt tangible and inescapable. His hands are "bloodstained" as he returns from the murder scene.



Psychological Torment

Macbeth laments that "all the water in the ocean" cannot wash the blood from his hands, showing how guilt cannot be cleansed away.



Lady Macbeth's Delusion

Initially believing "a little water clears us of this deed," Lady Macbeth later obsessively tries to wash imaginary blood from her hands while sleepwalking.

Blood evolves from a physical reality to a psychological symbol throughout the play. While Macbeth immediately recognizes that his guilt cannot be washed away, Lady Macbeth's initial confidence crumbles as her subconscious manifests her guilt through hallucinations of blood that "will not clean." This transformation shows how violence inevitably leads to psychological destruction.



The Dagger: Manifestation of Murderous Intent

Appearance

"Is this a dagger which I see before me, the handle toward my hand?" Macbeth sees a floating dagger pointing toward Duncan's chamber.



Questioning Reality

"Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible to feeling as to sight? Or art thou but a dagger of the mind?" Macbeth questions whether the dagger is real or imagined.

Acceptance

"I see thee yet, in form as palpable as this which now I draw." Macbeth compares the vision to his real dagger, blurring reality and hallucination.



Surrender to Fate

The dagger "marshals me the way that I was going," showing Macbeth's surrender to his murderous path.



Macbeth's hallucination of the floating dagger



The famous "Is this a dagger" soliloquy performed on stage



A period-appropriate dagger from Shakespeare's era

The floating dagger represents the externalization of Macbeth's murderous thoughts. This powerful hallucination reveals his psychological state as he struggles with his decision to kill Duncan. The dagger points toward Duncan's chamber, symbolizing how Macbeth's ambition directs him toward violence despite his moral hesitation.

Sleep: Innocence Destroyed



Peace Destroyed

"Macbeth does murder sleep" - the innocent sleep that "knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care."



Natural Restoration

Sleep is "the death of each day's life, sore labor's bath, balm of hurt minds."



Punishment

Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking represents her guilty conscience rebelling against her waking control.



Royal Vulnerability

Duncan is murdered in his sleep, symbolizing how even kings are vulnerable in their most innocent state.

Sleep symbolizes innocence and moral order in Macbeth. By murdering Duncan in his sleep, Macbeth violates this sacred state, and consequently loses his own ability to rest peacefully. Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scenes dramatically demonstrate how guilt manifests when conscious control is surrendered during sleep, revealing the psychological torment that her waking mind tries to suppress.

Darkness and Light: The Battle Between Good and Evil

Darkness pervades Act 2, creating the perfect setting for murder and deception. Macbeth explicitly asks the stars to hide so his "black and deep desires" remain concealed.



Concealment

"Stars, hide your fires! Let not light see my black and deep desires."



Evil Deeds

"Now o'er the one half-world nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse the curtain'd sleep."



False Appearance

"Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it."



Truth Revealed

Lady Macbeth carries a candle while sleepwalking, symbolizing how truth emerges even in darkness.

The absence of stars on the night of Duncan's murder symbolizes the disruption of natural order and divine absence. Light, conversely, represents truth and goodness that the Macbeths try to extinguish but cannot fully escape.

Banquo's Ghost: The Haunting of Conscience



Visible Only to Macbeth

Banquo's ghost appears at the feast, visible only to Macbeth, representing his personal guilt that others cannot see. This private haunting shows how Macbeth's crimes isolate him from others.



Public Breakdown

Macbeth's reaction to the ghost causes a public scene, forcing Lady Macbeth to dismiss their guests. This symbolizes how guilt eventually manifests publicly despite attempts to hide it.



Prophecy Fulfilled

The ghost's appearance reinforces the witches' prophecy that Banquo's descendants will be kings, showing Macbeth that he cannot escape fate despite his violent attempts.

Banquo's ghost represents Macbeth's guilty conscience and his inability to escape the consequences of his actions. Unlike the dagger, which appeared before the murder, the ghost appears after, showing how violence continues to haunt the perpetrator. The ghost's appearance at the royal banquet symbolizes how Macbeth's guilt disrupts his ability to rule effectively.



Nature Disrupted: The Cosmic Response to Regicide



Shakespeare portrays nature as responsive to human moral actions, particularly the killing of a rightful king. The disruption in nature mirrors the disruption in the political and moral order.



Violent Storms

The night of Duncan's murder brings "strange screams of death" and "lamentings heard i' the air" as nature itself protests the unnatural act.



Unnatural Behavior

"The obscure bird clamored the livelong night" and "Duncan's horses...turned wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out."



Darkness During Day

"By the clock 'tis day, and yet dark night strangles the traveling lamp" - showing how regicide disrupts even celestial order.

Storms, animals behaving unnaturally, and darkness during daylight all symbolize how Macbeth's actions have violated not just human law but natural law. This cosmic response emphasizes the severity of regicide in the medieval worldview.

The Knocking at the Gate: Judgment Approaches



Knocks

The persistent knocking at the castle gate after Duncan's murder symbolizes the inescapable approach of justice and judgment.



Worlds

The knocking represents the collision between the Macbeths' world of murder and the ordinary world outside, bringing reality back after their nightmarish deed.



Porter

The porter's comic scene provides ironic relief but deepens the symbolism by imagining himself as hell's gatekeeper, unknowingly accurate about the castle's new nature.



The knocking at the gate creates one of the play's most powerful symbolic moments. Coming immediately after the murder, it represents the first intrusion of the outside world into the Macbeths' crime. The knocking parallels the "knocking at my ribs" that Macbeth felt when first contemplating murder, connecting his initial fear with the inevitable consequences now approaching. This sound becomes an auditory symbol of conscience and judgment that cannot be ignored.