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Blood, Blood and More Blood

Symbolism is an artistic and poetic movement or style using symbolic images and indirect suggestion to express: people, places, objects and ideas. Shakespeare uses symbolism within his play titled *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. One heavily used symbol in *Macbeth* is that of blood. Blood is throughout Macbeth; Shakespeare uses blood to embody murder and guilt. In other words, Shakespeare uses blood to help describe the emotional progression of the characters Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. One could argue that blood is literally gushing out of Shakespeare’s pages, from the bleeding captain in Act 1 to Macbeth’s bleeding head at the end of the play.

Described horrifically by the bleeding captain, blood is first recognized at the beginning of Act 1 scene 2 with the opening battle between the Scots and Norwegian invaders:

“Which smoked with bloody execution,

Like valor’s minion carved out his passage

Till he faced the slave;

which ne’er shook hands nor bade farewell to him

Till he unseamed him from the nave to th’ chaps

And fixed his head upon our battlements” (1.1.18-23).

When Macbeth and Lady Macbeth begin on their murderous path, their guilt is symbolized by blood. Macbeth’s feelings about murder are also revealed through blood. For instance, when Macbeth considers murdering King Duncan, he hallucinates and sees a dagger floating in front of him, that points him in the direction of the Kings chambers where he lays asleep:

“A dagger of the mind, a false creation

Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?

I see thee yet, in form as palpable

As this which I draw” (2.1.39-44).

Macbeths mind is so “heat-oppressed” about the murder he is about to commit; he believes his mind is playing tricks on him. The dagger suddenly becomes covered in “imaginary” blood, which predicts how the dagger will look after Macbeth kills King Duncan:

“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” (2.1.47-50).

After Macbeth kills King Duncan, Shakespeare uses blood to symbolize the guilt Macbeth has from the murderous act he has just committed: “I am afraid to think what I have done; / Look on’t again I dare not” (2.2.54-55). King Duncan had thought highly of Macbeth, he had trusted him even after his previous Thane of Cawdor had betrayed him. Macbeth, with blood covering his hands begins to feel that their crimes have stained them in a way that can’t be washed clean by mere water.

“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” (2.2.63-65).

In other words, Macbeth feels extremely guilty for his murderous act, and doesn’t believe he will be able to overcome it. The mighty God of the sea cant even wash away the blood on his hands, it would just turn the ocean red. However, Lady Macbeth replies telling him to “go get some water / And wash this filthy witness” from his hands (2.2.49-50).

Lady Macbeth is also exposed by the symbol of blood, by showing the changes in her attitude towards the act of murder. Basically, she is Macbeth’s instigator and her views of blood are very casual. In contrast, Lady Macbeth thinks Macbeths obsession or in some cases fear, shows that he is a coward. Lady Macbeth then decides to dip her hands into the blood of King Duncan, saying “My hands are your color, but I shame / To wear a heart so white” (2.2.67-68). More specifically, she means to show Macbeth that her hands are bloody like his, but would be ashamed to have a cowardly bloodless “heart so white” like his. Lady Macbeth then goes and washes her hands clean, washing away her guilt.

Macbeth describes King Duncan’s blood as “golden blood”, which in fact contrasts with his own (2.3.110). King Duncan had done nothing to anger Macbeth, nothing other than put complete trust into him; Duncan had done nothing to provoke his murder. In other words, by Macbeth killing King Duncan he has contaminated his blood in the process. Unfortunately, Macbeth also suffers guilt from the murder of Banquo. In particular, Banquo’s ghost appears when Macbeth meets with the Thanes at a banquet. Macbeth comes to the conclusion that the ghost is haunting him in allegation: “Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake / Thy gory locks at me” (3.4.51-52). The description of Banquo’s appearance “gory locks” indicates that Banquo’s hair is dripping with blood. One could argue that the portrayal of Banquo’s appearance could possibly be the projection of Macbeth’s inner guilt.

Later in the play, Macbeth states that “they say: blood will have blood”, in other words Macbeth is saying that the blood of the victim will always find the blood of the murderer (3.4.121). Macbeths new found grit to see things to the harsh end is now present: “I am in blood / Stepped in so far that, should wade no more, / Returning were a tedious as go o’er” (3.4.37-39). In addition, Macbeth has gone from a guilty conscience to flat out accepting the actions he has committed.

Lady Macbeth’s second reaction of blood comes in Act 5. Previously in the play Lady Macbeth had a very nonchalant attitude towards blood, however it seems to have changed. When Lady Macbeth see’s both of the dead guards her husband had killed, she faints. The departed guards that lay covered in blood foreshadow Macbeth’s free acts of brutality. When Lady Macbeth see’s the blood covered bodies her role of instigator changes to merely a fainting spectator. Later in the play, Lady Macbeth begins to sleep walk. She begins to rub her hands in the action as if she is trying to wash them. In fact, she’s actually trying to wash away the blood or in other words guilt from her hands. Lady Macbeth is suddenly interrupted in her dream by the bell once used to summon her husband to murder King Duncan:

“Out, damned spot!

Out, I say! One –

two – why then ‘tis time to do’t. Hell is murky. Fie, my

lord, fie! a soldier and afeard? What need we fear who

knows it, when none can call our power to account? Yet

who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?” (5.1.35-40).

The stain of guilt that cannot be removed is shown through Lady Macbeth’s blood hauntings. As Lady Macbeth resumes her sleepwalking she complains a couple more times that she can’t remove the blood from her hands: “What will these hands ne’er be clean?” (5.1.43), “Here’s the smell of the blood still. All / the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. / Oh, oh, oh!” (5.1.50-52). Furthermore, comparing Lady Macbeth’s views of blood in the beginning of the play to the end exposes her transformation from guilt-free to completely over come with unbearable guilt.

In Act 5 another blood image appears when Macduff challenges Macbeth to a battle, to which Macbeth refuses. Essentially Macbeth didn’t want to have any more blood on his hands. Basically, more blood shed means more guilt, and more guilt meant more irremovable stains. Already suffering from his guilt of murdering King Duncan, anymore guilt would just cause more complications: “Of all men else I have avoided thee. / But get thee back. My soul is too much changed / With blood of thine already” (5.8.4-6). More specifically, the blood Macbeth refers to is that of Macduff’s murdered wife and children. From this point on blood isn’t mentioned again, however it is most likely seen on stage, especially when Macbeth dies. For example, when Macduff kills Macbeth he puts his head on a pole, caring it around victoriously.

The symbol of blood, serves a great purpose in Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Macbeth.* From the beginning of the play to the end the word blood has become very fraught. Shakespeare’s remarkable accumulation of blood can be seen as real and imagined, or as physical and psychic. Blood served as a sign for the emotional progression of the characters Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. The reactions of blood by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth highlight their emotional changes throughout the play. Macbeth began as a guilty soul that transformed completely into dry guilt, as where Lady Macbeth began as a heartless instigator, changed into a fainting spectator overwhelmed by guilt. Shakespeare’s symbol of blood is something complex, but truly brilliant.

**Blood Quotes:**

“What bloody man is that?” (1.2.1)

“Make thick my blood; / Stop up th’ access and passage to remorse,” (1.5.42-43)

“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” (2.1.47-50).

“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” (2.2.63-65).

“The spring, the head, the fountain of your blood / Is stopped, the very source of it stopped.” (2.3.98-99).

“Their hands and faces were all badged with blood” (2.3.102).

“golden blood”, which in fact contrasts with his own (2.3.110).

“the near in blood, / The nearer bloody” (2.3.140-141).

“Ah, good father, / Thou seest, the heavens, as troubled with man’s act, / Threaten his bloody stage” (2.4.4-6).

“Is’t known who did this more than bloody deed?” (2.4.22).

“our bloody cousin” (3.1.29).

“with thy bloody and invisible hand / Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond / Which keeps me pale!” (3.2.48-50).

“There’s blood on thy face” (3.4.13).

“Blood hath been shed ere now, I’ the olden time, / Ere human stature purged the gentle weal” (3.4.74-75).

“Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold” (3.4.92-94).

“they say, blood will have blood” (3.4.121).

“Brought forth / The secret’st man of blood” (3.4.124-125).

“in blood / Steppid in so far” (3.4.135).

“Free from our feast and banquets bloody knives” (3.6.35).

“Cool it with a baboon’s blood” (4.1.37).

“sow’s blood, that hath eaten / Her nine farrow” (4.1.64-65).

“Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn / the power of man, for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (4.1.79-81).

“the blood-bolter’d Banquo smiles upon me, / And points at them for his” (4.1.123-124).

“Bleed, bleed, poor country!” (4.3.30).

“I think our country sinks beneath the yoke; / It weeps, it bleeds; and each new day a gash / is added to her wounds” (4.3.39-41).

“I grant him bloody, / Luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful, / Sudden, malicious, smacking of every sin / That has a name” (4.3.57-60).

“nation miserable, / With an untitled tyrant bloody-scepter’d” (4.3.103-104).

“Out, damned spot! / Out, I say! One - / two – why then ‘tis time to do’t. Hell is murky. Fie, my / lord, fie! a soldier and afeard? What need we fear who / knows it, when none can call our power to account? Yet / who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?” (5.1.35-40).

“Here’s the smell of the blood still. All / the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. / Oh, oh, oh!” (5.1.50-52).

“Revenges burn in them; for their dear causes / Would to the bleeding and the grim alarm / Excite the mortified man” (5.2.3-5).

“Make all our trumpets speak; give them all breath, / Those clamorous harbingers of blood and death” (5.6.9-10).

“Of all men else I have avoided thee. / But get thee back. My soul is too much changed / With blood of thine already” (5.8.4-6).