

## Motifs: Imagery in Macbeth

One of the most distinctive features of *Macbeth* is the power of its recurring imagery. Shakespeare uses four key sets of imagery, all of them troubling. He introduces each one early, then uses them so frequently that we can't escape them. They involve:

1. Darkness and the absence of light
2. Blood (and imagined blood)
3. Nature and the dislocation of nature
4. Animals in some form of distortion, especial birds

These recurring images give the play a feeling of evil, of otherworldly forces closing in on a fast, tight-knit world filled with ambition and violence. The play has a sense of relentless speed, like a runaway train, and Shakespeare achieves this effect by various means. Many of the scenes are short and shocking. Some open in midstream, one in the middle of a letter, others in the middle of conversations.

An image is a word or phrase that suggests a mental picture that we associate with one of our senses. (Remember there are seven, including organic and kinesthetic.) So when Shakespeare refers to *blood*, we're meant to see its redness and feel its stickiness—and then we associate the word with violence and pain. The words *darkness* and *dark* and *blackness* create a whole different set of responses

### In-class assignment:

You will choose one of the following imagery groups and complete the accompanying in-class brainstorming exercise. Complete your exercise in a new Word document and drop-box it at the end of class.

#### Group One – Darkness and the absence of light

Act I, Scene 1 opens with the Weird Sisters chanting to each other in a void, and the effect is terrifying. This scene is dark in two senses. First metaphorically, these creatures have bubbled up from the darkest level of existence. They chant, they prognosticate, they call to invisible spirits with troubling names, and they immediately plunge us into a world of evil. Second they refer specifically to darkness (the absence of light). We are in the murky darkness as soon as the play opens—and from that point on, almost every scene in *Macbeth* takes place at night. Your task is to

- 1) identify specific instances of “darkness” imagery throughout all five acts of the play;
- 2) choose one passages of at least 15 lines that you believe best exemplifies Shakespeare’s use of “darkness” imagery; and
- 3) craft a thesis statement that explains how Shakespeare’s imagery of darkness contributes to the overall meaning of the play.

#### Group Two – Blood

In the first line of Act I, Scene 2—only the fifteenth line of the entire play—King Duncan refers to blood. He meets a “bloody man” who reports on the rebellion, telling the king that Macbeth fought bravely, “with his brandished steel, / Which smoked with bloody execution.” The word “blood” is then used again and again, more than forty times throughout the play. Your task is to

- 1) identify specific instances of “blood” imagery throughout all five acts of the play;

- 2) choose one passages of at least 15 lines that you believe best exemplifies Shakespeare's use of "blood" imagery; and
- 3) craft a thesis statement that explains how the Shakespeare's imagery of blood contributes to the overall meaning of the play.

### **Group Three – The Dislocation of Nature**

The words "nature" and "natural" are used more than twenty times in the play. The basic notion is that the natural world, which is orderly and good, becomes "unnatural" and distorted when evil is afoot. When Macbeth first gets the idea of killing Duncan, he realizes it is "Against the use of nature." Similarly, when Lady Macbeth first hears about the witches' prophecy, she fears that Macbeth is too imbued with natural human kindness. From that point on, in scene after scene, as the murders are committed and the evil spreads, unnatural things begin to happen: apparitions, ghosts, disembodied voices, etc. Your task is to

- 1) identify specific instances of imagery that reflects the dislocation of nature throughout all five acts of the play;
- 2) choose one passages of at least 15 lines that you believe best exemplifies Shakespeare's use of imagery that reflects the dislocation of nature; and
- 3) craft a thesis statement that explains how Shakespeare's nature imagery contributes to the overall meaning of the play.

### **Group Four – Animals and Birds**

Shakespeare associates changes in animals, especially birds, with the unnatural happenings of the evil world. Duncan's servants, for example, are sleep drunkenly is a "swinish sleep"; the moment Macbeth murders Duncan, "the owls shriek and the crickets cry." Your task is to

- 1) identify specific instances of animal and bird imagery throughout all five acts of the play;
- 2) choose one passages of at least 15 lines that you believe best exemplifies Shakespeare's use of "blood" imagery; and
- 3) craft a thesis statement that explains how Shakespeare's animal and bird imagery contributes to the overall meaning of the play.

\* Adapted from Ken Ludwig's *How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare*, Crown Publishing, 2014.