

# The Criterion

September 2012

ISSN 0976-8165

Vol. III. Issue. III

An International Journal in English

Quarterly Refereed and Indexed Open Access Journal

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## The Darkness in William Shakespeare's Play *Macbeth*: A Study

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William Shakespeare's world-famous tragic play *Macbeth* resides in darkness. This darkness forms a psychological domain where we see tremendous interaction occurring between the individual and his or her conscience. We can say that *Macbeth* is more a play of emotion, thoughts and planning than of action. No doubt the play of human psychology is far intense in *Hamlet* but in case of *Macbeth* it is so forceful that it often becomes difficult to differentiate between the real and the illusion. Darkness forms an all-inclusive space where the reality dissolves and the protagonist starts interacting with his or her own self and with other characters or incidents of the play at various levels thus, defying the barriers of space and time. In *Macbeth* darkness plays an important role in developing the conflict, progression of the action and the revelation of characters. It is necessary to understand that *Macbeth* is a psychological play and the development of the proper stage for the interaction of thoughts and ideas is accompanied with this darkness. The darkness reveals Macbeth's character. This revelation is associated with the tussle between Macbeth's good self and the ambitious dark side of his character. In this paper I intend to focus on the various presentations and applications of this darkness by Shakespeare in the play *Macbeth*. The paper also focuses on how this darkness becomes a dramatic device which influences the plot construction and character building thus, playing an important role in the development of the tragic motif of the play through situation, atmosphere and language.

The tussle and sufferings turn Macbeth into a tragic protagonist. But this conflict remains in darkness and is not revealed to the other characters of the play. Rather, the negative aspects of his personality become prominent and he turns out into a villain for all. Darkness tempts him to plan the murders. This same darkness also creates a platform on which the conflict within him develops. This ultimately drives Macbeth into a true tragic protagonist who deserves more than to be killed by Macduff in the end.

The plot of *Macbeth* is set in darkness. Darkness builds the evil atmosphere of the play. It is necessary to know the nature of this darkness so that we can understand its application in the play. It is true that the darkness lies in different realms. The most important territory of this darkness is the psychology of the characters, especially that of Macbeth. The second area of this darkness lies in the actions undertaken by these characters. Besides these, darkness also forms a continuous whole which prevails everywhere and forms the dominating background of the play. It almost turns out into a dominating character in the play. Such a dominating and omnipresent character is seen in Thomas Hardy's novels in the form of Egdon Heath (Wessex) or in J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* in the form of the sea. This omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient power is identified with God, with Death, Fate and human life. In *Macbeth* we see that this darkness is blended with the images of blood, death, destruction, fate, supernatural and evil. While talking about the darkness in *Macbeth* A.C. Bradley says,

Darkness, we may even say blackness, broods over this tragedy. It is remarkable that almost all the scenes which at once recur to memory take place either at night or in some dark spot. The vision of the dagger, the murder of Duncan, the murder of Banquo, the sleep-walking of Lady Macbeth, all come in night-scenes. The Witches dance in the thick air of a storm, or, 'black and midnight hags,' receive Macbeth in a cavern. The blackness of night is to the hero a thing of fear, even of horror; and that which he feels becomes the spirit of the play. The faint glimmerings of the western sky at twilight are here menacing: it is the hour when the traveller hastens to reach safety in his inn, and when Banquo rides homeward to meet his assassins; the hour when 'light thickens,' when 'night's black agents to their prey do rouse,' when the wolf begins to howl, and the owl to scream, and withered murder steals forth to his work. Macbeth bids the stars hide their fires that his 'black' desires may be concealed; Lady Macbeth calls on thick night to come, palled in the dunnest smoke of hell. (Bradley, 333-334)

We get the glimpse of this evil power in the beginning of the play (Act I Scene I) through the line, "Fair is foul and foul is fair" (Muir, 4). This darkness is prevailing everywhere in the play and Shakespeare has introduced some agencies which force this darkness to come into action. While talking about Act IV of *Macbeth* an eminent author says,

Darkness in our society is indicative of evil. For instance, a black cat, a dark night, and a dark place are all symbolic of diablerie. Authors use these symbols to describe an evil character or setting. William Shakespeare employs the imagery of darkness in Act 4 of his play *Macbeth* to describe the agents of disorder. The witches, Macbeth, and Scotland are all described as dark because they represent the agents of chaos. (*Darkness and Evil in Shakespeare's Macbeth*)

The three witches are the supernatural agencies of this darkness who form the media for Macbeth to interact with his future. It is true that while *Hamlet* deals with the past events *Macbeth* deals with the future. The witches cannot be considered only as the outward reflections of Macbeth's inner mind. Though Macbeth is ambitious and violent but the witches are the agents of this darkness which is there in Macbeth's character, as well as in the atmosphere. That is why the witches form a part of Macbeth's dark desires as well as the dark designs of the omnipotent fate. The witches describe such facts which are unknown to Macbeth. These witches symbolically represent as a part of the darkness which also forms the fate of Macbeth and other characters of the play. While talking about the influence of darkness on the plot and characters of the play Xuan Hang Trieu says,

In the tragedy *Macbeth*, Shakespeare uses darkness to emphasize evil, wickedness, and negativity. At first Macbeth simply portrays darkness as a blanket to conceal his evil, deadly deeds. Therefore, darkness is a tool. There are also scenes in *Macbeth* where the three witches evoke darkness with thunder to give the readers an idea that there is something vile about to take place. At one point in the play Banquo, a noble thane, defines the witches as "the instruments of darkness" (I, iii, 133.), which is true due to their wickedness. Lady Macbeth also relies on darkness to assist her in accomplishing the murder of King Duncan of Scotland. An example can be found in Act one, scene five when Lady Macbeth calls onto the night, "Come, thick night, and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, that my keen knife see not the wound it makes, nor heaven peep through the

blanket of the dark to cry, Hold, hold!" (I, v, 52-55.). As the play advances, darkness progresses into a personality that plagues both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth by transforming them into more ruthless characters who cause more malevolence. (Trieu, 1)

The play *Macbeth* is basically the character of Macbeth, the warrior. In this play Shakespeare is so obsessed with the personality of Macbeth—his psychology, his conscience and mental conflicts, the good and the bad selves in Macbeth and above all his demonic ambition—that overwhelms the plot developments, the dramatic conflicts and the major actions of the play *Macbeth*. Therefore, to know the play *Macbeth* we must know the character of Macbeth. The major conflicts, dramatic developments and action plans take place within Macbeth's mind. The play reaches its climax when the mental conflicts within Macbeth are at their heights. Before fighting with Macduff Macbeth's downfall has reached its end point. Macbeth is defeated psychologically and the beginning of climax is marked with the death of Lady Macbeth and the moving of the Great Birnam wood to the Dunsinane hill. The readers can understand that Macbeth has already turned into a tragic figure and his physical defeat is imminent. Therefore, the consequent war with Siward and Macduff are a part of the climax that started with Macbeth's mental downfall, as far as the plot development is concerned. This is because, the play *Macbeth* is a psychological play and the dramatic significance of the play concludes when Macbeth's mind is saturated with the thoughts of death, defeat and repentance. His sufferings have already turned him into a tragic figure. His assassination in the hands of Macduff restores his heroic stature and turns him into a tragic figure. Therefore, the mental conflict and the bite of conscience in Macbeth together form the main sequence of the tragedy of Macbeth.

The action and the plot develop in the psychological domain, and this domain is overshadowed by the darkness. As soon as Macbeth comes to know about the predictions made by the witches and starts thinking on them, he enters the area of darkness which is basically a part of his character and which pertains to the atmosphere of the play as well. The shadow of this darkness grows and intensifies gradually as Macbeth starts committing crimes. The other self of Macbeth, which remains hidden under this darkness, also develops and is always in conflict with this darkness and the evil self of Macbeth. This other self emerges victorious when Macbeth decides to face Malcolm (King Duncan's elder son) and his warriors in the final war. With the death of Lady Macbeth and the symbolic implementation of the second phase predictions of the witches the decline of the ambitious self in Macbeth reaches its culmination. At this point Macbeth emerges from the darkness into the light of glory as a warrior. Here again we see that the unstained self of Macbeth, which existed before meeting the three witches, and which now develops and reaches its point of completion.

Therefore, we find that two selves of the same character are developed by the playwright and two climaxes are reached along with the development of these two selves. The first one resides in the darkness and reaches its climax when Macbeth is mentally defeated and is prepared for death, and the second one develops in the light of heroism and reaches its climax with the defeat and death of Macbeth in the hands of Macduff thus, turning Macbeth into a tragic protagonist. It is interesting to see that throughout the play the dark side of Macbeth's character dominates the play and the major actions take place under the influence of this darkness. This darkness turns Macbeth initially into a

criminal and it becomes very difficult to sympathize with him. The consequent sufferings, aggravated in him by this darkness, actually turn him into a tragic figure.

The darkness has proved to be a major dramatic device for Shakespeare to create a new form of a tragic protagonist in *Macbeth*. The development of Macbeth's character and his tragedy is different from Hamlet, Othello and many other tragic heroes produced in the history of world drama. *Macbeth* does not go with the norms of a Revenge Tragedy as propagated by Seneca. *Macbeth* is a revenge play but in a different way. Unlike Hamlet or Othello here we see that the protagonist is not taking the revenge. Instead he is committing the crime and he is avenged for that. But the delineation of the characters of the avengers is so weak, compared to that of Macbeth, that, we cannot take them for the real heroes. The character of Banquo, Macduff, Malcolm and Donalbin are flat and are out and out good in nature. There is no tragic flaw in their character which is the most required criterion to become a tragic protagonist. This is because without the flaw there will be no conflict and the plot will lack proper action for its development. Darkness, on the other hand, provides everything to this play to become a tragedy. The evil in Macbeth's character is a part of the darkness that extends from the surrounding atmosphere to his psychology. The darkness of evil influences Macbeth's psychology to commit the crime. Macbeth is inflicted with the tragic flaw, *hamartia*, of over-ambitiousness that compels him to commit the crime and enter the domain of darkness. In the characters like Banquo, Macduff, Malcolm and Donalbin this tragic flaw and the consequent darkness are missing. As a result of that no such rise of conflict and development of sufferings are seen in these characters, as we see in Macbeth, which can turn them into a tragic protagonist. Thus, it is true that darkness turns Macbeth from a loyal warrior to an evil betrayer and finally into a tragic protagonist. In spite of being the criminal Macbeth becomes the tragic protagonist for the magnanimity and profoundness in his character which Shakespeare has portrayed minutely and very fluently. The reader feels that Macbeth's genius is unnecessarily wasted who does not deserve to die like that but fit for something more. Moreover, the sufferings and the consciousness of guilt mark the tragic self within him. Macbeth's sin and the sense of guilt are enveloped in darkness.

William Shakespeare has very skillfully delineated the blending of the real and the visionary world creating a hybrid space for the character to interact with his own psychology. This space can be considered as the third space which is experienced by Macbeth. This space is favoured by the darkness which dilutes the other realities that hinder the expression of the human subconscious mind. The visions of the blood smeared dagger and the ghost of Banquo cannot be considered as mere illusions but are the symbolic reflections of the imminent consequences that the protagonist may face as a result of the sins that he has committed. The darkness prepares this space for building the conflict of the play. It is interesting to see that this darkness or the visions are not always perceived by the other characters in the play. This shows that we are reading the play from Macbeth's point of view. The domain of the reader is defined by the psychology of Macbeth, and Macbeth's psychology resides in darkness. Therefore, the reader also becomes a part of that dark world of sin, evil and sufferings which is experienced by Macbeth in the play. But, this dark world cannot be a creation of Macbeth's own mind. Here we see that the playwright takes part in defining this discourse of dark world. This world includes the conscience (or the super ego) of the protagonist as well as the fate and the reality which are a part of the greater discourse. Therefore, this region of darkness

forms a vivid and profound arena where the philosophies of life and death locate themselves with a greater force and significance. As a result of that the protagonist (Macbeth), the reader and the playwright become mere components of this dark design and play as parts of this discourse. While writing *Macbeth* Shakespeare is also governed by the philosophy of life and death. These experiences are shared by the readers and are portrayed through the tragic figure Macbeth. Thus, darkness becomes the dominating factor which is more than a character and more powerful than the reader, writer and the protagonist in the play. This darkness can be seen in Christopher Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus* where similar kind of mental sufferings, sense of guilt and repentance and the philosophy of life, death and humanity are portrayed by the playwright with immense subtlety. The major actions of this play, including Faustus' meeting with Mephistopheles, take place in the darkness. This darkness denotes the region of greater reality where the deep desires of man's subconscious mind are revealed. This darkness is the part of a greater discourse which propagates the philosophy of life and death, good and evil. It is that same darkness that is depicted in *Macbeth*. The only difference is that in *Macbeth*, Macbeth succeeds in overcoming the influence of this darkness while Faustus fails to avoid the wrath of fate. Both Macbeth and Faustus face extinction. But for Macbeth the darkness of evil subsides and he is more enlightened with heroism than the darkness of death. In case of Faustus the darkness of evil further intensifies and unlike Macbeth life provides him with no relief from this darkness.

Apart from the characters and the plot construction darkness is enforced by Shakespeare through the language of the play also. Shakespeare has used words and other linguistic usages which were unavailable in his time to express the exactness of the theme, tragic tone and darkness. Macbeth's soliloquies reveal the domain of darkness where the interaction between Macbeth's mind and the hyper real world takes place. In this darkness the distinguishing boundary between the reality and the illusory world melts down and the individual starts witnessing such things which are a part of the greater reality or hyper reality which symbolically represents the future of Macbeth's life. Darkness also reveals such aspects of human psychology which need deep speculation and psychoanalysis, which include the conscience of the suffering character. The soliloquies of Macbeth reflect this darkness. Before going into the chamber of King Duncan to murder him Macbeth enters into the arena of darkness in Act II Scene I and reveals the conflict in his mind,

MACBETH...Is this a dagger, which I see before me,  
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch  
thee:—  
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.  
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible  
To feeling, as to sight? or art thou but  
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 now I draw. (Muir, 47-48)

Macbeth is aware of the fact that only darkness can provide him with the space where he can accomplish his dark, criminal desires. Darkness is there in his mind. This darkness has been tempted by Macbeth's ambitious soul. Macbeth invites the darkness that

prevails in the nature to hide his criminal acts. In Act II Scene I, before going for the murder, Macbeth reveals the dark side of his mind and the temptations from the elements of darkness and evil which invite and encourage him to commit the murder of Duncan and fulfill his ambition. In Act II Scene I Macbeth says,

MACBETH...Now o'er the one half-world  
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse  
The curtain'd sleep: Witchcraft celebrates  
Pale Hecate's off'rings; and wither'd Murther,  
Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,  
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,  
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design  
Moves like a ghost. (Muir, 48-49)

Shakespeare has used murder related words like 'assailable' (Muir, 83), in Act III Scene II, which Macbeth uses while describing Banquo and Fleance. Again we see the verbs capturing the blood-red image, which is a medium to the darkness, when Macbeth says the 'multitudinous seas incarnadine making the green one red' (Muir, 56) in Act II, Scene II. This also emphasizes on the darkness which is the source of this blood and other evils as well. As far as the language presentation is concerned Macbeth's soliloquies truly represent this darkness. In Act I, Scene IV, Duncan declares his son, Malcolm, to be the Prince of Cumberland. Macbeth considers this as an obstacle in his way to the throne. The three witches had predicted that Macbeth would become the king of Scotland. Macbeth immediately starts thinking about eliminating these obstacles. He invokes darkness to provide him security while murdering Duncan and his sons. It is revealed in his soliloquy where he says.

MACBETH.[Aside.] The Prince of Cumberland!—That is a step  
On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,  
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires!  
Let not light see my black and deep desires;  
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,  
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. (Muir, 25)

Lady Macbeth is also a product of this darkness. Her thoughts are even more vicious than Macbeth's. The difference is that the conflict of conscience is not so prominent in her like her husband. Moreover, she does not have the magnanimity to overcome those mental sufferings and emerge out as a protagonist like Macbeth. In Act I Scene V, after knowing about the prophecies of the Witches regarding Macbeth's future from his letter Lady Macbeth reveals the dark designs of her mind. Like her husband she also invites darkness for her security:

LADY MACBETH...Come, you Spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full  
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood,  
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse;  
That no compunctious visitings of Nature  
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
Th' effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,  
And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers,

Wherever in your sightless substances  
 You wait on Nature's mischief! Come, thick Night,  
 And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell,  
 That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,  
 Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,  
 To cry, 'Hold, hold!' (Muir, 30-31)

Lady Macbeth encourages Macbeth to commit the murder of Duncan. She appears to be the fourth witch and the harbinger of this darkness. But in the end she is engulfed by this darkness and turns insane. Unlike Macbeth she is unable to overcome this darkness and turn towards light of wisdom. This is seen in the 'Sleepwalking Scene' of the play which occurs in Act V Scene I, where we see that darkness has crept in every corner of Lady Macbeth's mind. She is afraid of this darkness. That is why she is walking with a 'taper', a light candle. But it is interesting to see that she is walking in her sleep. Therefore, it is obvious that the darkness is there in her mind. The sense of guilt and the prick of conscience lead her to greater darkness which is nothing but death. While talking, in her insanity, about the murder of Duncan and the blood Lady Macbeth says,

LADY MACBETH. 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 accompt?—Yet who would have thought the old  
 man to have had so much blood in him?(Muir, 139)

The night, the blood and sleeplessness emphasize this darkness. The mental darkness is an important factor which is the most important component of the darkness that is prevailing in the play, in the characters, readers and the playwright. The murder of King Duncan takes place in the darkness. After killing Duncan, Macbeth enters into a domain of spiritual conflict where he realizes the severity of the crime. The psychological conflicts lead Macbeth to the utter mental darkness where he can witness only death, destruction, blood and the black night of evil. In Act II Scene II Macbeth exhibits his mental agony,

MACBETH...How is't with me, when every noise appals me?  
 What hands are here? Ha! they pluck out mine eyes.  
 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. (Muir, 55-56)

It is important to note that except Macbeth, the reader and the playwright the other characters of the play are not directly experiencing this darkness. After committing the murder of King Duncan, Macbeth turns out into a complete criminal. The conflict of conscience and mental sufferings suggest the still-existing goodness in his character. But, after the murder of King Duncan we see that Macbeth starts residing in an imaginary plain where darkness prevails. In this domain Macbeth interacts with his conscience. He also starts devising his further criminal plans to kill Banquo and his son Fleance and later Macduff. He becomes a part of the darkness. From here onwards we see that Macbeth starts remaining aloof from the whole world. Even Lady Macbeth cannot understand the dark designs of her husband's mind. But this darkness gradually devours others also. The



blood, which is the symbol of evil and darkness, has stained permanently the soul of Lady Macbeth. She can never get rid of this stain which is on her soul. In the sleepwalking scene of Act V Scene I Lady Macbeth reveals the dark regions of her insane mind where she realizes the depth of her sins. She cries,

LADY MACBETH. Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.

Oh! oh! oh!(Muir, 140)

Before death Lady Macbeth turns mad. Her insanity and the sleepwalking scene show that she has gone through the similar sufferings of darkness like Macbeth. Macbeth recovers from this darkness and faces the fatal consequences which Lady Macbeth fails to do. That is why Macbeth becomes a tragic protagonist and Lady Macbeth a suffering soul. Darkness prevails all over Scotland. We come to know about that when Scotland is metaphorically compared to a patient.

The play starts with darkness. The witches are the instruments of the dark designs of Fate. Macbeth commits the murders of Duncan and Banquo in darkness. Macbeth's tyrannical rule brings all kinds of evils in the society of Scotland. Darkness lies not only in the psychological and physical realm but also in the political realm as well. The murders of King Duncan, Banquo and the family of Macduff have served the political purpose of Macbeth. Out of tremendous thirst for power Macbeth has committed these murders, and like a shrewd politician has transferred the blame on someone else. Macbeth does not have any personal grudge against the murdered persons. It is just only to acquire power and political position that Macbeth has committed these murders. Macbeth's conducts have involved dark intentions. The politics that he has played to acquire the throne of Scotland is also enmeshed in this darkness and is a part of the darkness that is visible throughout the play.

Macbeth is ambitious and that forms the tragic flaw or *hamartia* in his character. Violence is also a major aspect of his character. Therefore, these two negative features of his character give rise to dark intentions and evil desires (the lust for power) in him. These finally lead him to devise dark designs to implement his unlawful intentions which ultimately lead him to commit crime and suffer the wrath of not only the whole nation but also of fate. But Macbeth's death is not enveloped in the darkness of evil. Rather, unlike Lady Macbeth, he has succeeded in breaking the shackles of this darkness to emerge as a real suffering figure with heroic qualities in him. Macbeth has not fought for the cause of the humanity or his country. Neither has he strived to take revenge. Rather, he represents a common human being, and ambition is a common feature of any human character. Macbeth's struggle is against the darkness that is there in him. It is this darkness which turned him into a criminal. We identify ourselves with Macbeth's weaknesses and feel sorry to see him suffer. Macbeth's struggle to regain his former heroic stature and his death make him a tragic protagonist. Although Macbeth is defeated physically he has succeeded in defeating the darkness that was there in him and has turned into a heroic figure.

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The Criterion