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AP Literature

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The Tragedy of Macbeth:

Darkness and Evil

The Tragedy of Macbeth (1606) is a play shrouded in darkness. Despite how the Weird Sisters address him, evil, dark forces work their way into Macbeth's heart from the moment Lady Macbeth suggests they kill the king that very night. Shakespeare develops the theme of darkness and evil beginning in physical ways: Macbeth kills the king in the evening and, according to an old man, nature reveals its wild side with storms, wind, and unnaturalness. Next, Macbeth orders the murder of his friend Banquo, all the while hiding under a shroud of darkness. The theme of darkness is not, however, relegated to a single plane. Evil increases as Macbeth's paranoia and greed surpass reasoning, darkening his entire persona, spiraling out of control as perceived enemies barricade his present and future. He is lost. Shakespeare's theme of darkness and evil infiltrates the play by exploring how murder, cloaked by the darkness of the night, produces Macbeth's inner wellspring of hell.

In Act II of *Macbeth*, night is introduced as a time of day when dark deeds begin to unfold. Even before the body of King Duncan is discovered, the characters exhibit a feeling of unease. This feeling is communicated in Lennox's conversation with Macbeth:

The night has been unruly. Where we lay,
Our chimneys were blown down and, as they say,

Lamentings hear i'th'air, strange screams of
 death,
 and prophesying with accents terrible,
 Of dire combustion and confused events
 New hatched to th' woeful time. The obscure bird
 Clamored the livelong night. Some say the earth
 Was feverous and did shake. (2.3.61-69)

Macbeth replies to Lennox's account, stating, "'Twas a rough night" (2.3.70). In this exchange, a sense of natural dissonance foreshadows dark, foreboding events. Macbeth makes it clear in his reply to Lennox that he has been affected by the unruly feeling of the night, and yet his remark underplays the extent of the evil that has just occurred. Lennox's speech portends "dire combustion and confused events," but Macbeth's response downplays the evil, either because he chooses to ignore the calamitous nature of his actions or because he is not in tune with the extent of his own evil. This marks the beginning of Macbeth's descent. Very rapidly, however, the light of day seems to be covered in a pall of darkness, an intermingling of nature and man, specifically as Macbeth rises to power. In Act II, Ross and an old man discuss the close relationship of heaven and earth, disclosing the power of the divine over the natural world on earth: "By the clock 'tis day, / and yet dark night strangles the traveling lamp" (2.4.8-9), a statement describing a blanketed, dark cast over the sun to create an eery sky. In truth, he questions this natural phenomenon, wondering if the night has come too soon or if, by pathetic fallacy, the "day's shame" (10) is at the root of the day's blackness. In this passage, Ross refers to "man" as the culprit, rather than Macbeth, but the old man's anecdote about a falcon "was by a

mousing owl hawked at and killed” (16); clearly it is as unnatural for an owl to attack a falcon as it is for a thane to kill a king. Macbeth, in the early stages of his descent, quickly moves from regicide to heinous murder, eliminating those who stand in the way not only of maintaining the crown, but also of blocking his heirs. In murdering King Duncan, considered one of the most diabolical of crimes, Macbeth sacrifices his own integrity for the idea of power, marking his own hands and heart with regicidal blood. Now familiar with the power of darkness and the secrets it conceals, Macbeth uses the night to his advantage when he orders the death of Banquo and Fleance. Night darkness, both literally and figuratively, now dominates day. As evil and darkness become more synonymous in the play, Macbeth’s inner life is affected. His mind becomes tormented by what he has become.

In the article by Farah Karim-Cooper entitled “Why, This is Hell,” the author explores the evolving ideas of hell and inner torment. Karim-Cooper, Director of Education and Research at the Globe Theatre in London, suggests that in Macbeth’s internal hell, “the world around him becomes increasingly infused with the dark projections of his mind” (2), where he suffers an increasingly torturous internal hell, a hell that is spurred by a guilty conscience. Macbeth’s state of mind, she asserts, replete with monstrous, insomnia-causing anguish, becomes the hell described in Dante’s *Inferno* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* where lost souls experience eternal misery, thus describing an excruciating state of mind within an intolerable environment. Certainly, Macbeth’s mind has been altered past the point of redemption. Karim-Cooper’s description of Macbeth’s world, one that is “phantasmagoric,” is his own projection, implying the delusional imaginings. It may also be true that the reality of 11th-century Scotland may also play a role in Macbeth’s state of mind. Tanistry, providing an alternate inroad to the crown other

than primogeniture, allows Macbeth's mind to lust for something that is actually possible: becoming king without being the son of a king. His inner hell is pervasive in that it is made up of both his world's and his own sinister realities.

Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), a Renaissance text on melancholia, describes this condition as a disease of the body and the mind. Initially, Burton asserts, melancholia seems to be a "most delightful humor." Similar to Karim-Cooper, Burton conveys the idea of "phantastical imaginations," however, Burton relates these initial feelings as fantasy. Eventually, "Feare and Sorrow supplant those pleasing thoughts" and are replaced by suspicion, discontent, and "canker'd" thoughts (251-252). Shakespeare's audiences would have understood that melancholy as one humor found in the blood that, out of balance, could cause severe depression or anxiety, laden with unrealistic expectations and wild imaginings. Macbeth's downward spiraling would have been seen as a direct result of a sudden change in the body, a condition where the attempt to convince himself that evil is not a source of treachery, but of power. Twenty-first century audiences may not agree that melancholy derives from a humor in the blood, but understand the relevance of Shakespeare's dark and foreboding theme. The world today is full of darkness and often masquerades in the same "Burton-ish" pleasing clothing that he describes in his *Anatomy*. Our recent election continues to elicit dark thoughts, despite the fact that our country must now accept the results and move forward. Groups and individuals have threatened violence and claimed depression. Some prefer to leave or to demonstrate. It is a clear example of a political environment, such as Macbeth's, that has deteriorated to the point of affecting how people behave and internalize. Perhaps this is why Shakespeare's works continue to resonate. Scholar Stephen Greenblatt's article "How Shakespeare Explains the 2016 Election"

delineates how *Richard III*, one of Shakespeare's most popular first works, ascends to the throne. Greenblatt describes Richard as a "perverse monster" whose villainy was readily apparent to everyone," an incriminating statement, to be sure. The point is that perceived villains, the Macbeths of the world who will do anything for power, including murder his king, his friend, and an entire family - those despicable humans, still exist today. The early modern language may not mirror today's writing, but the characters, themes, and catharsis is the same. Twenty-first century readers and audiences continue to immerse themselves in the Bard's work because his work still speaks.

Finally, Macbeth's self-realization that he has passed beyond human fulfillment into a personal hell marks the end of his former life and demonstrates how his initial act of murder initiated a transformation from "brave Macbeth" in Act I to the murdering minister whom Lady Macbeth believes will take him into greatness. In Act IV, when Macbeth orders the death of Macduff's wife and children, the full extent of darkness consumes him. In the killing of an innocent family, Macbeth murders the innocence within himself, extinguishing the final candle of goodness. This self-realization is confirmed in Act V, when Macbeth hears the death screech of his wife: "I have almost forgot the taste of fears. / The time has been my senses would have cooled / To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair / Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir / As life were in 't" (5.5.11-15). The "night-shriek" does not stir a single emotion in Macbeth. He is so far beyond human fear that he lives in an eternal state of darkness. During Macduff and Malcolm's plot to overthrow Macbeth, Malcolm declares that "The night is long that never finds the day" (4.3.282). This statement is a testimony to the identity of Macbeth. Malcolm recognizes him now not as a human being to be slain, but rather as a dark force to annihilate.

This new identity correlates with Macbeth's inability to feel human emotion. Not even the death screech of his beloved Lady Macbeth has the power to cause him terror. He is consumed by evil. He is consumed by darkness.

Macbeth is the source of the powers of darkness. His destruction of others leads to his own inner torment, and this consummation of evil in his life causes the nighttime to overwhelm the day. By the end of the play, we realize that night is no longer merely a time or even a symbol. Night is living death. It is the root of destruction, the source of madness. In his ascent to power, we come realize that Macbeth is the source of the madness, the destruction, and the world's descent into complete darkness. Macbeth discovers his personal hell is "both 'within and without'" (Karim-Cooper 2). Macbeth's life becomes devoid of day, which is symbolic of everything good and pleasurable in life. But by choosing a life of treachery, Macbeth creates for himself a world devoid of human happiness. Macbeth *becomes* night.

Works Cited

Burton, Robert. *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Printed by Iohn Lichfield and Iames Short, for Henry Cripps, Anno Dom. 1621. *EEBO*. STC (2nd ed.) / 4159, copy from British Library, pp. 251-252.

Greenblatt, Stephen. "Shakespeare Explains the 2016 Election." *Sunday Review*. 08 Oct. 2016. *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/09/opinion/sunday/shakespeare-explains-the-2016-election.html?_r=0

Karim-Cooper, Farah. "Why, This is Hell." *Shakespeare's Globe*, 2010, pp. 12-15.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. 1607, edited by Barabara A. Mowatt and Paul Werstine, Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 1992.

Reflection

- Writing process
 - Problems with thesis
 - Successes with quoting or sources
 - Working outline
- Tutorials/Website
- Primary documents

Prospectus

Thesis: Shakespeare develops a theme of darkness and evil by exploring how murder cloaked by the night produces his own inner wellspring of hell.

Ideas from Text:

- Darkness of night permeates the killing of King Duncan
 - Regicide takes place at night
 - Nature is affected
 - Macbeth's mind is affected such that he cannot sleep
- Darkness increases as Macbeth rises to power affects his mental state
 - Banquo is murdered to stop his line of offspring from becoming King
 - Macduff's family is murdered to stop the rebellion against Macbeth
 - Lady Macbeth commits suicide, causing him to question life and purpose
- Darkness is associated with evil and its consequences
 - The banquet feast where Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost
 - Macbeth's unraveling mind after each murder
 - The realization of the witches' riddles and his final soliloquy

Possible Quotes:

- "The night has been unruly. Where we lay, / Our chimneys were blown down and, as they say, / Lamentings hear i'th'air, strange screams of / death" (2.3.61-64).
- "Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, / Till thou applaud the deed.--Come, seeling night, / Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day" (3.3.51-53).

- “I have almost forgot the taste of fears. / The time has been my senses would have cooled / To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair” (5.5.11-13).
- “I am afraid to think what I have done. / Look on ‘t again I dare not” (2.2.66-67).

Research Ideas:

- Primary: The Booke of Plaies and Notes therof per forman for Common Pollicie (1610)
- Primary: Woodcut of Macbeth and Banquo meeting the witches; from Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England* (1577)
- Secondary: “Why, This is Hell”: “The world around him becomes increasingly infused with the dark projections of his mind” (Karim-Cooper 2).
- Secondary: Shakespeare-navigator.com
- Secondary: Field-of-themes.com: “Darkness: Signs of Chaos in *Macbeth*”

Relevance:

- Politics and the darkness of thought
 - Fear of immigrants as they face a new administration
 - Dylann Roof, convicted murderer in Charleston, faces death penalt
 - Fort Lauderdale airport shootings
 - Hate crimes in Garden City, Kansas
- International politics
 - Arab and Middle East unrest
- Problems here in our city/county
 - Cyber-bullying and cyber-theft (YA books: *Butter*)

