

32. THE USE OF IMAGERY IN MACBETH

The terms 'image' and 'imagery' have many connotations and meanings. Imagery as a general term covers the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, state of mind, and any sensory or extra-sensory experience. An image does not necessarily mean a mental picture. An image may be literal, perceptual or conceptual. Many images are conveyed by figurative language, as in metaphor, simile, synecdoche, onomatopoeia and metonymy. An image may be visual (pertaining to the eyes), olfactory (smell), tactile (touch), auditory (hearing), gustatory (taste), abstract (in which case it will appeal to what may be described as the intellect), and kin-aesthetic (pertaining to the sense of movement and bodily effort). William Shakespeare has used all kinds of images in his plays. But mostly it is in his metaphors that his imagery is striking. The great tragedies make frequent use of highly figurative language. Imagery in Shakespeare is not just ornamentation; it is very much organic, closely linked up with the theme of the play. *Macbeth* is possibly the richest and the most poetic of all Shakespearian tragedies. If *King Lear* is rich in symbolism, *Macbeth* has the luxury of imagery. There is full and free use of images in this great tragedy of overvaulting ambition to embody and represent outer and inner atmosphere and action in the play. The inner conflict and spiritual significance are rendered into art naturally being duly articulated through a variety of befitting images. In *Macbeth* there is a recurrent use of images which suggest darkness and stealth. The world of *Macbeth* is full of crime and sin; moral values have collapsed; so, the imagery of darkness

dominates. The nocturnal birds and animals, the instruments of murder, the witch, the will-o, and the wisp - everything refers to unscrupulous crime and concealment.

The opening scene presents a world which suggests the collapse of moral values: the thunder, the lightening, the witches, Graymalkin and Paddock, the fog and the filthy air create the atmosphere where 'Fair is foul and foul is fair'. In the Scene III of the Act I, the same situation continues and the imagery suggests supernatural soliciting which 'cannot be ill, cannot be good.' The light of conscience is switched off: '*Stars, hide your fires;/ Let not light see my black and deep desires.*' Lady Macbeth is the most important evil machinery in the play. She does something which is unexpected of a woman. So, she prays to the evil spirit that they should unsex her. Her 'blood' should be made thick. She wants that her 'milk' should turn into 'gall'. The 'raven', a bird of evil omen, occurs in her speech. Through imagery Shakespeare unfolds the dark chamber of her heart: '*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!"*' (Act 1, Scene V). It is a world where hell is let loose. In the speeches of Macbeth and his wife there are frequent references to the nocturnal birds and wild animals, suggesting cruelty, ferocity and treachery. In sharp contrast to these, there is the 'martlet' which is 'temple-haunting' and 'guest of summer' in the speech of Banquo who is innocent. Duncan also uses such images which appear in ironical contrast with the images of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth is simply horrible when she says: '*I have given suck, and know/ How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;/ I would, while it was smiling in my face,/Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums,/And dash'd the brains out, had I*

sworn as you/Have done to this' (Act-1, Scene-VII).

The images couch the feelings and thoughts of Shakespeare in an adequate and dramatic way. Bleed, bleed poor country of Macduff is a terrifying image of blood. The imagery of storm mirrors the disorder, conflict and abnormality of the action of the play and its protagonist. The heart of Macbeth at the time of Duncan's murder is not less stormy and abnormal than the night itself. Animal imagery consisting of 'rat without tail', 'Huracan tiger', and 'rugged Russian beer' suggest the degradation and bestiality of *Macbeth*. When Macbeth's conscience begins to work and there is a fight in his heart between the forces of heaven and the forces of hell, imagery rises to a grandiloquent height: '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.' But as *Macbeth* goes on advancing in the world of crime, the images of hell - blood, knife, fangs, fire, alarm-bell---come most frequently. It is only at the end when the moment of catharsis comes and Macbeth rises to a spiritual regeneration that his imagery attains a different colour and dimension. In this connection we can refer to his famous utterance on his wife's death:

'Out, out, brief candle! /Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player/That struts and frets his hour upon the stage/And then is heard no more: it is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, /Signifying nothing'.

In short, *Macbeth* is rich in powerful and complex images which intensify the dramatic atmosphere and the poetic lushness of the play beautifully articulating Shakespeare's profound vision of life and darkness in a subtle and successful way.