

## Themes

*Macbeth* is the shortest of Shakespeare's tragedies; it is simple and direct in its plot but complex in its psychological analysis of what takes place in the mind of the criminal. Unlike the other great tragedies, there is no villain pitted against the hero: Macbeth is both; he begins as the heroic warrior but, led by ambition, he chooses evil and becomes a murderous tyrant.

Regicide is an act against nature which brings about chaos, catastrophe signalled by terrible weather conditions. The terms *blood*, *bloody*, *to bleed* are the most frequently used words in the play, repeated more than a hundred times.

The reversal of values – “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (☉ t32) – introduced by the three witches represents the darkest, most dangerous aspect of equivocation. Closely related to the theme of equivocation is the one of false appearances. Shakespeare explores the difference between what is true and what only seems to be true. This theme also finds expression through the chain of metaphors connected with clothing, especially clothes that do not fit, or in the repetition of the verb to seem.

There is another important theme: that of “time”. Time progresses in a way that is pre-ordained, then whatever action we perform with the intention of changing the future can only be one of the necessary steps in arriving exactly at that future. The alternative is a future which is neither fixed nor inevitable, therefore can be shaped by human activity. This theme is associated with a chain of images concerned with “growth”: babies, seeds, plants, trees.

## Macbeth as a tragic hero

Macbeth can be regarded as a tragic hero. At the beginning of the play he is a highly esteemed member of a social group. At the end of the play he is totally alone because of his ambition and his own free decisions. Nothing that Macbeth does in the play is forced upon him, and he is never deceived by some human agent. His death is the inevitable consequence of what he has chosen to do for his own reasons. The most

remarkable quality of the character is the awareness of what is happening to him. He suffers horribly throughout the play; he becomes overwhelmed with fear and psychological terrors, but he does not compromise with the world. This gives a heroic quality to his tragic course of action. What we witness is his gradual dehumanization. His loss of physical relationships is accompanied by the loss of any power to feel sensitively about life (☉ t35).

## Imagery

In *Macbeth* there is a striking use of imagery. The murder of Duncan brings some consequences that go beyond individual conscience; it involves the concept of order (☉ 3.5) implying correspondences between the parts of the Creation. Duncan is the symbol of social harmony, order, justice and honesty, the values that should inspire human behaviour. For this reason his death is foreshadowed and followed by “exceptional natural events”. On the night of the murder the earth trembles. After the murder the macrocosm of nature mirrors the chaos of the social microcosm: the sky is troubled, darkness covers the earth during the day, Duncan's horses break their stalls and eat one another.

Darkness characterises the whole play, the sun shines only twice and the darkness of the night is interrupted only by the flashes which light up horrible scenes painted in red the colour of blood. Night does not convey the idea of peace and rest but, on the contrary, is connected with lack of sleep and madness, which will be respectively Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's punishments.

A cluster of images connected with the animal world – macabre and disgusting insects and other animals – is used by Macbeth. He always expresses his thoughts and emotions in vivid physical terms like a man who has reached the edge of humanity (☉ t35).

## guided study

### 1. Answer the following questions about *Macbeth*.

1. What does *Macbeth* mainly analyse?
2. Is there a villain?
3. What is the most frequent word in the play?
4. What characters and images are connected with the theme of equivocation?
5. How does Shakespeare deal with the theme of time in the play?
6. Why can Macbeth be regarded as a tragic hero?
7. What are the consequences of Duncan's death?
8. What is the connotation of the night in this play?