

An Analysis of Gothic Features in *Macbeth**

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Macbeth as one of the Four Great Tragedies by Shakespeare depicts a great change of Macbeth from a hero of counter-insurgency into a tyrannical king. What impresses readers most is the frequent usage of Gothic features, like murders, ghost, witches, and so on. The paper will make a tentative study on Gothic settings, Gothic characters, and Gothic plots in *Macbeth*. The age of confusing right and wrong and horrible environmental settings will be expounded; then, the detailed analysis of Gothic characters like Macbeth, the trio of Witches and Lady Macbeth will be elaborated on; the plots of noumenal horror and mental terror will be elucidated finally. It is helpful for deeply understanding the drama's theme and interpreting the work from a new perspective, which plays a positive role in the research and development of Gothic literature and possesses certain significance for literary reference.

Keywords: *Macbeth*, Gothic settings, Gothic characters, Gothic plots

Introduction

Gothicism in literature has different stages of development and it is generally believed that it is pioneered by Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764) and flourished through the early 19th century. The Gothic fiction is characterized by depicting the events of horror, ghost, violence, nightmare, and so on; besides, its locale is often a gloomy and mysterious castle. The Gothic works are destined to depend on terror and horror, though bringing about emotional changes in distinctive ways. They invariably dig into subconsciousness, trauma, insanity, and taboo that exist in human society, revealing the social evil. Relatively, ghosts, dark power, bloodshed, castles, and others emerge as fundamental features of Gothic fiction.

Four tragedies by Shakespeare interiorize readers by perfectly applying fundamental Gothic features; and among his four tragedies, *Macbeth* depicts a great change of Macbeth from a hero of counter-insurgency into a tyrannical king and what impresses readers most is the frequent usage of Gothic features, like witches, murders, ghost, and other abnormal phenomena that render the whole drama shroud in ghostly atmosphere.

Gothic Settings in *Macbeth*

Undoubtedly, precise background information could be obtained from the story that happens to human characters; however, in *Macbeth*, every detail of the witches' appearance and the short opening scenes impulse readers to sense a confusion of the usual human order and a world of darkness and foulness. "Fair is foul, and foul

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is fair” (1.1.12) said by the trio of witches at the very beginning of the drama, setting the tone of unusual darkness and unhealthiness for background. Therefore, it can be inferred that *Macbeth*’s social background is an age of confusing right and wrong.

The dark night is a representative Gothic setting. The important scenes like murders, conspiracy in penetralium and the appearance of Banquo’s ghost all occur in dark nights and the whole drama is enveloped in the darkness. When Macbeth heard the news that Malcolm had been the Prince of Cumberland, he thought it was a step to block his way and he had to eradicate it, but he wanted to conceal this unrepresentable desire and said: “stars, hide your fires; let not light see my black and deep desires” (1.4.57-58). Lady Macbeth also turned to darkness for help to cover her conspiracy of murder so that heaven could not “peep through the blanket of the dark” (1.5.60). At the moment before the murder of King Duncan, there is a line from Macbeth, “for fear thy very stones prate of my whereabouts, and take the present horror from the time, which now suits with it” (2.1.66-68), which implies that his deeds have blent in the darkness and he is an incarnation of darkness to implement the evil. It is easy to find from the above evidence that the dark night is an image that represents the evil and intrigue. Also, as the main setting, darkness shrouds the drama all the time, gloomy and horrifying atmosphere haunting.

Castle as a fundamental feature of the Gothic fiction is considered as a cradle of terrorist incident. Macbeth’s Castle is an essential place that witnesses how Macbeth descends into the depth of evil. Macbeth’s Castle appears for the first time when Lady Macbeth reads a letter about the Witches’ prophecy from Macbeth and immediately she decides to achieve fulfillment of the prophecy and prepares her mind to the murder of Duncan. Here the castle is a locale to ferment a profound conspiracy. When Duncan and his attendant lords arrived at Macbeth’s Castle, he said that “this castle hath a pleasant seat; the air nimbly and sweetly recommends itself unto our gentle senses” (1.6.1-3). They admired such a peaceful location without recognizing it is to usher a great bloodshed. The latter scene follows the former one in quick succession, shaping a sharp contrast of the imagery of Macbeth’s Castle, strengthening the unexpected terror of what might happen.

Accompanied with the above, the desert heath in which the trio of Witches are gathered also underlays the horrible atmosphere. The setting of the very beginning of the drama is the desert heath with thunder and lightning where the Witches assemble to meet Macbeth. It is a representative Gothic setting removed from ordinary people and normal social rules, hollow and horrible. The weather on the heath is hostile to human, “fog and filthy air” (1.1.13), implying excessive darkness and foregrounding the terrible incidents that would happen later. The weather can be easily changed from “fair” to “foul” by the Witches on the heath, which again proves that the desert heath is a world separated from the world of human.

Gothic Characters in *Macbeth*

Macbeth—A Ruthless Ruler

Macbeth, as the hero of this play, is necessary to explore his legendary process of rise and fall. His obedience of the Witches’ prophecy, his murder of King Duncan, his tyranny and his final tragic end, what happens in his every stage of life all possess Gothic elements. Macbeth is given to be full of ambition, which can be found in the report of his courage in battle “for brave Macbeth, well he deserves that name...like valour’s minion carved out his passage” (1.2.18-21). In addition, Macbeth’s murder of King Duncan and being crowned of King primarily

result from his improper careerism. His unconcealable careerism can be detected at the comparison of his and Banquo's treatment to the Witches' prophecy.

Macbeth and Banquo are surprised at the prophecy initially but afterwards they hold different attitudes to it. Banquo does not believe it at all and he believes that if they "speak about such thing" (1.3.85), they must "have eaten on the insane root that takes the reason prisoner" (1.3.86); also, even after Macbeth's being the Thane of Cawdor, Banquo still deems that "oftentimes, to win us to our harm, the instruments of darkness tell us truths" (1.3.132-133). However, Macbeth changes his inceptive suspicion into a glimmer of hope that the prophecy would come true as it is going. At their first meeting with the trio of Witches, his reaction is "would they had stayed" (1.3.84), which means that he is eager to obtain more information from the Witches and to some extent he is willing to believe their words, gradually that kind of improper careerism begins to emerge. While, on his way to the crown, the Prince of Cumberland is a stumbling block for Macbeth, "let not light see my black and deep desires" (1.4.58) directly speaks out his evil desire hidden for so long time. All the above are a couple of indirect evidences that prove Macbeth to be a careerist and the most obvious and immediate one is revealed in the letter from Macbeth to Lady Macbeth, which here is his first time using his own voice to speak desire out: "I burned in desire to question them further" (1.5.3-4); also, his wife Lady Macbeth considers him as a man with ambition but in lack of "illness" (1.5.20).

Although Macbeth's careerism is not what enables readers to immediately experience the Gothic horror, it is in fact the primary cause of subsequent bloody incidents. It cannot provide readers with direct horrible shock but foreshadows a sort of mental terror anticipation that is stronger to raise the emotional effect. To achieve his careerism of being a king, the murder of King Duncan is what he must do; however, he is thought to be in lack of courage to support his ambition. Finally he makes up his mind to carry out the murder with the incitement of Lady Macbeth. Macbeth is a timid murderer but he forces himself to challenge his timidity and finally he can only be led out by Lady Macbeth to wash off blood on his hands.

In Gothic fictions, tyrannical rulers are regulars, they are ruthless and brutal and their hands are stained with blood. Without exception, so does Macbeth. When Macbeth has just been crowned as King, his priority is to kill Banquo whose descendant is said to be the King according to the Witches' prophecy, indicating that Macbeth has already totally believed their words and his tyranny makes the first move. Macbeth hanging over the instruction of the murder of Banquo to the murderers creates a terrifying and haunting atmosphere and enables readers to be completely obsessed with fear. When Lady Macbeth asked about what happened to Banquo and his son, Macbeth answered:

Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day;
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
While night's black agents to their preys do rouse.
Thou marvell'st at my words: but hold thee still;
Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill. (3.2.50-56)

There are several basic Gothic elements used here. "night", "bloody and invisible hand", and "night's black agent" are employed to describe Macbeth's plan of murder and naturally strengthen the nervousness. Most obviously, Macbeth's darkness and viciousness is clearly shown in the last sentence, consolidating the crown by

Banquo's murder. It is a generalization of Macbeth's bad traits till now and a hint of horror is faintly conveyed, intensifying the Gothic sense to this character.

The Trio of Witches—The Instruments of Darkness

Witches originally function as a medium between human beings and God whose duty is to ease the God's anger, by applying the magic power, that is deemed to generate illness, death, misfortune, and other crazy phenomena in the old age; they are unbelievably related to devils and must strictly follow their orders. "There is the appearance of the Witches themselves, traditionally ugly, barely human, often taking the shape of animals like cats and toads" (Macrae, 2001, p. 9). As a result, they are usually regarded as the incarnation of evil and relatively they are the synonym of ugliness, cruelty, and mercilessness.

The first presence of the Witches happens in thunder and wild heath, discussing about the time and location to meet with Macbeth, with devilish look and murmuring gloomy and incredible words, "fair is foul and foul is fair" (1.1.12). Each of them has a monster following, respectively Graymalkin, Paddock, and a kind of odd bird. They are addicted to blood and death; they haunt in the wild heath, along with thunder and storm, which is not only an external performance of Macbeth's internal evil but also an epitome of chaotic society. The second presence is set in the same locale; readers are threatened by their skinny body and weird clothing. Besides, the Witches hail Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor and future King but quickly disappear. The third presence ushers a "highlight" of extreme horror of the whole play with intolerable scene of singing the spells and boiling the venom.

Dialogue plays an essential role in shaping the image of the Witches. In three times of appearance, what they have done and are going to do is all shown in their dialogue. The conversation of the Witches removes from the communication of ordinary men. The use of rhyme is a feature of the Witch's speech and throughout the play it reinforces a sense of incantation of magical charms. The content of the dialogue is full of supernatural elements, strengthening the horrible atmosphere.

What they say implies who they are—the dark power of reversing right and wrong and making chaos. Moreover, their dialogue proceeds in a way of asking questions, which renders readers to wonder what is going to happen, resulting in perplexed mystery and ominous atmosphere. Reading through this part, readers would be shocked as the way they speak out these awful things is like telling stories and a vivid picture of sufferings of these men rises at the same time. The Witches' spell is comprised of various kinds of frightful animals that are used to produce boiling venom and is sung out in a raspy voice. The spell portraying a variety of disgusting images arouses readers' emotion of horror.

All the images above again state that the Witches are dark power in the world of devil in concert with Macbeth's careerism and desire and add more darkness to the play. The exquisiteness of imagery in the description of the Witches has reached perfection under Shakespeare's hand and it occupies a significant portion of the Gothic features in the play.

Lady Macbeth—A Serpent Under Flower

In Shakespeare's times, all the actions of Lady Macbeth could be equal to a witch's and a word said by herself can be a best condensation of her, "Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under't" (1.5.76-77).

When she read the prophecy in Macbeth's letter, there was no doubt and hesitation in her reaction. Her only worry was Macbeth being "full of the milk of human kindness" (1.5.17) and his lack of "illness" (1.5.20) to support his ambition. She was confident that "the valour of my tongue" (1.5.29) can persuade him. More surprisingly, she decided to give up her femininity and humanity to "give solely sovereign sway and masterdom" (1.5.81). By the time Macbeth arrived, she found he could not make up his mind to have Duncan murdered, she said "thy letters have transported me beyond this ignorant present, and I fell now the future in the instant" (1.5.64-66), which fully illustrates Lady Macbeth's malevolence and "artful" incitement. When Macbeth still hesitated if they would proceed in the murder, she called him "a coward like the poor cat in the adage" (1.6.46-48) and irritated him with her decisiveness and being heartless.

When Macbeth is still trapped in the scare after the murder, the readers would be amazed at the unusual calmness of Lady Macbeth. She sneered at the timidity of his husband and said that "had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done't" (2.2.16-17). Although she does not put the murder into effect directly, as a participant, she is merciless enough. She comforted Macbeth for his feeling guilty that "these deeds must not be thought after these ways; so, it will make us mad" (2.2.44-45). As she found the daggers were still in Macbeth's hands, she urged him to put them back but he was afraid to return and on the contrary Lady Macbeth did it.

Amazingly, she does not show a hint of fear towards the dead body and blood and her calmness enables readers to suspect whether she is a woman or not. After the return of the daggers, her hands were also stained with blood and she again ridiculed Macbeth that "my hands are of your colour; but I shame to wear a heart so white" (2.2.79-80). Lady Macbeth is such a tough role in the drama and the murder of King Duncan becomes a heartquake for her involvement, adding much more Gothic terror to the drama.

Gothic Plots in *Macbeth*

Macbeth's ambition to get the crown is fired because of the Witches' prophecy and he murdered the King Duncan; he killed Banquo for fear that the Banquo's descendants one day would deprive him of the crown. When Macduff escaped to England, his wife and son, even the servants were killed by Macbeth. Among the above the murder of King Duncan is the most breathtaking scene which is ornamented by decisive murder action, Macbeth's timidity, and Lady Macbeth's ruthlessness. There are detailed descriptions about every murder scene, from the previous preparation of murder to practical process of murder, displaying dynamic pictures with thrill and panic and transmitting a sense of terror. HE Xiang-lin (1999) reviews that Macbeth cannot stop at the murder of King but degenerates into a feudal tyranny (p. 55), proving that the plots of murder enrich the image of Macbeth, reinforce the theme of the play, and strengthen the effect of Gothic features.

At the start of the play, the first character appearing is a bleeding Sergeant and his report is about an internecine scene, which foreshadows that bloodshed will run through the play. The amount of blood is exaggerated, emphasizing Macbeth's panic and deepening the horrible atmosphere. Murder and bloodshed are "twins" and they are the most basic Gothic features, also the most common, to construct Gothic ambience.

After the murder, there was a voice resounding "sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep" (2.2.46-47), resulting in a kind of auditory horror. At that time, Macbeth's state of mind verges on the hysteria and the extreme tension and the illusion of voice is what he has thought in his mind. Vivid descriptions of imagination and mysterious illusion are communicated to readers so that they are forced to participate in the scene, letting readers

get trapped in Macbeth's anguish and appear to be a stimulus to drag readers back to the play, increasing the fear of unknown.

Just after the murder of Duncan, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth were still immersed in fear and worry, with a knocking within, appalling them. It precisely happening at this point frightens readers for it is unknown—who or what is approaching. H. P. Lovecraft (1993) states in his *Supernatural Horror in Literature* that “the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is the fear of the unknown” (p. 1). The knocks happen as soon as they become calm, resulting in another peal of nervousness. The knocks appear to be a warning to them that their merciless deeds would be uncovered if not escaping immediately.

Through analysis, it could be found that these strange knocks and abnormal sounds are implications of Duncan's death and a reverse of order, which could bring about mental terror.

Conclusion

Through the research, it is of great benefit to comprehensively understand the drama's theme and make reinterpretation of the drama from a new perspective. The paper enlarges the scale of research concerning Gothic features in *Macbeth* that provides useful views for the further researches in this field. In regard to the discussion of supernatural horror in the drama, the paper offers a new access to explore the connotation of this drama, bearing certain referential significance for literature. As to the exploration of the work itself, through the analysis it could be found that *Macbeth* is more than a world-famous drama but a classic Gothic fiction which plays an essential role in the research of Gothic literature and more importantly can be a perfect reference for the future development of Gothicism.

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