

In the following critical essay, one aspect of William Shakespeare's Macbeth will be explored and be explained. This aspect is that of the three Weird Sisters. These three "secret, black, and midnight hags" (Mac. IV.i 47), hardly distinguishable as humans, serve a huge dramatic function in the play. Closely looking at Macbeth, one can distinguish the many functions that they serve in the play. The role of the three Weird Sisters in the play Macbeth is to generate imagery, mood, and atmosphere and to serve as the equivocation that will bring Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, to his downfall.

#### The History of Macbeth

During the reign of James I of England in the 17th century, William Shakespeare wrote Macbeth. This history - tragedy was about the Scottish Thane Macbeth who had murdered his cousin King Duncan I to possess the title of king of Scotland. In Macbeth, Shakespeare exposes the internal forces of the human mind that eventually brings the ambitious Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to their downfall. James I was pleased with this masterpiece because it included Banquo, Macbeth's companion. In the beginning of the play, Macbeth and Banquo are greeted by three witches, which proclaim Macbeth as king and Banquo as "thou shalt get kings, though thou be none." (Mac. I.iii 67) This is significant through the fact that James was a direct descendant of Banquo.

One might ask why Shakespeare included witches in Macbeth in the first place, not fearing the criticism and the hatred of witchcraft in Europe. An interesting fact of 17th century England that Shakespeare was living in was the overwhelming fascination of the supernatural. Elizabethans of all classes had believed in the power of supernatural agencies. The most sensational aspect of this Elizabethan superstition was the belief in witchcraft, with James I as one of the advocates. (Campbell and Quinn 833) Shakespeare saw this break in traditional values to use the supernatural to create immense dramatic effects. The use of these supernatural agencies can be seen in half of Shakespeare's works, being most significant in Macbeth.

#### Role 1: The Witches and their Effect in Generating Mood and Imagery

Macbeth is a true masterpiece in itself. However, the one great element that makes it so is the imagery. As in any other piece, imagery is what sets the whole mood and perception of the story being told. In Macbeth, the elements of gloom, foreboding, and darkness that reoccurs throughout the play is generated by the supernatural. It is the Three Witches and their actions that render this horrific atmosphere.

In the beginning of the play, an atmosphere of darkness is already established with the mere presence of the Three Witches. The human state has already associated the presence of witches to evil and darkness so often, that the mind subconsciously perceives the evil and dark atmosphere that is intended. As Elizabeth Montagu responds to this fascinating effect of supernatural imagery: "The agency of witches and spirits excites a species of terror, that cannot be affected by the operation of human agency, or by any form or disposition of human things." (Montagu 174) Why then does the human mind respond with this horror? Montagu further explains, "For the known limits of their powers and capacities set certain bounds to our apprehensions, mysterious horrors, undefined terrors, and raised by the intervention of beings whose nature we do not understand, whose actions we cannot control, and whose influence we know not how to escape." (Montagu 174) Then it is the human mind's ignorance and awe of supernatural "agents" that set the bounds for our apprehensions. It is the fact that the witches are supernatural and beyond the limit of our comprehensions that make them so discreet, creating a atmosphere of mystery and the darkness and evil that characterize that mystery. When the "interposition of such agents" takes place, "the most salutary of all fears" instills the human mind. (Montagu 173) This explains the remarkable dramatic effect that the few lines of Act 1 Scene 1 and the

Witches have in setting a base for the horror and forebodingness that lurks throughout the play and in the audience's mind.

At the very beginning, the atmosphere that has been extensively discussed is contributed to the effect of the witches' presence. However, the setting for the scenes that are already given help considerably to render the darkness and gloom. In fact, it is sometimes the stage direction that leads to the conclusion of the environment, which is further emphasized with supernatural imagery. In the following stage direction, it is in fact the given descriptions of the environment that create the first perception of evil:

[A desert place. Thunder and Lightning. Enter Three Witches]  
(Mac. I.i 0)

Throughout the entirety of the play, the atmosphere is dark and evil, from the presence of the witches until the defeat of Macbeth and the proclamation of Malcolm to his soldiers. All this imagery was foreshadowed by the witches in the very first lines of the play. Because the witches show up at seemingly correct intervals in accordance with the major events, these two lines confirm the setting and mood which characterizes Macbeth. The following lines are spoken by the First Witch:

"When shall we three meet again  
In thunder, lightning, or in rain."  
(Mac. I.i 1-2)

The atmosphere is further expressed with the ending lines of the scene, with references to Paddock, a toad which they worship, and the murky environment. These grotesque images further make the atmosphere more detestable. :

"Paddock calls. - Anon!  
Fair is foul, and foul is fair.  
Hover through the fog and filthy air."  
(Mac. I.i 9-11)

Macbeth's strongest imagery that is generated by the Weird Sisters can be seen in Scene 1 of Act 4. Once again the stage direction is used to its fullest capacity: [A cavern. In the middle, a boiling cauldron. Thunder. Enter Three Witches.] The reoccurring theme of thunder is once again used to create an atmosphere of tense, irrational fear that humans connect with "nightmare". (Spurgeon 1935) The cauldron and the contents that are being emptied into it by the "beldams" displays an apprehension of horrid smells and weird mists, which further emphasize the nature of the play. The contents unearthly and malicious nature creates an effect that cannot be rendered by human agencies. Take for example the lines of the third witch as "she" is delighting in the contents:

"Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf,  
Witches' mummy, maw and gulf  
Of the ravined salt- sea shark,  
. . . Gall of goat and slips of yew  
. . . Finger of birth strangled babe  
Ditch-delivered by a drab  
Make the gruel thick and slab  
And thereto a tiger's chaudron  
For the ingredients of our cauldron."  
[Mac. IV.i 22-36]

The final appearance of the witches in Macbeth is in Act 4 Scene 1. Here, the desperate Macbeth seeks an answer from the witches to his problems. Instead, they present to Macbeth a series of four apparitions: an armed Head, a bloody Child, a Child crowned, and a show of eight kings. Here the atmosphere is presumably better, with the show of eight kings perceived to be in an aura of light. However, the reoccurring theme of thunder that Shakespeare places in the stage direction proves this to be false. With the exception of the thunder, the

atmosphere portrayed in this scene does not appear to be as horrific as before. However, the fact that these still are supernatural agents and that they are generated by the evil powers of the Three Witches still presents to the audience an atmosphere of darkness and evil.

It is now apparent that the effect of generating imagery is extremely important in the establishment of the mood and perception of an audience. These are the elements that are crucial in the interpretation and understanding of a literary work. Shakespeare's Macbeth is a story of the evil deeds of an evil man. Therefore, an atmosphere of horror, darkness, and evil must be generated. As Caroline Spurgeon observes, "The most terrible part of Macbeth, 'Shakespeare's most profound and mature vision of Evil', is the stifling, baffling, murky atmosphere of fear in which everyone moves; the mystery, darkness all tending to produce the state of tense irrational fear that we connect with nightmare." (Spurgeon 155) In trying to achieve what has been observed by Spurgeon, Shakespeare has introduced the three witches, or the Three Weird Sisters as they are called. Their effect in rendering the dark, murky atmosphere is achieved in the highest degree. The fact that they are supernatural and their disgusting ideals ("Hover through the fog and filthy air") and actions ("fire burn and cauldron bubble!") have enveloped the play in a setting of darkness and ever-dominant evil. Therefore, the witches create a mood that makes Macbeth as evil as it is.

#### Role 2 : Equivocators in Disguise

In addition to generating the foreboding atmosphere within Macbeth, the witches also serve as equivocators to Macbeth, making truth seem like fiction and fiction seem like truth. The three witches in Macbeth exercise greater power over human destiny and fate than do preternatural beings in the play. (Campbell & Quinn 833) However, Campbell & Quinn explain that Shakespeare believed that the hero, in this case Macbeth, should always be responsible for his action or inaction. Therefore, Macbeth is portrayed to have retained his own free will, given that his actions are inspired by lady Macbeth.

If the evil that Macbeth is going to commit cannot be directly carried out by the witches' command over him, then how will he be compelled to murder Duncan and the many more that follow? Frank Kermode explains: "The Weird Sisters, knowing of his ambitions, could persuade Macbeth to evil, but they could not compel him to it; by an equivocal representation of the foreseen future they could tempt him to choose an apparent before a real good." It is then explained that Macbeth is not forced by higher beings to do evil, but by an equivocal representation of his ambitions, along with his ignorance of the truth and desire to realize his desire, he is compelled to choose the apparent choice than the good choice. Thus they subjected him to the temptation he was least able to withstand. (Kermode 1309) This equivocal representation of the foreseen future is shown to Macbeth in Act 1 Scene 3, when he is first confronted by the witches:

Second Witch. "All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!"

Third Witch. "All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!"

[Mac. I.iii 49-50]

When the persecution of the Thane of Cawdor takes place, and the title is given to Macbeth, then the first part of the witches' proph

