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## Nature's Fury and Human Frailty: Ecological Perspectives in *Macbeth*

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### Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the ecological elements of William Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth* through the lens of eco-criticism. This paper aims to identify the deeper ecological themes, symbolism, and warnings that the play communicates by examining the relationship between literature and the natural world. The disruption of the natural order, the use of nature as a moral standard, the impact of human behaviour on the environment, the meaning of deforestation, and the viability of restoration are all examined. Through this research, the study highlights the link between human behaviour and the play's portrayal of the natural environment. The paper examines the relevance of *Macbeth's* ecological elements in the modern day by establishing connections to current environmental issues. It exposes their ongoing significance by looking at how the play addresses topics like resource exploitation, climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental justice. The psychological states of the protagonists are also taken into account concerning the ecological aspects of the story, emphasizing the link between their internal turmoil and the ecological imbalance caused by their actions.

*Keywords:* Nature, Ecology, Macbeth, Environment, Deforestation

"What brings me to *Macbeth*, then, is the role in the play of what used to be called Shakespeare's Natural History: the references to weather, birds, animals, flowers and trees, so constant throughout the play as to constitute the continuous presence of an ecosystem in which the human characters and their desires and actions are embedded. I am coming to this as an ecocritic now, but it was always an integral part of what excited me in this and other plays."

Richard Kerridge, "An Ecocritic's *Macbeth*"

The primary goal of eco-criticism as a literary theory is to examine how literature and the environment interact. The interdependence of people, the natural world, and the larger ecosystem is emphasized in

eco-criticism as it examines how literary works portray and engage with ecological challenges. Eco-critics use an ecological perspective to analyze literature, looking at how writings affect how we perceive the natural world and the problems that the environment presents. Examining how literature contributes to, critiques, or reflects our interaction with the natural world is the main goal of eco-criticism. It views literature as a means of conveying our relationship with nature and the effects of human activity on the ecosystem. Eco-critics attempt to understand the complex interactions between people and their natural surroundings by examining how nature, landscapes, animals, and environmental issues are depicted in literary works.

Eco-criticism was pioneered by Lawrence Buell's book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* in 1996. Buell provides a framework for understanding how *Macbeth* might be examined via an eco-critical lens by examining how literature affects how we perceive nature and the environment. Although in a different vein, Rachel Carson's book on Environmental Science *Silent Spring* (1962) brings the direct effect of pesticides upon nature. Ecocriticism takes an interdisciplinary approach that believes literature is intricately entwined with social, historical, and ecological settings rather than existing in a vacuum. Eco-critics examine how literature tackles ecological problems engages with environmental topics and reflects societal values, attitudes, and ideas about nature. Literature's ability to raise environmental awareness, cultivate a feeling of ecological responsibility, and promote sustainable behaviours is also acknowledged by ecocriticism. Readers' relationships with the natural world are intended to be reconsidered by eco-critics by exposing the cultural, psychological, and imaginative components of environmental challenges through literary analysis.

William Shakespeare's one of the most well-known tragedies, *Macbeth*, provides a rich backdrop for analysis when viewed through an eco-critical lens. The play, which was written in 1605, tackles the negative effects of unrestrained ambition and power-seeking while also delving into the nuanced interactions between people, the natural world, and the natural order. The first step in introducing *Macbeth* as a literary work for eco-critical analysis is to acknowledge the play's ecological dimensions and look at how Shakespeare

interacts with environmental topics. *Macbeth* considers the fundamental ecological consequences of human behaviour and its effect on the natural world through dramatic imagery, symbolism, and the description of human deeds.

The destruction of the natural order and its effects on the environment is a major theme in *Macbeth*. Elizabeth Gruber, however, in her book *Renaissance Ecopolitics from Shakespeare to Bacon: Rethinking Cosmopolis*, studies the drama as “the entwining of ecological and epistemological concerns” (109). Thunder and lightning signal a disruption in nature and provide an ominous tone for the play’s opening scenes. The disturbance grows as Macbeth’s desire drives him to murder the king and take the throne, and is represented by several weird happenings, such as the darkness during the day and the tales of strange and abnormal behaviour in animals. These disruptions show how human behaviour and the environment are intertwined, meaning that Macbeth’s thirst for power is what disrupts the natural order. In addition, the play makes extensive use of nature and environmental symbolism and imagery. Blood is a repeating motif that is used to symbolize remorse as well as the deterioration and pollution of the natural environment. The blood on Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s hands symbolizes how the moral and natural worlds have been tainted by their acts. The disruption of the natural hierarchy is symbolized by the images of birds like the owl and the falcon, which also foreshadows the chaos and loss of equilibrium brought on by human ambition. Gabriel Egan in his book *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* comments:

The play’s ubiquitous analogies from nature become its dominant tone once the central couple are together and Lady Macbeth counsels her husband to ‘look like the innocent flower, | But be the serpent under ‘t’ (1.5.64–5). Nature’s threat to humankind is to be emulated, but often the direction of agency is unclear: are the evil things of the Earth sympathetic to the Macbeths’ evil, or vice versa? Lady Macbeth’s ‘The raven himself is hoarse | That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan | Under my battlements’ (1.5.37–9) is supremely ambiguous in that regard, but seems to imply that evil nature corresponds with her evil thoughts.... (86)

William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* thus explores the ecological dimensions of human-nature relationships by depicting the disruption of the natural order, the symbolism of nature, and the

effects of human behaviour. It does this by highlighting the connections between human ambition, environmental degradation, and the requirement for ecological balance.

## II

The play *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare has as its main theme the violation of the natural order. Shakespeare emphasizes the effects of this disruption and its repercussions for both the human characters and the natural environment using a variety of dramatic devices. Under King Duncan's dominion, Scotland is portrayed in the play's opening scene as a peaceful and well-run kingdom. The existing order is disrupted when Macbeth commits regicide due to his ambition and thirst for power. The play is affected by this act of regicide, which upsets the natural order and brings forth chaos and anarchy. The disruption of the natural world is one of this disruption's most obvious effects. Shakespeare conveys this disruption through vivid imagery and paranormal components. Storms, darkness during the day, and animal screams are examples of unnatural events that symbolize the unrest brought on by Macbeth's acts. For instance, Ross notes that when Macbeth kills King Duncan, "By the clock, 'tis day,/ And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp" (2.4). These disruptions represent the ethical and ecological imbalance brought on by Macbeth's sins in addition to acting as dramatic techniques.

The natural order is being disturbed on a human scale as well. In addition to contributing to Macbeth's demise, his actions have an impact on those around him. His ambition sets off a chain of events that results in agony, bloodshed, and a loss of morality. Even the characters themselves are aware of how strange their actions are. As an effective metaphor for the irreversible harm brought about by their disruption of the natural order, Lady Macbeth, for example, has guilt paralysis and sleepwalks while trying to wash fictitious bloodstains off her hands.

The disruption of the natural order also represents a bigger issue with how people interact with the environment. The disdain for the delicate balance of the natural world is mirrored in Macbeth's thirst for power and his willingness to break moral and natural norms. Macbeth represents the destructive powers that take advantage of

and manipulate the environment for one's gain by usurping the throne and pursuing his goals. The prediction that Macbeth won't be vanquished until Birnam Wood moves perfectly captures this notion. Although it is difficult for the forest to move literally, as the performance goes on, the destruction and exploitation of nature as a metaphor become more apparent. As a result of human desire, the destruction of the natural order in *Macbeth* serves as a potent image. Shakespeare emphasizes the ecosystem's fragility and how interrelated humans and the natural world are using dramatic devices and images. The play serves as a warning against upsetting and exploiting the natural order and emphasizes the necessity of maintaining a balance between human behaviour and the environment.

Nature acts as a potent moral barometer in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, reflecting the characters' interior emotions and moral quandaries. Shakespeare makes a connection between the natural world and the moral decisions made by the characters, emphasizing the effects of their deeds on both their conscience and the larger environment. Shakespeare does this through the use of vivid imagery and symbolism. Nature serves as a mirror for the characters' internal feelings and moral dilemmas throughout the play. For instance, after killing King Duncan, Macbeth feels terrible guilt and regret. The speaker states in his soliloquy that "Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse/The curtain'd sleep" (2.1). Nature is portrayed as being dead and perverted in this scene, reflecting Macbeth's troubled conscience. The chaos and gloom in the natural world are a reflection of the chaos and gloom in his psyche. Similar to Lady Macbeth, who tries to wash away the imagined bloodstains from her hands while sleepwalking, Lady Macbeth exhibits guilt. The figurative link between the protagonists' moral culpability and the tarnished environment emphasizes the consequences of their deeds are unavoidable.

Additionally, nature is frequently linked to innocence, purity, and harmony in *Macbeth*, emphasizing the characters' departure from moral excellence. For instance, the play's opening language describes nature as "fair," "gentle," and "blessed," which reflects the kingdom's original balance and order. This concord is disturbed, though, when Macbeth and Lady Macbeth plot and carry out their

crimes. Blood, gloom, and bad weather are all symbols of the depravity and degradation of both the human world and the natural world. The clash between the destabilized natural order and the protagonists' moral failings highlights the significant consequence of their deeds on the environment. In addition, the play implies that human morality and the state of the natural world are mutually correlated. In addition to upsetting the natural order, Macbeth's activities lead to ecological imbalances. The symbolism of damaged crops and arid landscapes represents how the environment has been tainted by human activity. The witches in Act 4, Scene 1 create visions of the future, one of which is a "show of eight/Kings, and Banquo last with a glass in his hand," signifying Banquo's offspring who will succeed in the kingdom. This vision suggests that the return to moral and political stability is closely related to the return to ecological equilibrium.

In *Macbeth*, nature not only reflects the moral standing of the characters but also acts as a moral example and cautionary tale. The play's natural setting serves as a moral compass, delivering messages and highlighting the effects of the characters' deeds. Nature's reaction to characters' immoral actions is one way it serves as a moral barometer. For instance, the night is full of frightening noises and disruptions in the natural world after Macbeth kills King Duncan. The earth trembles as the owl, a bird typically linked with death and gloom, screeches. These commotions stand in for the natural world's disgust and turmoil in response to Macbeth's immoral deed. Similar to this, the natural world displays signs of disarray and turmoil in response to Macbeth's order to kill Banquo and his son Fleance. The use of natural occurrences to represent moral transgression highlights the connection between human behaviour and its effects on the environment.

Additionally, the inclusion of paranormal components, such as the witches and their prophecies, emphasizes the link between nature and morality even more. With their ability to predict the future, witches appear to derive their power from nature. Their emergence during the stormy weather on the lonely heath raises the possibility that the evil forces at play in the play are connected to the natural calamities. The protagonists are advised to think about the moral ramifications of their decisions by the predictions they get, which,

despite being frequently ambiguous, function as warnings and guides. Rebecca Laroche and Jennifer Munroe, however, make an ecofeminist reading of the witches' role in the play:

An ecofeminist reading of the play thus compels us to reorient ourselves to the weird sisters, to the other-than-human, which brings us to a vision of the world that is about multiplicity, possibility, one that embraces wonder and the not-yet-known. Repeating their famous incantation ('double, double, toil and trouble'), the witches use nonhuman ingredients in such a way that evokes women's domestic medicine and cookery. (101)

In *Macbeth*, the characters' deeds upset the harmony of the natural world, which is shown as being harmonious, balanced, and righteous. For instance, when thinking of killing King Duncan, Macbeth says, "Stars, hide your fires,/ Let not light see my black and deep desires" (1.4), recognizing the intrinsic wrongness of his plans. The morally ambiguous nature of Macbeth's deeds is highlighted by the contrast between his dark aspirations and the purity and radiance of the stars. In the play, nature is also frequently linked to goodness and morality. Malcolm is referred to as having a "good and virtuous nature" (4.3), emphasizing the relationship between moral character and the natural world. Malcolm is the legitimate heir to the kingdom. This relationship suggests that moral integrity and keeping harmony with nature are strongly related and that moral degradation results from upsetting the natural order.

Again, In Act 1, Scene 4 of the play, when Macbeth and Banquo victoriously return from the battle and meet King Duncan, their conversation with Duncan reflects a prelapsarian stage of the perfect symbiosis of the human and natural world. Banquo's reply to Duncan in Act 1, Scene 4: "There if I grow/The harvest is your own." (1.4.27–33) is an example of 'horticultural imagery' in *Macbeth* (Egan 84). Regarding this imagery, Randall Martin in the book *Shakespeare and Ecology* comments: "Presenting himself (Duncan) as the nation's good farmer, he vows to restore Scotland's productive fertility by 'planting' Macbeth to 'make [him] full of growing' (1.4.29–30" (102).

The theme of deforestation in *Macbeth* serves as a potent condemnation of human greed and ambition by metaphorically representing the merciless exploitation of natural resources. Shakespeare emphasizes the detrimental effects of using the

environment to one's advantage through vivid imagery and metaphorical connotations. The theme of deforestation is frequently employed in the play to highlight the rapaciousness of Macbeth's goals. The witches summon apparitions in Act 4, Scene 1, to give Macbeth a prophecy. According to one of the predictions, "Macbeth shall never be vanquished until/Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill/Shall come against him." Since woods cannot move, this prophecy seems implausible. But as the play progresses, the audience sees Malcolm's English army sneak up on Dunsinane Hill while concealing themselves with branches from Birnam Wood. The literal shifting of the forest is a metaphor for how Macbeth's deeds have harmed and exploited nature. In the Foreword to Lynne Bruckner and Dan Brayton's edited book *Ecocritical Shakespeare*, Greg Garrard mentioned that:

Harrison's reading of history is, like Heidegger's, *epochal*, and *Macbeth* is positioned at the terminus of an era in which the forest functions as a refuge for justice in the face of civic barbarism: "As the city becomes sinister, forests become innocent, pastoral, diversionary, *comic*."1 The violation of natural law by Macbeth and his wife – themselves its victims, afflicted as they are by sterility – is avenged, appropriately enough, when Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane, and "We see the law of the *land* in a strangely literalistic guise."2 For Harrison, the Christian promise of redemption blunts the force of ancient tragic conflicts, and so, despite the bloodshed, *Macbeth* concludes comically. The forest shadows civilization – or in Macbeth's case, besieges him – as the proof of its corruption, and so its victory is paradoxically the reassertion of law. (Garrard xvii)

A potent metaphor for the careless pursuit of power and contempt for the environment is the motif of deforestation. Macbeth's callous exploitation of the land's resources, which is similar to how deforestation depletes forests for personal benefit, is caused by his ambition. The destructive powers that alter and exploit the environment without taking into account the long-term effects are symbolized by Macbeth's deeds. The theme of deforestation also represents the upheaval of the natural order and the imbalance it brings about. By disrupting the ecosystem with tree removal and forest devastation, soil erosion, biodiversity loss, and unfavourable climate effects result. Similar to how Macbeth's ambition for power upsets nature's order, it leads to chaos, violence, and the



disintegration of society's moral foundation. The motif of deforestation emphasizes the connection between moral standards decay and environmental damage.

### III

Shakespeare examines the prospect of restoration in *Macbeth* and emphasizes the link between the reestablishment of law and order and the re-establishment of ecological balance. The play makes the connection between the restoration of moral principles and the healing of the natural environment through a variety of motifs, images, and symbolic representations. The idea of heavenly or cosmic justice plays a significant role in *Macbeth's* restoration. The drama presents a society in which moral failings are not tolerated. The natural order is upset by Macbeth's takeover of the throne and the accompanying acts of tyranny and bloodshed, which result in a moral and political upheaval. The play, however, makes the case that there is a force at work to bring things back to balance. Despite being cryptic, the witches' prophecies ultimately come true and aid in the restoration of moral and political order. The fall of Macbeth and the ascent of Malcolm, the legitimate heir, denote the restoration of justice and legitimate power. This restoration affects the natural environment in addition to being a political action.

Additionally, the play's theme of the therapeutic properties of water represents the potential for recovery. Water is frequently linked to purification and cleaning. Characters like Lady Macbeth are driven to water as a means of atoning for their transgressions because they are overwhelmed by remorse and moral decay. The yearning for atonement and the restoration of moral integrity is shown in this symbolic action. The repeating image of water is a metaphor for the purification and healing of the human spirit, which can bring harmony and balance back to the natural world. The idea of restoration in *Macbeth* implies that the moral and political order must be restored before the natural world may be healed. Shakespeare communicates the idea that the health of the human realm and the natural environment are intertwined by weaving these subjects together. When one is disturbed, the other is likely to follow, and when one is repaired, the other may follow.

In conclusion, it can be said that *Macbeth* explores the upheaval of the natural order, the effects of human behaviour on the environment, and the potential for restoration in both the moral and natural spheres. Shakespeare emphasizes the connection between people and nature via the examination of these subjects, stressing the significant influence of human behaviour on the environment. The play urges viewers to consider their duties as stewards of the natural environment and the necessity for sustainable practices to preserve the ecosystem's delicate balance as it serves as a cautionary tale. We can better comprehend the ecological aspects of the play *Macbeth* and its broader implications for how we interact with the environment by looking at it through an eco-critical lens. Gabriel Egan, however, in his Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare book *Shakespeare and Ecocritical Theory* makes a critical estimation of the ecocritical reading of this text by saying that "Georgia Brown's essay naming *Othello* and *Macbeth* is in truth simply about monstrosity and its role in our conceptions of what is normal and natural, and it has little connection with ecocriticism" (27).

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