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Shakespeare: Then and Now

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**Notes to Accompany the Macbeth Seminar**

Topic: Sight, Light, Darkness, and Blindness. Much of Macbeth takes place in the dark, and both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth seem to believe that the dark can hide their crimes, perhaps even from themselves. How is light and darkness used in Macbeth as an image and as a symbol?

**Claim 1:** In Macbeth, light is used as a symbol of life. For example, Macbeth uses a candle’s light as a metaphor to Lady Macbeth’s life after her suicide:

“out, out brief candle”

(Macbeth 5, 5, 26)

**Claim 2:** In contrast to light, darkness is used as a symbol of death and evil. For example, Lady Macbeth summons the night to come in order to mask the despicable crime her and Macbeth are about to make:

… “Come, thick night,

And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,

That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,

(Macbeth 1, 5, 57-59).

Similarly, all of the murders happen during the night. Macbeth sends murderers after Banquo at night time:

**Claim 3:** In respect to the imagery of darkness, Shakespeare seems to see the world as having a lot more darkness than light. For example, after Macbeth murders Duncan, Ross tells the old man about darkness snuffing out all light.

Ross

By th' clock 'tis day,

And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp.

Is 't night's predominance or the day's shame

That darkness does the face of earth entomb

When living light should kiss it.

(Macbeth 5, 5, 27 – 31).

**Claim 4:** Darkness and evil is a deceitful force that not everyone can handle. For example, at first lady Macbeth craved the darkness in her unsex me speech:

Lady Macbeth

Come , you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,

And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full

Of direst cruelty.

(Macbeth 1, 5, 47-50)

However she latter refuses to be in darkness and requires light around her at all times:

Doctor

How came she by that light?

Gentlewoman

Why, it stood by her. She has light by

Her continually. ‘Tis her command.

(Macbeth 5, 1, 24-25)

**Claim 5:** In Macbeth, sight acts as a gateway to the person’s soul in which a traumatic scene can taint a person’s soul. For example, after MacDuff discovers the body of Duncan he tells Macbeth and Lennox:

“Approach the chamger and destroy your sight

With a new Gorgon. Do not bid me speak.

See and then speak yourselves.

(Macbeth 82-84).

**Claim 6:** Shakespeare portrays sight as something that cannot be trusted as it can be deceptive and distort reality. For example, Macbeth can see a dagger floating in front of him, he knows that it is an illusion, but he is not sure if his eyes are tricking him or showing him what he must do:

Macbeth

… Mine eyes are made the fools o’ th’ other senses

Or else woth all the rest.

(Macbeth 2, 1, 56-57)