

There's a Knocking at the Gate

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The theme of the poem is “Macbeth’s descent into evil and mental conflict”. This poem is written from Macbeth’s perspective some time after his death. Its tone is reflective and regretful, as if Macbeth wrote it during his time in Hell, illustrating how he journeyed there.

The title of the poem is a quote from William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, when Lady Macbeth relieves the moment when she and Macbeth kill Duncan, and they hear a knocking on the gate after the deed is done. The knocking represents Macbeth’s fate, ever present. Having the line repeat after each stanza provides a sense of urgency, but also serves as a constant reminder, following Macbeth and reminding him of the witches and the inescapable prophecies. It is the question of whether or not Macbeth’s actions and decisions are his own. This is also an allusion to Beethoven’s 5th Symphony, as it is believed that the main theme is supposed to represent fate knocking at the door.

The witches have a strong presence in the poem, as they are partly responsible for Macbeth’s metamorphosis into a greedy king. There is a line that says “Instruments of darkness paint the skies in blood”. The witches are referred to as instruments of darkness by Banquo when he says “The instruments of darkness tell us truths,/Win us with honest trifles, to betray’s/In deepest consequence.” He explains to Macbeth that the witches only serve the devil, and that listening to them and their prophecies will do him no good. In the poem, there is an allusion to the sirens of Greek mythology who would lure sailors with their sweet voices and then drown them. This refers to how the witches entice Macbeth with small pieces of his future. Knowing these prophecies sets Macbeth on a path that ends in his own demise.

As well, Macbeth has come to realise the impact that fate has had on his life. When in the poem Macbeth says “I can’t follow fate’s nimble sleight of hand”, he explains that he follows a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is said that fate works in mysterious ways because mortal men cannot understand fate, or how their futures will play out. This line is an example of personification, and compares fate to a magician, a master of illusion. As well, fate is referred to as an ancient tree in the poem. Macbeth says in the poem that when he touches “the ancient tree all the roots start to decay”. This refers to when Macbeth attempts to change his fate and kill Banquo so that his sons will not be king setting himself on a road of darkness. Fate is also referred to as a path, though Macbeth comments that is more like a maze, because he cannot see where he is going, and he doesn’t not know where his destination is.

Macbeth also comments on human nature. In the poem he refers to it as an “animal within all men” and also as a “sickening plague”. Throughout the poem, Macbeth illustrates his battle with the darkness. At the beginning, he hears whispers and he feels a darkness

within himself. He says that the “walking shadows beckon”, which refers to his Tomorrow, Tomorrow, and Tomorrow speech, when he refers to life as a walking shadow. With this line in the poem, he implies that his life has now been consumed by darkness, and he faces a constant temptation to let go of his morals and give into ambition. The line “the harsh spotlight melts the wax off from my wings” is a reference to the Greek story of Daedalus and Icarus. In the story, Daedalus has angered King Minos of Crete, and is locked in a tower with his son Icarus. To escape, Daedalus builds them both a set of wings made of wax and feathers. Though Icarus is warned not to fly too high, he envisions himself as a god, and wants to fly higher to be closer to the heavens. The sun melts the wax from his wings and he falls to his death into the sea. This is a Greek story about the dangers of ambition, and how greed ends in self-destruction. Much like Icarus, Macbeth is consumed by his own greed, wanting to climb higher on the social ladder, and Macbeth’s demise is his own fault. When Macbeth says “The wooden arcs set sail as the red seas start to flood” he is referring to the biblical story of Noah’s arc. Frustrated with the greed and sin of mankind, God decided to create a flood to cleanse the Earth. He told his plans to Noah in advance, as Noah was one of the few good men, and helped Noah build an arc so that he could survive the flood. After Macbeth kills Duncan, he says “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood/Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather/The multitudinous seas incarnadine,/Making the green one red”(2.2.54-60). He essentially says that there is so much blood on his hands that he will turn the beautiful green seas red. The line in the poem describes how the people with honour and morals will safely sail above Macbeth, while he drowns in his own guilt and sin. When God decided to cleanse the earth, he could only find one man worth preserving. Macbeth is also commenting, in a lamenting fashion, on how few men are able to resist temptation.

Macbeth also remarks on his own nature, and how he has changed in such a short span of time. “Yesterday I was a warrior, but today I am a king” refers to Macbeth’s honour as a warrior at the beginning of the play. Macbeth has a lot of prestige after his actions in battle and his loyalty towards the king clearly is shown when he fights against the traitors. Once Macbeth becomes king, he no longer has that honour, and he is not the same man that he was before. This line just emphasises how King Macbeth and the Macbeth who fought in battle are not the same, and Macbeth can’t be both at the same time. The line “I lie awake until the end of all my days” is about the guilt that Macbeth experiences after he kills Duncan, stating that he shall sleep no more, and that he has murdered sleep. Macbeth predicts that sleep will evade him because of the gravity of his actions, and even before killing Duncan, he knows he will regret it. After killing Duncan in his sleep, and upon seeing how it easy it was, Macbeth may be afraid of meeting the same end. If he tries to sleep, he will remember how he killed his king in his slumber. “Autumn leaves form from young buds of spring” is a reference to when Macbeth says “My way of life/Is fall’n into the sere, the yellow leaf” (5.3.24-25) and he continues on to list the things he should have in his old age, such as friendship and respect, but he finds himself with none of these. Though Macbeth has a crown on his head, he is not truly happy, and he feels like his life, which had so much potential when it started, has wasted away until he has nothing of value left. He says that “he bathes in gold” but Macbeth is no happier for it. “I fear the heavens high, the oceans deep, the forests grand” is a reference to how Macbeth lacks the strength to face immense forces greater than himself. The “heavens high” refers to how only good men make it to heaven,

and in killing Duncan, Macbeth has sacrificed his “eternal jewel”. The “oceans deep” refers to Neptune’s seas, which are now tainted with the blood from Macbeth’s hands. The “forests grand” refers to the prophecy about Birnam wood, when Macbeth was to be vanquished in Dunsinane Hill.

At the end of the poem, the structure changes completely. The “knocking at the gate” line is no longer repeated at the end of every stanza, and the pace becomes a lot quicker. This is a metaphor for how quickly Macbeth loses control, and how more and more people are dying just so that he can continue his reign as king, and hopefully pass the crown to his children. At the end, he remarks on how he was once a flower. His wife said that he “is too full o' th' milk of human kindness/To catch the nearest way” (1.5.4-5) and she tells him to “Look like th' innocent flower,/But be the serpent under 't”(1.5.56-58). Snakes are known for their cunning and sly nature, but Macbeth has proved to be the opposite. Instead of acting with a cool calculated nature, he has been striking with a panicked violence. The poem concludes saying that the knocking has stopped, signifying that Macbeth’s life has come to end, just as it was fated to.