

Animals, Omens, & Nature in *Macbeth*

Preston Coleman, Alec Wilson, and Caroline Digan



Snakes and Serpents

“We have scorch’d the snake, not kill’d it:
She’ll close and be herself, whist our poor malice
Remains in danger of her former tooth.” (III,ii, 1248-50)

“Your face, my Thane, is as a book where men
May read strange matters. To beguile the time,
Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under’t.” (I, v)

- Snakes often represent sneaky and untrustworthy behavior. In the first quote, Lady M is giving Macker the plan to kill Duncan. By telling him to “be the serpent,” she is referring to his need to be as quiet and stealthy as possible.
- Serpents, biblically, also represent the Devil as the snake in the Garden of Eden introduced chaos into the Christian world.

Birds (owls, ravens, etc)

“The raven himself is hoarse
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements.” (I, v)

“Hark! Peace!
It was the owl that shriek’d, the fatal bellman,
Which gives the stern’st good-night” (II, ii)

“Stones have been known to move and trees to speak;
Augurs and understood relations have
By magot pies and choughs and rooks brought forth
The secret’st man of blood.” (III, ii)

Shakespeare uses birds very cleverly in Macbeth. Most commonly, you’ll hear Macbeth or Lady M referencing owls, ravens, crows, etc. All of these birds are nocturnal birds who center around death.

For example, Lady M’s quote about the owl shrieking references the sound an owl makes when they kill. This also lines up with the plot of the play as Lady M hears this shriek as Macbeth kills Duncan.

Scorpions

“O, full of scorpions is my mind,
dear wife!” (III,ii,1277)

*In a more literal sense. Scorpions have the ability to be painful or venomous by touch. If MacB has “scorpions in his mind”, he could also be feeling feverish or a terrible headache with his guilt.

As an animal, Scorpions are a venomous creature that can cause pain or death to others creatures, including mammals such as ourselves. However, among the thousands of different species, only a couple dozen are lethal. Meaning, it is almost rare to find a lethal scorpion especially because they are even less common in medieval scotland.

[Source 1](#) [Source 2](#)

Scorpions are directly related to the astrology sign scorpio, which according to greek mythology is the cause of death to the greek god Orion. The idea of scorpions within Shakespeare may hold the same weight or power as the prioritized ideas of fate and the stars.

[Source 3](#)

Weather

“Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.”(II, i, 653)

“Though you untie the winds and let them fight
Against the churches; though the yesty waves...” (IV. I.
1677-1678).

Ideas of weather, relate to the ever changing Earth. Shakespeare calls to the fluctuation of weather and temperature using a way of pathetic fallacy, or bringing nature to life by comparing it to human qualities. He gives it power, while emphasizing ideals of uncertainty and instability.

[Source 1](#)

Here we have another example of Pathetic Fallacy as Shakespeare brings the nature of weather to life, give it power as a human could have. The image of the wind being tied up, then released and ready to fight parallels to that of a caged animal. Yesty, meaning a foaming breaking sea, also relates to the unrest or agitation, also implies that the wind will contribute to agitated waves for a complete powerful image of the weather.

[Source 2](#)

Dreams

“Now o’er the one half-world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain’d sleep.” (II, i, 656-658)

“But let the frame of things disjoint, let both the worlds suffer,
Ere we will eat our meals in fear and sleep
In the affliction of these terrible dreams
That shake us nightly” (III, ii, 1251 - 1254)

Dreams can be omens of the unconscious mind. Things that are suppressed or known to the individual become present in sleep. Dreams of death have been related to new changes coming ahead. By noting the death of Nature, perhaps this is an illusion to drastic change in nature. Maybe a drastic change in nature’s power. I.E. the witches.

Continuing with the idea that dreams are omens of the unconscious mind, it is obvious that the dreams that are plaguing Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are because of their murder of Duncan. However, it could also be noting Macbeth’s intense character change that happens as he continues down his road to becoming King.

<https://www.bustle.com/articles/120091-8-unsettling-omens-in-dreams-that-actually-mean-something-good>

Soil

“Thou sure and firm set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts,
And take the present horror from the time,
Which now suits with it.” (II, i, 648 - 652)

“The earth hath bubbles, as water has,
And these are of them.”(I, iii, 131 - 132)

Earth is not capitalized here so it may be an emphasis of dirt or soil. Soil that is hard or dry could be signs that it is compacted, or packed down. Meaning, it has been made denser and harder to penetrate. This, in turn, makes the conditions very difficult for plants and organisms to not only grow but survive. Macker may very well be walking along the soil of “death”.

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/bring-science-home-soil-dense/#:~:text=Soil%20that%20is%20hard%20and,helpful%20earthworms%2C%20to%20survive%20in.>