

Imagery of Clouds in Macbeth

"Fair is foul and foul is fair/ Hover though the fog and filthy air"(Shakespeare, II, 11-12). When the witches speak these words at the opening of Shakespeare's Macbeth, they are setting the atmosphere and bringing the reader into the world of the play. This passage particularly evokes the image of clouds. Shakespeare uses the image of clouds to relate to the broader theme that things are not what they seem. He also uses them to symbolize clouded judgment, and equivocation. As the play progresses the image of clouds also changes. In certain parts where the witches are equivocating to Macbeth, the image of clouds intensifies. In other parts such as in VI where Macbeth is enlightened with the truth, the image of clouds abates and there isn't a cloud in the sky.

The last lines in the first scene of Macbeth sets the atmosphere of the play. Not only do they set the atmosphere, they also foreshadow the plot of the play. From the beginning to the end the major theme is nothing is what it appears to be. Shakespeare uses the imagery of clouds because they hide the truth. At times sunrays, which symbolize truth and goodness, shine through. For example when Banquo comments on the weather in the lines, "So foul and fair a day..."(Iii?). The foulness suggests clouds and the fairness suggests sunlight. The problem is with so much fog; the mind becomes clouded and can no

longer make educated decisions because there is a lack of the truth. As the play will go on, the witches will cloud Macbeth's mind even more.

Subsequently, Banquo feels as if something is dubious. He suspects that Macbeth is up to foul play. Before he is ambushed by the murderers his suspicion is seen in the line, "It will be rain tonight"(IIIiii20). Presently, there is no rain but there are clouds in the sky, which symbolizes things not being what they appear to be. Following his murder, Banquo becomes a ghost. Though Macbeth was not present at his murder, he still haunts him because he knows that Macbeth is responsible for his death. Banquo's mind wasn't nearly as clouded as Macbeth's, which drove him to killing many people. In fact Banquo's thinking is quite clear.

In the progression of the play, Hecate the witch tells the way in which she and the other Weird Sisters planned on building Macbeth up for his big fall. Shakespeare's use of the image of clouds is seen when she says, "My little spirit, see/ Sits in a foggy cloud and stays for me"(IIIv34-35). Her spirit sits in a cloud because she equivocates. She tells people what they want to hear and fills them up with false confidence which clouds their judgment. Macbeth's mind has been clouded by the witches and has caused him to become a totally different person.

Prior to Hecate's plan, the ghost of Banquo haunts Macbeth. He can't believe what he is seeing and feels afraid and doubtful for the first time since he kills Duncan. He thinks to himself:

Can such things be, and overcome us

Like a summer's cloud, without our
Special wonder? You make me strange
Even to the disposition that I owe (IIIiv111-114),

Macbeth feels as though the fear makes him unrecognizable to himself. In this case, the cloud would symbolize his fear. The answer to his question is yes. The witches have been clouding Macbeth's judgment. His decisions are based on the information that the Weird Sisters give him. The downside being that the sisters are equivocating and not telling the whole truth. Due to their meddling in his life, Macbeth has changed and continues to change as the play progresses. Macbeth doesn't even realize how much he has changed since he began listening to what the witches had to say. The clouds in his mind keep multiplying.

Later, Macbeth beholds the apparitions conjured by the three witches.

Shakespeare uses the image of clouds when Macbeth says, "Infected be the air whereon they ride, / And damned all those that trust the fiends that equivocates"(IVi138-140). Macbeth is talking about the fog that appears whenever the witches appear. It follows them around, as does Hecate's fog. He knows from past experience that there is always something in the prophecies of the witches. In the first Act when they told him he would be King, he was not sure whether he would become King by doing nothing, or by murdering him to take his place. Macbeth chose to kill Duncan, but he still became king as they said. Macbeth is feeling like he has no choice but to believe them because everything they have said in the past has come true one way or another. The witches have ensnared

Macbeth's mind and clouded his judgment so severely, that he now depends on the information that they give to him.

For the duration of the play, the clouds in Macbeth's mind intensify. The witches have clouded his judgment and Macbeth is not aware of the whole truth until the last act of the book. The image of clouds clears up symbolizing when Macbeth realizes the truth that is seen in the lines:

And be these juggling fiends no more believed
That palter with us in a double sense,
That keep the word of promise to our ear
And break it to our hope (Vviii19-22).

Macbeth realizes that his life was like a game to the witches. They equivocated about Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane. They also equivocated about him not being able to be harmed by anyone born of a woman. The clouds the witches created obscured Macbeth's ability to see the truth. They led him on a string right to his ultimate downfall. When Macbeth realizes the truth, the clouds both in his mind and in the sky vanish. By the time he realizes this, it is already too late and Macduff is ready to get revenge for Scotland and his murdered family.

In Macbeth, Shakespeare uses the image of clouds as a tool that symbolizes clouded judgment, equivocation, and things not being what they seem. As the play progresses, the clouds surrounding Macbeth's mind increases. It causes Macbeth to become unrecognizable to his self. In the beginning of the play the witches begin to cloud his mind and the more Macbeth listens to them, the more they corrupt his mind. There

are clouds all over Scotland in Macbeth, which shows that nobody sees the real truth hidden behind them except Banquo who is certain that there is some foul play about.

[Since the first scene of the play starts out with the witches in the fog, the image suggests that the witches are actually responsible for bringing the fog into Scotland. The witches are doing the devil's work. In contrast, whenever there is light around, it suggests that God is doing His work.] The clouds continue to get worse until the final showdown between Macbeth and Macduff. Macbeth realizes what the witches have done to him. Shakespeare evokes the image that clouds are clearing away, the sun is shining through and Macbeth now sees the whole truth behind them. As previously mentioned sunlight can still get through clouds and show some truth but there were too many clouds created by the witches surrounding it for Macbeth to make educated decisions. ^{This seen in lines} [Shakespeare uses the ^{Definite conclusion} clouds to show that Macbeth's downfall is not all his fault. Nothing is what it appeared to be and the witches equivocated and clouded his judgment, so naturally they share some of the blame for the treachery and death in Macbeth.