

THE IMAGERY OF BLOOD IN *MACBETH* AND *HASSAN*

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It is a remarkable feature of these two plays – *Macbeth* and *Hassan* – far separated by time and place that they should both be saturated with a profusion of images based on the symbolism of blood in all its extended associations. It has been observed of *Macbeth* that it has over one hundred references to blood.¹ This predominance of blood imagery in *Macbeth* was earlier noted by the famous scholar, A.C. Bradley, in his authoritative works, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, where he writes:

It cannot be an accident that the image of blood is forced on us continually... even by the reiteration of the word in unlikely parts of the dialogue.²

Subsequent critics have more or less echoed his opinions. Caroline Spurgeon in her well-known study entitled *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* states:

The feeling of fear, horror and pain is increased by the constant and recurring images of blood; these are very marked.³

The Shakespearean critic, G. Wilson Knight, in his noted study of Shakespearean tragedy titled *The Wheel of Fire*, puts it thus:

There is constant reference to blood.... But though blood imagery is rich, there is no brilliance in it; rather a sickly smear.⁴

¹ Kenneth Muir (ed.), *Shakespeare's Macbeth* (London: Methew and Co., 1960), 5. All references are to this edition.

² A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1922), 335.

³ Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What it Tells Us* (Cambridge: University Press, 1961), 334.

⁴ G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (London: Methew and Co., 1960), 147.

It is thus clear that the numerous references to blood in *Macbeth* are directed to create revulsion in the minds of the readers at the deeds of violence that permeate the play and express horror at the union of pain, injustice and tyranny.

The chief association of 'blood' as a symbol in the sense outlined above is chiefly with the person of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth – prior to the murder of Duncan – invokes the spirits to 'make thick [her] blood'.⁵ Macbeth debates the murder in his mind and observes:

That we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague th' inventor.⁶

Macbeth's vision of the floating dagger is a prelude to his murdering Duncan. He sees 'gouts of blood'⁷ on it which hints at the 'bloody business'⁸ he is about to execute.

After the murder of Duncan, Macbeth sees his blood-stained hands and asks:

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand?⁹

Later, when Lady Macbeth becomes mentally unbalanced as a result of her complicity in Duncan's murder, she too [in the sleep-walking scene] sees blood on her hand and even smells it:

Here's the smell of blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia
will not sweeten this little hand.¹⁰

Her tortured mind goes back to the scene of Duncan's murder where she sees the slain king:

⁵ *Shakespeare's Macbeth*, I. v, 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, I. vii, 7-9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, II. i, 46.

⁸ *Ibid.*, II. i, 48.

⁹ *Ibid.*, II. ii, 59-60.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, V. i, 48-49.

Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?¹¹

These lines are “the most terrible lines in the whole tragedy” according to A.C. Bradley.¹²

After the scene in which the appearance of the ghost of Banquo unnerves Macbeth, he [Macbeth] states with growing realization: “Blood will have blood.”¹³

Macbeth’s next encounter with the witches at the beginning of Act IV, Scene-1, has its share of references to blood. The ingredients of the witches’ brew include the blood of baboons¹⁴ and sows¹⁵. The second apparition warns Macbeth to be “bloody, bold and resolute”.¹⁶ The ghost on Banquo is “blood-boltered”¹⁷ with hair matted with congealed blood.

In short, these and other images create the pre-intended feeling of horror of foul death. However, there are not only victims in this great human drama, for evil deeds rebound with even greater force.

James Elroy Flecker [1884-1915], a member of the school of Georgian poetry which represented the new, budding talents of the early 20th century, was a great admirer of Shakespeare. His stay in the Middle East and his familiarity with the Oriental languages opened to him the doors of the rich literature of the Middle East. He was quick to drink from this fountain and also to adapt its various elements into his own poetic and dramatic consciousness. Thus in his greatest play *Hassan* we see a multiplicity of images related to blood that we find in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.

¹¹ Ibid, V. i, 38-39.

¹² Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*.

¹³ Macbeth, III. iv, 121.

¹⁴ Ibid, I. 37.

¹⁵ Ibid, I. 54.

¹⁶ Ibid, I. 79.

¹⁷ Ibid, I. 123.

In the East, particularly the Muslim Middle East – the locale of Flecker's *Hassan* – blood has a signification similar to, but wider than that which prevail in the West. There are five clusters of symbolic meaning attached to blood in the East. These are: 'blood' as equivalent to 'life' as in 'bloodshed'; then there is 'blood' in the sense of lineage or ancestry. The third is 'blood' in the sense of nearness or affection as in 'flesh of flesh and blood of blood'. The next meaning of 'blood' is in the sense of retaliation as in 'eye for an eye'. The last meaning is that associated with the blood of Jesus [as understood in Christianity which we take for a product of the East].

In *Hassan*, a play that contains the predominant motif of blood woven into the action of the play, we observe that it is used as a means of provoking horror against the cruelty of kings¹⁸ – as in *Macbeth*. The king in *Hassan* is the Haroun al-Rashid of the *Arabian Nights* fame. He is also a historical figure open to diverse interpretation of his deeds both of kindness and cruelty.

The first reference to blood is made by the confectioner Hassan when his friend Selim steals his beloved and he cries that he sees 'blood dripping from the walls'.¹⁹ When the dazed Hassan comes to in the house of the King of the Beggars, he does not recall how he came there but says:

'Just now I was in Hell, with all its fountains raining fire and blood.'²⁰

The image of wall streaming with blood has been extended to that of fountains spouting blood – a recurring image in the play.

Further on, Hassan understands that the King of Beggars Rafi plans to murder Haroun when he says: 'Tonight I shall fill my bowl of oblivion with the blood of the Caliph of Baghdad',²¹ Hassan recoils in horror saying: 'Who dost dare talk of shedding the holiest blood in Islam!'.²² Later when Rafi

¹⁸ James Elroy Flecker, *Hassan: The Story of Hassan of Baghdad and How He Came to Make the Golden Journey to Samarkand* (London: William Heinemann, 1932). All references are to this edition.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 26.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 48.

²¹ *Ibid*, 50.

²² *Ibid*.

refers to his beloved, Pervaneh as 'the blood of my blood' we see that these are usages from the five clusters detailed above. Finally the Beggar King states his intentions to engage in a general massacre by washing Baghdad 'in blood'.²³

Blood permeates the play with its manifold references whether to future killing of Pervaneh and Rafi or others who associate with the Beggar King and seek to overthrow the Caliph Haroun. There are prophetic predictions to fountains gushing with blood, walls dripping with blood and the raining of the blood from the sky. All this is a reaction to the cruelty and indifference of potentates to the suffering and misery of their people. In *Hassan*, carpets run with blood and even the designs on them are coloured with blood. The emergence of red roses and red lilies from the earth indicates that these plants have been nurtured with the blood of innocent victims. The obsessive repetitions to blood are taken to morbid heights when Masrur the caliphal executioner vows to drink Rafi's blood when he kills him. Not satisfied with this and exhibiting his pleasure at the arousal of pain in accordance with his sado-masochism, Flecker makes more loathsome references to blood in Hassan's word when he describes the killing of Rafi and Pervaneh: 'They cut off her lover's head and poured the blood upon her eyes'.²⁴

The scene of the ghost in the garden with the spirit of the fountain ghost, Rafi and Pervaneh assuming an immaterial form is also reminiscent of the ghost of Banqou and his descendants rising out of the witches' cauldron in *Macbeth*.²⁵

Unlike *Macbeth*, Flecker's play has blood of bright colour and not the 'sickly smear'. When he was writing this play, Flecker was terminally ill with tuberculosis in which a patient coughs up a lot of blood. It is possible that Flecker imaginatively transported his blood images to his play and metaphorically, it can be said that he wrote *Hassan* with his own blood.

There are other colour images of unhappy associations – such as purple and black in *Hassan*. These colours – purple, black and violet – are also

²³ Ibid, 54.

²⁴ Ibid, 169.

²⁵ *Macbeth*, IV, i.

associated with death and suffering in the West.²⁶ Over all, Blood takes precedence both in number of references and shades of meaning in the two plays – *Macbeth* and *Hassan*.

²⁶ Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999).