Guilt in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*

What is guilt and is it shown in the play ***Macbeth***? Who demonstrates this guilt, and why is it being displayed?

Guilt is a feeling that haunts the conscience for a while. Usually this feeling comes when one has committed an offence, crime, violation or wrong act. It is the feeling of responsibility for this poor action that has been committed. In this play, there are many themes, but guilt is one of the most significant ones. It teaches crucial lessons to the readers, with everlasting morals. In Shakespeare’s play ***Macbeth*,** the theme of guilt is established through Lady Macbeth, blood imagery and Macbeth’s internal conflict.



Lady Macbeth is a strong-willed character who will do anything to have her way. Her desire for Macbeth to become King is even greater than that of Macbeth. Throughout the play, Macbeth is forced to commit unforgivable sins to achieve the position of King. Lady Macbeth shows her guilt towards the deaths of Duncan, Banquo, Lady Macduff and her family. Lady Macbeth’s guilty conscience is displayed near the end of the story when she is sleepwalking. She discusses her feelings, but mainly she reiterates her guilt. “The thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now? What, will these hands ne’er be clean? No more o’that, my lord, no more o’that. You mar all with this starting.”(V. i. 38-40).

This demonstrates how Lady Macbeth is feeling guilty about Lady Macduff’s murder and how Macbeth has ruined everything with his nervousness. Lady Macbeth also shows another form of guilt when she says “Wash your hands put on your nightgown. Look not so pale. I tell you yet again, Banquo’s buried; he cannot come out on’s grave.”(V. i. 54-56). This confirms how Lady Macbeth is constantly thinking about the deaths that she was part of, and how the feeling of guilt is taking over her life. Lady Macbeth shows her guilt throughout this whole scene. She writes a letter, but the reader does not know what the letter says. It is possible she is writing about her guilty feelings, or writing an apology letter. Although the letters content is unknown, Lady Macbeth does end her life as a result of her guilty conscience.

Blood represents guilt as it is a significant image pattern in the play. Blood also represents murder, which results in guilt of the characters in ***Macbeth***. Duncan and Macbeth are loyal friends to each other, but once Macbeth finds out that he needs to kill his loyal kinsmen his feelings change. He is hesitant to commit this crime, but as a result of Lady Macbeth’s persistence he ends up murdering Duncan. Macbeth makes the choice to kill Duncan. “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.” (II. ii. 63-66). This illustrates that Macbeth is feeling guilt towards the death of Duncan. He is asking if the ocean will wash his hands clean, but instead he will stain the water red, from the blood on his hands. The blood shows an image of guilt, the guilt is on his hands, and how Macbeth wants it to go away.

Another form of blood is represented when Lady Macbeth says, “Here’s the smell of the blood, still, all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.”(V. i. 44-45). This shows that Lady Macbeth’s hands still have traces of blood on them and even the best perfumes will not rid her of the smell. This blood is from the killings she has taken part in, and it shows that the guilt can not be easily rid of, but will stick with her for a long time. Finally, blood is also shown through the murders that were committed. The murders formed a feeling of guilt, which is connected to why blood is an image of guilt through the deaths, but this may only be shown in Macbeth’s point of view.

Guilt is displayed a number of times through the internal conflict of Macbeth. Macbeth has to make many decisions throughout the play that revolve around his guilty conscience. Macbeth’s conflict in the beginning of the play is whether or not he should kill his kinsmen. He shows a guilty feeling before and after the crime is committed. He is guilty before when he is deciding to kill his best friend, and he is guilty after because he went and killed his best friend, and as a result, he is guilty of committing this crime. Another form of internal conflict is when Macbeth says, “I’ll go no more: I am afraid to think what I have done; Look on’t again I dare not.”(II. ii. 53-55). This shows that after killing Duncan, Macbeth regrets his decision. He is saying that he can not go back and that he is afraid to think about what he has done. This proves that he feels guilty over what he has done and that he can not go back in time. However, if he could, he would not have killed Duncan. He was faced with a conflict that he had to resolve, but he realized that he did not make the right decision. It also shows that in the play, Macbeth is not able to say “Amen”. Only because he can not agree with what people have to say, because he regrets his actions, and feels guilty for what he has done.

In conclusion guilt is displayed through various representations in the play. The theme of guilt is expressed by Lady Macbeth, through blood imagery and Macbeth’s internal conflict. Guilt is a major factor in people’s lives, and will continue to haunt the characters of ***Macbeth*** for a long time. Guilt can be a result of many things, as it is a feeling that remains forever. Usually this feeling occurs when an offence, crime, violation or wrong act is committed. It is the feeling of responsibility for this poor action that has been committed. Macbeth commits this poor action just to be happy, but in the end, he was only left with much remorse.

**Directions:**

Answer the following questions regarding the article above.

1. In your own words, create a definition for “guilt.”

2. Which events or objects represent “guilt” in *Macbeth* based on what you read in the article?

3. Make a prediction about how this text will connect with “**Bloodstain,**” our next short story.