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A Literary Analysis of Symbolism

Every story, no matter how old, has symbolism embedded in it. That symbol could be a physical object such as a crown or something more intangible like an evil manifestation.

Symbolism has been an essential element in creating and telling stories for centuries. Every book, story, play, and poem is unique, much like the history that surrounds it. That is why the 14th century's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and 16th century's *Macbeth*, are so well known. The symbolism and change in symbolism play a vital role in how these stories are perceived.

Symbolism was first introduced in the late 19th century in France. It was “a loosely organized literary and artistic movement [...] of poets, [and soon] spread to painting and the theatre, and influenced the European and American literatures of the 20th century to varying degrees” (Britannica). Some of the first examples of symbolism come from objects in everyday life. A dove is a symbol of peace; the color red represents romance, and a broken mirror symbolizes separation. Symbolism gives writers the freedom to add double levels of meaning to their work.

In the 14th century, authors and poets used symbolism to invoke elements of honor, bravery, and chivalry. These symbols and the number three were repeatedly seen throughout *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. All the major events occur in multiples of three. Sir Gawain is tempted by Lady Bertilak three times, and on the third day, he succumbs to her temptations, accepting the green girdle (Trivett). The hunt between Gawain and Lord Bertilak takes place

over the course of three consecutive days. Lastly, the Green Knight's three swings to the back of Sir Gawain's neck. Almost everything in life falls into groups of threes: "man, women, child; three trimesters to the birth of a child; the Sun, Moon and the Earth" (Parkins). The way in which the Gawain Poet uses groups of three makes each event more significant.

The three swings of the Green Knight's axe are symbolic because each swing represents one of the three days of the "Hunting Game" that Sir Gawain and Lord Bertilak play. The first two swings were purposeful misses; the Green Knight explains, "So twice you were truthful, therefore twice I left / no scar" (Poet 2352-2353). In other words, the missed swings symbolize the first two days of the game when Gawain fulfilled his end of the bargain. On the third day, Gawain withheld the green girdle, breaking the game's rules. For this, the Green Knight left a small cut on the back of Gawain's neck. This symbolism of the number three reminds me of symmetry. Humans are drawn to symmetry and find a natural attraction to it. In this poem, the author uses the number three to symbolize Sir Gawain's loyalty to Lord Bertilak.

The number three was considered unlucky and was related to "witchcraft and demonology" (Kranz 370) in the 16th century. For these reasons, William Shakespeare incorporated the number three into *Macbeth*. "Three is the number of several classical figures with whom the Weird Sisters are associated in Elizabethan demonology. Hecate, for example, is a triple goddess in classical mythology" (Kranz 370). There are three groups in *Macbeth* that come in threes: the three witches, the three prophecies told to both Macbeth and Banquo (coincidentally) in Act One, Scene Three, and the three apparitions in Act Four, Scene One. It has been said that things that happen in threes result in death. One of the very first instances of this is when the three witches say, "All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis! / All hail,

Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor! / All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter”

(Shakespeare 1.3.51-53). These three lines lead Macbeth and Lady Macbeth down a road of pain, guilt, suffering, and death. Why people say, “Third times the charm” remains a mystery because three has been known to cause a lot more harm than good. Three family members have passed away within the last year. While superstition is not a firmly held belief, the occurrence of this happening three times creates a feeling that something more significant might be on the horizon.

As stated, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has more symbols. Besides the reoccurrence of the number three, there is also a literal symbol that holds value: the pentangle. A pentangle is like a star, but the difference between the two is that a pentangle is a geometric term for a star, and the generic definition of a star is a fixed luminous point in the night sky. The five points of the pentangle on Sir Gawain’s shield each represent five different ideas or values. These values are what Gawain aspires to as a virtuous and chivalrous knight. In no particular order: the first point symbolizes his five senses, the second his five fingers, “Thirdly his faith was founded in the five wounds / Christ received on the cross” (Poet 642-643). The fourth point symbolizes “the five joys / which Mary had conceived in her son” (Poet 646-647), and the fifth represents the knightly virtues: friendship, purity, politeness, and pity. Throughout the poem, Gawain is tested in these four virtues.

In “The Current State of ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’ Criticism,” the author states, “In the course of the poem, [Geraldine] Heng asserts, 'Gawain is marked over twice . . . , first by the pentangle, and then by the girdle’” (Blanch and Wasserman 405). By "marked," the author most likely means tested by the virtues of the pentangle and the green girdle. Every day of the “Hunting Game,” Gawain plays with Lord Bertilak. Lady Bertilak tests him, and from lines 1481

to 1483, she gives Gawain an ultimatum, “Sir, if you truly are Gawain it seems wondrous to me / that a man so dedicated to doing his duty / cannot heed the first rule of honorable behavior” (Poet). He either has to be honorable to Lord Bertilak or courteous to Lady Bertilak. Either way, Gawain will be breaking one of his most sacred vows of knighthood. Gawain throws the knightly virtues out the window when Lady Bertilak gives him her green girdle, which is said to hold magical properties and protect the wearer from death. When his life is on the line, Gawain puts himself before his knightly duties, breaking his vow as a knight. Gawain knows this to be true, and in the end, he switches out the pentangle, symbolizing honor and chivalry, for the green girdle as a reminder of what he did.

While Sir Gawain struggles to uphold the meaning of the pentangle, Macbeth dives blade-first into chaos and bloodshed. Shakespeare is known for his bloody and tragic plays, and *Macbeth* takes the prize for being one of the bloodiest of them all. Symbolism plays a prominent role in emphasizing the theme of corruption of power. Blood is used throughout the play as a symbol of guilt, betrayal, and murder. It first appears in Act One, Scene Two, with the opening battle between the Scottish and the Norwegian invaders. Later, when Macbeth and Lady Macbeth learn of Macbeth’s fate, they set out on a killing spree. It is important to note that Macbeth is the first to think about killing King Duncan, even though it is Lady Macbeth who has to convince him to do so.

Blood becomes a symbol of Macbeth’s guilt as he finds that his crime stained his hands in a way that cannot be washed away. Lady Macbeth scolds Macbeth and says that water will get it off. “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?” Macbeth says this in a panic as Duncan’s blood refuses to come off his hands (Shakespeare 2.2.78-79). Lady

Macbeth experiences the same thing Macbeth did as her guilt manifests as blood she sees on her hands while sleepwalking. “Out, damned spot, out, I say!”; this is out of character for Lady Macbeth (Shakespeare 5.1.37). From the beginning, she was the headstrong, vile, and ambitious character willing to stop at nothing to make the last prophecy come to fruition. Shakespeare used blood as a way to convey what Macbeth and his wife are feeling and experiencing. The combined urgency and bullying from Lady Macbeth and Macbeth’s greed and ambition for the crown lead them both to their deaths. Macbeth’s destructive quest for power led him to have his closest friend murdered and killed by the true king of Scotland, Malcolm.

The change in symbolism over the centuries has played a vital role in how stories are perceived. Symbolism, like any art form, is subjective. Interpretations of symbols in these stories can vary widely among individuals. Symbolism will never go out of style because some things cannot be conveyed any other way. It helps create meaning and emotion in a story. Symbols are still used today in modern literature and other aspects of life. The number three symbolizes different things to different types of people. The same can be said for the pentangle and blood. Insight gained from these stories indicate that their symbols' meanings have evolved over time.

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