

## **The Unholy Symbolism of Number Three in the Plays of William Shakespeare**

**G. Zeenathaman**  
Asst. Professor of English  
Adhiyaman Arts and Science College  
For Women  
Uthangarai  
[zeenaashiq@gmail.com](mailto:zeenaashiq@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

Literature means reality, which enriches the ordinary into extra ordinary. Literature means dedication, which change a man to exuberant. Literature means a treasure which gives the valuable findings; literature means reflection, which reflects the life. Literature is a guide which guides everyone; it is a tutor which teaches the life. In literature symbolism is the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities, by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal sense. Shakespeare used this term to remain the audience to look deeper in order to understand the thoughts and actions of the characters. The aim of this paper is dealing with the use of unholy symbol of number three in the plays of William Shakespeare. It refers three plays 'Macbeth', 'The Merchant of Venice', and 'The Tempest'. In these three plays Shakespeare used the number three as unholy wherever he mentions number three that was referred as the symbol of bad or sorrowful.

**Keywords:** William Shakespeare, number three, Dedication, exuberant, treasure, symbolism, qualities, signify, unholy.

Before going to speak about the unholy symbolism of the number three in the play Macbeth, I want to describe the historical information which I think is important to understanding the meaning of the number three in Macbeth, which I refer to as the unholy symbolism. During the time when Shakespeare was writing England was experiencing profound social upheaval, which was the cause for much concern. The primary cause for this concern was the Elizabethan belief that what happens on earth is reflection of what is happening in heaven. So the displacement of the nobility by the merchant class, and the fact that the traditional patriarchal rule of England was now controlled by a woman, led many to speculate that the realm of the divine was also being turned upside down and that unholy beings were possibly assaulting the divine throne of God.

A brave Scottish general named Macbeth receives a prophecy from three witches that one day he will become king of Scotland. Consumed by ambition and spurred to action by his wife, Macbeth murders the king Duncan and takes the Scottish throne for himself. Duncan's sons Malcolm and Donalbain, flee Scotland, where they begin plotting against Macbeth. One of their allies, Macduff, poses a serious threat to Macbeth. So the new king has Macduff crowned king. Malcolm and Macduff join forces and prepare for war. Overcome with remorse over the murder of King Duncan, lady Macbeth commits suicide. Her death barely affects Macbeth, who has received three new prophecies: to brave Macduff, that "none of woman born" shall harm him, and that he won't be defeated until Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane hill. Macbeth nearly assumes that he is invincible.

Macduff's forces camouflage themselves with foliage from Birnam wood as they march on Dunsinane. Macduff, the product of a gruesome war was not "of woman born" and thus the power to defeat Macbeth, who realizes too late that the witches' prophecies foretold his death and not his success. Macduff kills Macbeth in the play. The play opens in a desert place where the three witches are seen meeting amid thunder and lightning. To these three witches they planned to meet Macbeth and change his mind. This idea is the key in the play and is expressed in the very first act when the three witches say in unison: "Fair is foul and foul is fair."

It was common belief that bad luck comes in threes. It is the traditional belief that if one dies the death is usually followed by two more deaths will occur. The same things had happened in the play Macbeth too. The first use of number three relates to the number of witches. The three witches appear together throughout the play and generally signify dire events. In fact, much of their presence and conjuring has to do with three. When the witches first meet Macbeth, they address him by three titles: Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and finally the king. Then there is a cauldron scene, which opens with the following lines, thrice the blinded cat hath mewed, Thrice and once the hedge pig whined, Harpier cries Tis time.

Macbeth joins the scene, the witches conjure three apparitions, and each apparition shouts Macbeth's name three times: "Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth!" when the three apparitions conjure they present some shadows to Macbeth. He sees the eight shadows the last one holds two orbs and three scepters. Another most important reference for the unholy symbolism of three is the three men Macbeth, Malcom, and Macduff. These three men are the important characters of the play who are the symbolism for unholy happenings. And their names also start from three M's. It is again the number three is used when Macbeth calls the murderers to murder Banquo, he gave the work to the three murderers. There are also three murders that are actually performed those of Duncan, Banquo, and Macduff's son. There are also the three murders such as Lady Macduff and rest of her children.

‘Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow’, this is one of the more famous speeches of Macbeth. He says this to indicate that another day in his life would be just a futile and monotonous crawl towards the inescapable end. This phrase is meant of useless, meaningless, and empty. After his wife death, time seems to Macbeth an intolerable burden, and the future an overwhelming force that leads him to his destiny. This is directly opposite of the conventional and easy future he had fantasized about having with his wife before murdering the king Duncan. After the death of Lady Macbeth, he feels his future is hopelessly tedious, and empty, while life looks ridiculously short. Macbeth suddenly gets a tragic end only because of the prophecies the three witches and their three prophecies. So this is the unholy symbolism of the play *Macbeth*.

With this description I searched the description of number three in Bible. One obvious meaning of the number three is the Trinity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In a general sense number three in the Bible also signifies growth and reproduction. There were three apostles of God: Peter, John, and James, who followed Jesus Christ to the garden of Gethsemane. These apostles signify light, love, and life individually. Other trinities existing in the Bible are body, spirit and soul and the three parts of the consciousness of the mind: conscious, super conscious and subconscious. Additionally, there are three archangels mentioned in the Bible by name as Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael.

Jesus prayed three times in the garden of Gethsemane before his arrest. He was placed on the cross at the third hour of the day and died at the ninth hour. There were three hours of darkness that covered the land while Jesus was suffering on the cross from the sixth hour to the ninth hour. Three is the number of resurrection. Christ was dead for three full days and three full nights. Whereas William Shakespeare used number three as unholy in his plays.

In the play *The Merchant of Venice* also we get the symbolism of number three which was used as unholy. A young Venetian Bassanio needs a loan of three thousand ducats so that he can woo Portia, a wealthy Venetian heiress. He approaches his friend Antonio, a merchant. Antonio is short of money because all his wealth is invested in his fleet, which is currently at sea. He goes to a Jewish money lender, Shylock, who hates Antonio because of Antonio’s anti-Semitic behavior towards him. Shylock nevertheless agrees to make the short term loan, but in a moment of dark humor he makes a condition the loan must be repaid in three months or Shylock will exact a pound of flesh from Antonio. Antonio agrees confident that his ships will return in time.

Because of the terms of Portia’s father’s will, all suitors must choose from among three caskets, one of which contains a portrait of her. If he chooses he may marry Portia, but if does not he must vow never to marry or court another woman. The princes of Morocco and Arragon fail the test are rejected. As Bassanio prepares to travel to Belmont for the test, his friend

Lorenzo elopes with Shylock's daughter Jessica. Meanwhile two Antonio's ships have been wrecked and Antonio's creditors are pressuring him for repayment. Antonio was helpless and the duration of the bond too was over. Shylock made use this chance and he gave a complaint on Antonio.

The curtain opens with three caskets, Portia gets the suitors and the casket has three inscriptions. Because of the game conducted by Portia's father, Bassanio planned to court Portia a wealthy heiress. Bassanio approached Shylock about three thousand ducats. He thought he will repay it soon. Shylock nurses a long- standing grudge against Antonio, who had made a habit of berating shylock and other Jews for their usury. Shylock agreed to loan Antonio with the agreement. Antonio wants to repay the money within three months otherwise he allows him to take a pound of flesh from his body.

This clear evident that Bassanio needs three thousand ducats to court the rich heiress Portia. So Antonia gets it from Shylock. This made Antonio to imprison and the court of Venice also helpless to save him from the bond. That bond also specified three months. When Bassanio went to Belmont he came across Portia's father's will. There is a game with three casket, the suitors of Portia should choose any one of it. Each casket has made of gold, silver and lead respectively. The caskets has a slogan like, 'who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire', 'who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves', 'who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath'. This made Bassanio to forget the bond of Shylock. Meantime the due time was over and Antonio' ships are lost at the sea. So he cannot repay the money to Shylock. Shylock has become more determined to exact revenge Antonio. Because of the three thousand ducats Antonio suffered a lot. Even he faced the problem like death.

The play *The Tempest* begins with the huge storm batters a ship carrying Alonso (the King of Naples), Sebastian (Alonso's brother), Ferdinand (Alonso's son), Antonio, Gonzalo, and others. They are likely to die by shipwreck. On the island near the storm, Prospero and his daughter Miranda are introduced. It is clear that Prospero has created the storm battling the ship. Miranda is concerned that the men aboard the ship are harmed and asks Prospero to stop the storm. But Prospero explains that he was once the Duke of Milan but was banished to the island with Miranda by Antonio, his brother, who took over Prospero's dukedom of Milan.

Ariel, a magical spirit, appears. It becomes clear that Ariel is in Prospero's service, and caused the storm at Prospero's bidding. He tells that the men onboard the ship have all made it ashore unharmed as planned. Miranda expresses her strong dislike for him. Ferdinand, who has been wandering the island, meets Miranda and falls immediately in love with her: This appears to be of Ariel's doing and part of the carefully-laid plan that Ariel must carry out to win his freedom from Prospero. Miranda was three years old When Prospero entered in the enchanted

Island. This unholy symbol of number three is led Prospero to undergo this pain and sufferings. In these three plays Shakespeare used number three as unholy symbol for his plays.

---

---

### References

- Shakespeare, William. The Merchant of Venice. Ed. A. W. Verity. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
  - .... The Tempest. Ed. A. W. Verity. New Delhi: Cambridge University press 2012.
  - .... The Merchant of Venice. Ed. John Widens. New Delhi: Macmillan press, 1969.
  - .... The Tempest. Ed. Harold Bloom. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2006.
  - .... The Merchant of Venice. Ed. W. M. Merchant. London: Penguin Books, 2005.
  - .... Macbeth. Ed. A. W. Verity. New Delhi: Cambridge University press 2012.
- 
-