

Macbeth

Importance of Sleep-walking scene

Any scenes of Shakespeare's plays can hardly claim less significance than the other scenes. Yet some scenes deserve special mention and discussion for some reasons. *Macbeth's* Act V, scene I, which is popularly called 'Sleep-walking scene' is such a scene.

In this scene, we see that Lady Macbeth's attendant, a gentleman and a doctor are waiting at the Lady Macbeth's bed-chamber. From their conversation we come to know that Lady Macbeth uses to walk in her deep sleep. She rises from her bed, throws a night-gown upon her, unlocks her closet, takes some paper, folds it, writes upon it, seals it and then returns to bed. She also mumbles some incoherent words. At this moment, Lady Macbeth enters into the room with a candle in her hand. Her eyes are open, 'but their sense are shut'. She rubs her hands, tries to wash her hands. Then she begins to mumble some words incoherently. First, she recalls the incident of murdering Duncan. Then she expresses suspicion about the slaughter of Macduff's family. Last of all, she speaks of the murder of Banquo. She expresses her anguish at her inability to clean her hands. She says, 'What's done cannot be undone'. Then she retires to bed. The doctor confesses that he is incapable of dealing with such cases. He says that she needs divine help than a help of a physician.

The sleep-walking scene owes nothing to any source beyond Shakespeare's insight and dramatic sense. Four hundred years ago, when psychology was at its cradle, this type of scene was hardly conceivable. Elizabethan audience took it as nothing but fantastical. Today, with the advancement of psychology, it has been proved beyond doubt that this kind of scene reflects the very reality. This proves the existence of farsightedness, which is an essential quality of a true artist, in Shakespeare.

Sleep-walking scene forces us to reinterpret Lady Macbeth's character. There is little in her previous action to prepare us for this pathos. In the first half of *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth equally dominates with her husband. It is Lady Macbeth who takes the first practical measure to murder Duncan. She leads, perhaps misleads, Macbeth to that terrible deed. She even criticizes her husband's character. She condemns that Macbeth's character is "too full o'th' milk of human kindness" and he is incapable of murdering Duncan. Moreover, she says, "Had he not resembled/My father as he slept, I had done't." She appears to be more courageous and hard-hearted than Macbeth. She says that she knows how tender it is to love the baby that milks her, but if need arises, she will throw it. But in the course of action, we see that surely she underestimated her husband's character and overestimated herself. She has to brace herself up with the help of wine just to put the dagger in Duncan's bed chamber. She faints only at hearing Duncan's murder. From this point a gradual degeneration of Lady Macbeth's character begins. She is left alone. A breach of relation with her husband occurs. We are appalled to see that she has to make an appointment to meet her husband. She is not consulted at the matter of Banquo's murder. She has been seen only at banquet scene at her former capacity. Only in banquet scene she performs her duty of a social woman and once again she shaves her husband from undesirable revelation. After this she has been not heard once again. She dissolves into insignificance. We catch a glimpse of Lady Macbeth again in this sleep-walking scene. But this Lady Macbeth is totally different from that of her former self.