

Appearance vs. reality in macbeth

Literature, William Shakespeare



Appearance and Reality in Macbeth William Shakespeare's Macbeth displays an interesting use of different themes and motifs. A motif that is used throughout the play is the contrast between appearance and reality. This motif is simultaneously a theme in that the glaring contrast between the appearance and reality in Macbeth is used by Shakespeare to express that one should be careful of this contrast that exists in everyday life. In the very beginning of the play, the Three Witches allude the audience to this contrast when they say together, " Fair is foul, and foul is fair. / Hover through the fog and filthy air" (1. 1. 10-11). This serves as a warning to the audience to be aware of how things are not actually as they appear to be. Macbeth's actual character gradually contrasts with its initial appearance as the play progresses. In the beginning of the play, he is praised as being a brave and valiant soldier. The positive light that Macbeth is put in causes him to seem as a person of good character. Even after Macbeth kills Duncan, he still appears to have good character because of how passionately he professes his guilt: " Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather / The multitudinous seas incarnadine" (2. 2. 59-61). This appearance slowly diminishes as Macbeth becomes more corrupted with power and murders more people. Lady Macbeth's character also gradually changes throughout the play. She initially appears to be a ruthless and shameless person. After reading Macbeth's letter that tells her of the witches prophesy, her only concern is that Macbeth's nature is " too full o' th' milk of human kindness" (1. 5. 15). She also shows these qualities while she is convincing Macbeth to go through with their plan to kill Duncan: How tender ' tis to love the babe that milks me: I would, while it was smiling

in my face, Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums, And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you Have done to this. (1. 7. 55-60) Lady Macbeth shows shame and remorse only after Duncan has been murdered, when she says, " My hands are of your color, but I shame / To wear a heart so white" (2. 2. 63-64). Later in the play, Lady Macbeth is so overcome with guilt that she sleeps walks. In her sleep, she reveals her guilt when she speaks of Duncan's blood on her hands and says, " will these hand ne'er be clean?... All the per- / fumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand" (5. 1. 43-44). She becomes so overcome with her feelings of guilt that she commits suicide. The reality manifested by the actions of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is very different that what it initially appears to be. The most important contrast between appearance and reality in the play is the contrast between what the Three Witches are actually telling Macbeth and what their meaning appears to be to him. When Macbeth meets the witches in the beginning of the play, the witches tell him only that he is Thane of Cawdor, and that he will be become king. This appears to be a good thing to Macbeth only because the witches do not tell him of the tragedies that will occur when he becomes king. The second time that Macbeth meets the witches he is falsely made to believe that his power is secure. That is because the witches equivocate. They do this when they cause the Three Apparitions to appear to Macbeth. The First Apparition is more honest and straightforward than the other two when it tells Macbeth, " Beware Macduff! " (4. 1. 71) The Second Apparition tells Macbeth that " none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (4. 1. 80-81). The Third Apparition says that " Macbeth shall never vanquished be until / Great Birham Wood to high Dunsinane Hill /

Shall come against him" (4. 1. 92-93). While it appears to Macbeth that his power is secure, he learns otherwise. The Third Apparition's prophecy comes true first when Macduff and his army come to Dunsinane carrying tree limbs from Birham so as camouflage the amount of soldiers with them. The Second Apparition's prophecy comes true when Macduff reveals to Macbeth that "Macduff was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped" (5. 8. 15-16). Only before his is killed by Macduff does Macbeth realize the real meaning behind what he had been told by the Three Witches: Accursed be that tongue that tells me so, For it hath cowed my better part of man! And be these juggling fiends no more believed, That palter with us in a double sense; That keep the word of promise to our ear, And break it to our hope. (5. 8. 17-22) The contrast between appearance and reality in Macbeth is a motif that reoccurs in different ways. This contrast causes suffering and tragedy to all the characters of Macbeth because of the murder, suicide and tyranny that result from it. What is expressed by this motif is a warning that things are not always what they seem, and that this can have tragic consequences.