

Foreshadowing in macbeth: more than meets the eye

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



William Shakespeare is one of the most, if not the most influential writer in English literature, one that has left us numerous fascinating works about the fall of flawed heroes into despair. 1606's *Macbeth* was one of these tragedies, which told the tale of how the titular character, a once righteous man, was influenced to commit atrocious deeds which would ultimately morph him into becoming a bloodthirsty, unhinged tyrant. Throughout the duration of this tragic story, the audience is given hints and expectations as to not only what would happen in the following pages, but also what would happen to the story's characters, a feat accomplished by foreshadowing.

But what effects does foreshadowing have on *Macbeth's* plot and on its characters?

Foreshadowing is a literary device that “[Can give] a clue or hint as to later development of the plot” (Merriam-Webster's *Encyclopedia of Literature*) which can be frequently found in this story.

Take the titular *Macbeth* and the three witches, for instance, the latter hailing him as Thane of Cawdor, and announcing “ All hail, *Macbeth*, that shalt be king hereafter!” (1. 3. 51) at their first meeting. Their words give the audience expectations on what changes *Macbeth's* life may go under, namely his acquisition of the Thane of Cawdor title and later the throne.

Foreshadowing isn't just limited to giving hints and clues about the development of the plot, it also covers what changes the characters might experience. One of the most famous examples in the play being *Macbeth's* bloody dagger hallucination in Act 2, Scene 1 “ I see thee still, / And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood, / Which was not so before” (2. 1. 46-48).

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The guilt he felt for entertaining the idea of killing King Duncan, whom he thought of very highly, was so impactful it morphed his mind for the worst, making him psychologically unstable. Macbeth's hallucination foreshadows just how deranged his mind would eventually become, and how different his character would be as a result.

Aside from the aforementioned influences, foreshadowing “[Can foretell] a theme close to the heart of [a literary work]” (Lee), like the grim theme of guilt presaged through Macbeth's manipulative wife, Lady Macbeth. In Act 2, she berates her husband for being too kind to carry out the murder of King Duncan, calling him a coward for not going through with his ambitions. She sees guilt as a waste of time, a shameful emotion to experience, something that wouldn't face her at in the slightest, and an obstacle in the goal of attaining higher status. Her words foreshadow how, ironically, the guilt eventually consumes her three acts later. “ Out damned spot! Out I say!” (5. 1. 25) she exclaimed whilst rubbing her hands together trying to “ wash off the blood’ that stained them, symbolizing how she was trying to free herself from the emotion she previously acclaimed never bothered her, but to no avail. The guilt was so great, she ended up taking her own life by committing suicide.

The impact of foreshadowing in Macbeth doesn't stop there, as it also influences the symbolism present in it. “[The three] apparitions [in Act 4] are symbolic representations of what would happen to Macbeth” (346), each giving him a different message. The armed head told Macbeth to watch out for Macduff, the bloody child assured him that none of woman born would be

able to harm him, and the crowned child with the tree in his hand further declared that he would not be defeated until Birnam wood came to him. The words the apparitions delivered served to not only warn Macbeth and up to his ego, but were also prophecies of his doom, with the apparitions themselves representing what his ultimate fate would be and how it would unfold. The armored head symbolizes how Macbeth would be slain, by dying in battle and then having his head chopped off. The bloody child symbolizes Macduff, who was ripped from his mother's womb at birth; he would be the one who would ultimately vanquish the tyrannical king. The crowned child with the tree in his hands symbolizes Malcolm, son of Duncan, and the rightful heir to the throne, who went to Dunsinane Hill with the intent to defeat Macbeth. He was aided by English soldiers who were covered in Birnam wood bough, a plan devised by him to disguise their numbers. Macbeth would fall, with Malcolm replacing him as the ruler of Scotland in the end.

As can be seen, foreshadowing has a great, influential effect on Macbeth; it gives readers expectations as to what may happen next in this tragic story and how the characters in it might change. It should be noted however that "[Foreshadowing] doesn't allow the hints to reveal the ending but merely... suggest[s] possibilities and pique the reader's curiosity" (31). They don't spoil what would exactly happen in the story and/or its characters. The dagger hallucination that Macbeth experienced, Lady Macbeth's expression of how she felt about guilt, and the three apparitions serving as proof. Analyzing the foreshadowing present reveals just how much of an impact the

actions of the characters have in the course of the story, it gives us a window to see what some of them are thinking, what their next move could be. Such skillful use goes to show just how masterful of a writer Shakespeare was, how effectively he kept any readers hooked in his stories. Foreshadowing adds depth and complexity to countless amounts of literary works, it keeps stories suspenseful and makes them an interesting read that people would want to continue, something that only well-crafted works of literature can successfully accomplish.