

Macbeth- the weyward sisters

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English| Macbeth- The Weyward Sisters | Discuss the nature of the three witches who foretell Macbeth's future. The Three Witches in William Shakespeare's play Macbeth (1603-1607) add an element of supernatural and prophecy to the play. These three witches represent the personification of evil, conflict and chaos in an already hectic story. The predominant witch, Hecate- the Greek goddess of the moon and later witchcraft- and her two following witches- Graymalkin and Paddock- predict General Macbeth's rise to the throne.

The witches are described as having beards but appearing human. Also known as the ' weyward sisters'- as quoted in Macbeth- these old, decrepit prophetesses recite " Fair is foul and foul is fair; Hover through the fog and filthy air"(1; 1; 12-13). This line sets up the play with suspicion and confusion as the line suggests that tables will turn. " Double, double toil and trouble" (4; 1; 10-11) the three witches chant- making it clear that these witches seek trouble, what is unclear is whether they are changing and controlling fate or if they are merely ensuring its success.

What do these prophecies represent, what clues does Shakespeare provide and what conclusion (if any) does he allow his audience to come to? " All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor; All hail, Macbeth! That shalt be King hereafter! " (1; 3; 11-12) " The power of man; For none of woman born; Shall harm Macbeth" (4; 1; 88-89) The witches' prophecies imply Macbeth will reign and that no man of natural birth will cause his downfall. The prophecies foreshadow the development of the plot, they hint to the audience the likely direction of the story and they give legitimacy to the final outcome of the plot.

They give righteousness to the outcome; because its destiny. Shakespeare hints throughout the play of the expected downfall of the murderous King Macbeth. The second prophecy “ For none of woman born; Shall harm Macbeth” hints that an unnatural birthed man can kill or overthrow Macbeth. Macbeth is later be-headed in a duel against Macduff- retribution for the killing of his family including King Duncan. The audience come to a conclusion that good is returned- that fair is no longer foul. The wayward sisters and the death of Macbeth illustrates the need to follow good rather than choose the path to evil.

The audience has seen the effects of Macbeth's tortured soul- the death of his beloved wife and even his own- emphasizing the need to rid a guilty conscience. Was the ambiguity of the witches' prophecies necessary to the development of the play's plot and key themes? Hecate, Graymalkin and Paddock foretell the uprising of Macbeth and inform him of his future and what he must do in order to pursue his destiny as king. The Three Witches never tell Macbeth to kill King Duncan, they merely imply that King Duncan must die for Macbeth to become king.

The witches set a path for him that only he may choose to follow should he wish. Through temptation of sure success he kills King Duncan and follows the path to destruction. Macbeth is not psychologically capable of living with the guilt of murder, however the Three Witches prophecies have given Macbeth the assurance that he will succeed- blanketing his guilt and giving him the confidence he needs to commit the crime. Had the witches kept their prophecies to themselves, Macbeth would not have enough confidence, or encouragement from Lady Macbeth, to kill King Duncan.

However there would be a lack of supernatural and excitement in the play. Macbeth is unique because of its treacherous witches, unreal fascinations of King Duncan's and Banquo's ghosts and Lady Macbeth's ' blood' on her hand- individualising this play to numerous regicide stories. Word Count- 711

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