

Paradoxes and contradictions presented in macbeth paradoxes and contradictions (...)

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Paradoxes and contradictions (“foul and fair,” and so on) presented in Macbeth

In William Shakespeare's tragedy, *Macbeth*, readers are introduced to a harsh world of war, murder and treachery. At the beginning of the play three witches tell Macbeth that in his life time he will become Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, as well as the King of Scotland. At first Macbeth is slow to believe the prediction of the witches, but after the first two prophecies come to fruition Macbeth becomes power hungry. Throughout the drama readers see both the rise and fall of Macbeth. Macbeth's coming to power, through destructive and immoral means, creates a world of mistrust in most, if not all, characters. Shakespeare exploits this world of uncertainty and evil by adding many contradictions and paradoxes pertaining to trust and darkness.

After the original murder of Duncan in Macbeth's castle characters become very uneasy because there is obviously a traitor among them. Trust becomes a big issue among those in the castle, and others concerned for the well being of Scotland. Shakespeare emphasizes the trust versus mistrust issue by using specific literary devices. In the very first scene one of the witches utters the famous paradox, "Fair is foul and foul is fair" (1. 1.) This paradox means that appearances can be very deceiving and there is fine line between good/evil and trust/mistrust. Before the murder of Duncan Macbeth has an

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internal battle with his conscience, he reflects on the fact that Duncan is here in double trust. There are in fact two reasons for him to be protecting the King. He says, “ He’s here in double trust:/ First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,/ Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,/ Who should against his murderer shut the door,/ Not bear the knife myself.” (1. 7.).

Ultimately Macbeth’s “ vaulting ambition”(1. 7) overrides his conscience and he does murder Duncan in his own castle. After the deed is committed Macbeth panics. He sees ghosts and believes that he will never sleep again. Lady Macbeth reminds him that he must keep remain calm and hide his guilt to maintain the trust of the other members of the King’s party. “ False face must hide what the false heart doth know”(1. 7.). Hiding the truth is Macbeth and Lady Macbeth main focus, along with attempting to murder anyone who stands in the way of the continuation of their royal lineage.

The question of who to trust is also seen when Macduff travels to England to seek the help of Malcolm, Malcolm tests him by making himself out to be a tyrant that has no interest in kingly duties and MacDuff reacts with despair, “ O my breast,/ Thy hope ends here!”(4. 3.) Malcolm then decides that MacDuff is indeed a loyal patron of Scotland and he may trust him. The uneasiness of the characters is amplified by Shakespeare’s emphasis on trust. It is extremely difficult to tell your friends from your enemies when a traitor is among them.

Shakespeare also uses light and darkness to enhance the images of good and evil throughout the play. Macbeth often makes reference to darkness as

if he is shamefully trying to run away and hide from his thoughts and actions. Even before the murder of Duncan he feels guilty. Macbeth says, " Stars hide your fires,/ Let not light see my black

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and deepest desires"(1. 4.) The darkness of the night is then embraced by both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as they attempt to hide their evil deeds from the public eye. It seems as though the characters in Macbeth believe that the cover of darkness is needed when committing acts of violence and corruption.

The witches are also associated with darkness. Banquo refers to them as " instruments of darkness" (1. 3) and Macbeth calls them "...secret, black, and midnight hags"(4. 1) These references give readers a sense that the witches are mischievous and evil rather than simply the messengers of good news and predictors of great fortunes. The darkness also seems to blur the lines between reality and the supernatural. All of the appearances of the witches occur during the night deep in the wood, where it is hard to tell reality apart from a paranoid imagination. The light and your eyes may play tricks on you causing you to think or believe something fictional. This is why Shakespeare only had the witches materialize under these circumstances, to enhance the effect of the supernatural.

Light is also used as a metaphor for life. In Macbeth's final soliloquy he says, " And all our yesterdays have lighted fools/ The way to dusty death. Out, out

brief candle!” (5. 5.) Shakespeare compares life to the flame of a candle. The candle can be extinguished easily and in the grand scheme of things it only burns for a tremendously small amount of time. It does not matter how long the candle has been burning it can be blown out at any point. This is an especially interesting comparison because those murdered in Macbeth are of all ages, from King Duncan to Macduff’s children.

Throughout this tragedy Shakespeare uses many literary devices to make certain aspects of his writing stand out to the reader. The paradoxes, contradictions and metaphors

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used in Macbeth constructed a sort of onstage world where it is impossible to trust anyone. At any point there could be someone hidden in the darkness ready to take your life. Scotland has been enveloped in a shadow of darkness, and the result is disorder, chaos and murder.