

To what extent is macbeth a play of antithesis? essay sample

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Macbeth, like many of Shakespeare's famous plays, relies heavily on antithesis to convey its inner meaning. It is very important that each place has opposing forces and parallels, and these make it much better.

Shakespeare uses a variety of techniques like cultural significance, charisma and motivating ideas to get his unique message across in each play.

Macbeth is one play that incorporates an especially large amount of contrast, and this is evident in almost every scene. There are many on-going themes that are intertwined and help to give the tragedy significance, and essentially keep the audience engrossed. We cannot fully appreciate much of this as citizens of the twenty-first-century, as Shakespeare cleverly integrated many topics specific to the time when he wrote Macbeth. His audiences – especially King James I – who were able to see his plays as he intended, could completely understand what Shakespeare wanted to represent and understand better the way he captivated audiences and kept them interested.

People of the Elizabethan times lived very interesting lives – there was always something going on – and for the King of England, Macbeth bore increased impact – James I was a direct relative of some characters and also knew all too well about attempts on a monarch's life, in light of the recent 'Gunpowder Plot'. The characters show real individualism and at times it is almost impossible not to sympathise with Macbeth after he is drawn further and further into evil ways by his ambition. Often, one is drawn into criticising a character's actions as they are so vividly realised in Shakespeare's writing.

Macbeth is truly a superb play, one that appeals to many people on an almost personal level. The many soliloquies give the audience an insight into his mind and mentality. We can begin to realise and understand his motives and time come when you even begin to sympathise with Macbeth. The morals are incredibly deep and induce concentrated thought. Macbeth shocks from the start and would have been very controversial in 1606. James I also had an avid interest in witches, and it seems the mysterious scenes with the witches in Macbeth were tailored to the king's curiosity. In fact, Shakespeare was very sympathetic towards the king and even changed the true story of Macbeth slightly to avoid embarrassing James I. Shakespeare decided to flatter James as well and often tried to make him and his relatives seem kind and in the image of a 'good king'. Macbeth works on many levels and has intricate morals. The power of the word is evident as Shakespeare demonstrates his use of rich and strong language. He manipulates English and creates varied and imaginative images, and dripping with atmosphere, sounds and clever puns.

Macbeth would have had massive cultural significance when it was written when compared to today and would have been more accessible to everyone. The play starts with an unusual, provoking scene on a deserted moor where three witches are meeting. In 1606, people were scared of witches and believed they existed, so this would have had a far greater effect on seventeenth-century audiences when any mention of witches was a mild taboo. This was probably a controversial play in its time, and the first scene would have been more shocking and interesting to Shakespeare's original

viewers. A law was even passed in 1604 to allow the execution of witches. James I was also interested in the supernatural – he wrote a book entitled *Demonology* about witchcraft – and a play with heavy supernatural influences would have appealed him. Once an attempt was even made on his life by a ‘witch’. He would have been riveted from the start due to this clever introductory scene that leaves a lot to the imagination.

The ‘good king, bad king’ theme would also have referred directly to the current king in 1606 – King James I. Throughout the performance, we are constantly reminded that Duncan and Malcolm are brave, ‘good’ kings and that Macbeth is corrupt and evil – almost defining a ‘bad’ king. He was the first person to see Shakespeare’s play in action, and it was actually written for him. Of course Shakespeare would have tried to flatter James I, and took away all responsibility of Duncan’s murder from James’ family (the Stuarts) – he made the Macbeths solely responsible as James naturally hated regicides. Also the murder of the king in Macbeth would have particular relevance to James I. Under a year ago, James had escaped from the infamous Gunpowder Plot. Macbeth paying the ultimate penalty for usurping the ‘correct’ king, and losing everything he cared for could discourage any other would-be conspirators. One plotter, Everard Digby was a favourite of James I and could be represented by the disloyal Thane of Cawdor in Act I.

There are many strong themes and morals in Macbeth. Many of them are related and they also had cultural significance. Appearance versus Reality is a significant theme in Macbeth. Shakespeare was interested by how a character appears to everyone else compared to what they really feel inside.

Just before the murder, Lady Macbeth tells her husband to "...look like the innocent flower/But be the serpent under ' t." (I, v, 64-5) She wants Macbeth to be brave and ruthless but not give himself away. Later, in scene seven, Macbeth wants to appear man-like and courageous to his womanly wife and she preys on this fear to persuade him to kill the king – knowing he likes to seem bold even though inside he may be scared and doubtful. In Act II, there is a renowned scene in which Macbeth ' sees' a dagger. How does he see the dagger though? Is it merely a hallucination due to the pressures on him or is it something more sinister? Perhaps the witches conjured it up to warn him? However he understands that it might be an illusion:

" Is this a dagger which I see before me,

The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee:

I have thee not, and yet I see thee still...

...Mine eyes are made the fools o' the other senses,

Or else worth all the rest" (II, i, 33-5 and 44-5)

This well-known soliloquy shows how Macbeth thinks he sees the dagger but is not sure whether he is seeing correctly or not. " Mine eyes..." means that either his eyes are untrustworthy, or they are more dependable than his other senses. After the murder, the Macbeths are evidently scared; Macbeth jumps when " the crickets cry" (II, ii, 16). As Macbeth starts to regret his deed, Lady Macbeth helps him to cover up the evidence and tells him not to be caught because he is still awake. She says, " Get on your night-gown, lest

occasion call us, And show us to be watchers.” (II, ii, 70-1) meaning she does not want him to appear awake as he might be suspected of having committed the murder. After the murder is discovered, Lady Macbeth faints, probably faked to seem womanly and shocked. Macbeth also tries to cover-up in front of the other nobles but ends up being overly eloquent and going a bit over the top. This causes Malcolm and Donaldbain to suspect him because his behaviour was questionable.

In Act III, Macbeth secretly organises the murder of Banquo. He declines to inform Lady Macbeth as he does not want to get her any more caught up in his plan and so that she is “...innocent of the knowledge” (III, ii, 45). In scene four, the Macbeths are depressed and resentful but have to appear normal to their guests. Finally, when he sees Banquo’s ghost, Macbeth is unable to contain himself and screams aloud. The guests do not know what is happening and Lady Macbeth tries to cover up, dismissing it as “...a thing of custom...” (III, iv, 97). She attempts to give the impression of being in control and calm when, in reality, inside she is very worried. Lady Macbeth is very ill in Act V. She has kept all the reality pent-up inside herself and now it is coming out as she sleeps.

She is obsessed with the bloodstains on her hands and the stench of Duncan’s blood. She realises that she’ll never be cleared of her involvement that night and “...all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.” (V, i, 48-9) The doctor brought in is baffled because he does not know about her part in the murder of the king. When Macbeth discovers his wife’s death in scene five, he is not particularly shaken, saying it would have happened

sooner or later. He seems braver and this is because he knows about the witches' prophecy – he cannot be harmed by anyone "...of woman born" (IV, i, 80). However, when Macbeth begins fighting with Macduff, he is very scared and finally realises he is going to die. He finds out that Macduff was born by Caesarean section, and therefore can kill him. Macbeth nonetheless, chooses to die a brave, man's death in an attempt to redeem himself:

" I will not yield,

To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet,

And to be baited with the rabble's curse.

Though Birnam Wood be come to Dunsinane,

And thou oppos'd, being of no woman born,

Yet I will try the last." (V, vii, 56-61)

These instances show the differences between appearance and reality and the importance in understanding them. Shakespeare wanted to show how one's true feelings could be very different from those communicated to others. He demonstrates that appearances cannot be trusted and how much difference there can be between your ideas of a person and their reality.

Another very closely related theme is that of natural and supernatural and how these two opposite ideas are so closely related. People at the times of the Stuarts had little to explain natural occurrences such as sun, drought, wind and rain. They turned to supernatural forces to account for these

inexplicable and mysterious 'forces' that turned against them or adversely, made for generous harvests in the autumn. Firstly, it seems that whenever the witches appear, they are accompanied by thunder – a rather overused stereotype but one that suits this theme. The witches are evil and depraved and therefore it is only suitable that they are complemented by terrible weather – a sure sign of malevolence and a bad omen.

It was also thought that nature mirrored an awful affair and could even predict acts of sin. In Act II, Macbeth reveals that "Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse/The curtained sleep..." (II, i, 50-1) showing that he has been troubled in his sleep by the witches' prophecy and also that Nature is not quite right just before the murder. This means that Nature can almost 'sense' that something bad is about to happen as Macbeth proceeds towards Duncan's bedroom. In the next scene after Macbeth has killed the king, he mentions that he "...heard the owl scream and the crickets cry." (II, ii, 16) A scream is not a natural sound for a normally peaceful owl to make and this is another example of Nature's unrest following the undeserved death of the a 'good' king. In scene three, Lennox talks to Macbeth about the last night's ghastly weather:

"The night has been unruly: where we lay,

Our chimneys were blown down; and as they say,

Lamentings heard I' the air; strange screams of death,

And prophesying with accents terrible

Of dire combustion and confus'd events

New hatch'd to the woeful time. The obscure bird

Clamour'd the livelong night: some say the earth

Was feverous and did shake." (II, iii, 54-61)

Apart from the ironic "...screams of death" and the night's "...woeful time...", this quote shows that after the proper king is removed, Nature almost rebels. The king, ordained and approved by Nature, is dead and so the earth responds by reflecting this. Tremors are felt, and strong gales damaged buildings, showing the general unease. People can see from the conditions that something is wrong even before the murder is discovered.

In scene four, Ross and an Old Man discuss the unusual events on the night of Duncan's murder. They learn that Macbeth will succeed him to the throne, " He is already nam'd, and gone to Scone/To be invested" (II, iv, 31-2). The Old man says that he say an "...unnatural" (II, iv, 11) deed – an owl caught a falcon and killed it in mid-air. Ross replies by saying that Duncan's specially trained horses "...broke their stalls, flung out, Contending ' gainst obedience, as they would/Make war with mankind." (II, iv, 16-8) He also says that they bit each other and ate the other horses. Clearly this is not an everyday incident and very abnormal.

It appears that once Nature knew that Macbeth, the epitome of a ' bad king', was going to rule Scotland, it revolted and displayed the wrongness of this for all to see. Everyone should notice these bizarre happenings and talk

about what it could mean. This is Nature's way of showing that there is something wrong. In Act IV, his messenger tells Macbeth that Birnam wood was moving – the witches said that he would never be vanquished until Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane – and this unsettles him a lot.

Supernatural powers are making seemingly impossible things happen to catch him out. Macbeth finally realises that he is not invincible and that Supernatural things are showing him to be wrong. Natural and Supernatural forces are joining together against him. At the end of Macbeth, Malcolm is proclaimed king, Scotland is finally at harmony again with a suitably appointed king. Malcolm is a 'good' king – he is noble, respected and honourable so Nature can now relax knowing that Scotland is in good hands.

An interlinked theme is that of the relationship between Macbeth and his wife – Lady Macbeth. The relationship between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth twists and turns during the play. Each scene brings on different feelings for each other and it is very interesting to watch how Lady Macbeth manipulates Macbeth to sway him towards her own views and intentions. It is also notable that Macbeth is not totally evil – his one main flaw is his ambition and the major, driving-force behind his evil is the encouragement of his wife. She is using him as a mask to carry out her dire deeds, but in the end her guilt and involvement in matters backfires on her.

At the start of the play, Macbeth is fairly innocent and has not let the witches' prophecy get to his head. Once Lady Macbeth gets news of his thaneship though, she immediately begins plotting and calls on evil spirits, asking to lose all her feminine inhibitions. However, she realises that

Macbeth "...wouldst be great, Art not without ambition, but without/The illness should attend it..." (I, v, 17-9) She likes his determined attitude but fears that he is not brave enough to take his chance. Lady Macbeth wants him to be more courageous and be certain to get the kingship. In scene seven, Macbeth begins to have doubts about murdering the king, but his Lady Macbeth forces him to proceed.

She persuades him by challenging his manhood – she calls him a “ coward” (I, vii, 43) and asks him: “ Art thou afeard/To be the same in thine own act and valour/As thou art in desire?” (I, vii, 39-41) Macbeth is finally convinced, as he wants to appear masculine to his womanly spouse. She is the evil influence to him and is making all the decisions. After the murder, Macbeth is very shocked at what he has done and starts to regret the killing apprehending that he will be forever tarnished by the deed. He is scared that he will not be able to sleep because of the knowledge of what he has done. Lady Macbeth dismisses these thoughts, reassures him and helps him clean his hands and remove any evidence before going to bed. This is especially ironic as later in the play, it is Lady Macbeth who cannot rest at night due to her involvement. She is obviously in-control in this marriage and is taking command.

When the body of Duncan is discovered, Lady Macbeth does the womanly thing and faints on the spot. She probably was acting, as she would not have been shocked knowing that he was dead the night before, and managing to stay composed then. Nobody suspects her, but Macbeth goes over the top with the melodramatic, exaggerated speech in Act II, scene three. He is too

eloquent when praising Duncan so soon after his death and Malcolm and Donaldbain become suspicious. In Act III, Macbeth has let his objectives and hopes get to him and he takes charge of matters. He considers Banquo as a threat to him and has him killed without consulting his wife. He tries to protect her and tells her to “ Be innocent of the knowledge” (III, ii, 45).

By scene four, Macbeth finds out that Banquo’s son, Fleance, has escaped to England. While in a banquet with other lords, he ‘ sees’ Banquo’s ghost appear and sit in his place. This distresses him and Macbeth becomes very worried and frightened. The ghost appears and disappears and the guests wonder what Macbeth is looking at as he behaves very unnaturally. At last, Lady Macbeth helps him out regarding Macbeth’s behaviour “ But as a thing of custom...” (III, iv, 97) before asking everyone to leave. Macbeth was out of control and relies on his wife to make his excuses and back him up.

In the final Act, Lady Macbeth has gone mad – she is sleepwalking and reliving the night of Duncan’s murder. Her conscience is, in the end, showing through after years of her ignoring it. During her sleep, she screams to herself and makes the action of washing her hands over and over again, trying to rid herself of ‘ Duncan’s bloodstains’. The doctor called in is puzzled while Lady Macbeth keeps feeling guilty for all the deaths. Now Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are both in the same situation – and are out of command. Neither of them is thinking rationally or making major decisions. Later, Macbeth begins to think logically as he realises that he is destined to die. He makes sound judgments and when he finds that Macduff is going to kill him, chooses to die fighting. On the contrary, Lady Macbeth dies whilst

completely mad and not herself like the sane Macbeth. Before the witches influence, the Macbeths had a stable, loving marriage – he calls her “ my dearest partner of greatness” (I, v, 10). But, their relationship deteriorates slowly, and at the end of the play, Lady Macbeth and her husband hardly know each other.

The image of a ‘ man’ was quite important in Shakespeare’s day. Women were expected to be humble, have no opinion and act weakly. They were meant to stay at home and cook, knit and do other ‘ womanly’ activities. Men, on the other hand, were supposed to be brave, courageous, clever, and natural leaders. They were better than women and should never doubt themselves. When trying to convince Macbeth, she often taunted him and questioned his manhood saying he lets “...’I dare not’ wait upon ‘ I would’”(I, vii, 44) Lady Macbeth used this stereotype much to her advantage when persuading Macbeth to her own point of view. She preys in his insecurities and makes him feel feminine when persuading him:

“ When you durst do it, then you were a man;

And, to be more than what you were, you would

Be so much more the man.” (I, vii, 49-51)

She, meanwhile, tries to seem masculine so she can command him with her strong-minded will and threaten him with her ‘ manliness’ – she calls to malicious spirits to “...unsex...” (I, v, 40) her. At the time Shakespeare wrote Macbeth, there was a lot of misogyny and these views were quite normal.

Macbeth uses her persuasive tactics when trying to get the murderers to kill Banquo. He questions their manliness by comparing them to breeds of dog...

Banquo is a very important character in Macbeth; his friendship with Macbeth leaves an interesting and winding path. At the start of the play, both characters are very close, and good friends. However, from the point when the witches fuel Macbeth's ambition with their predictions, they drift further and further apart. Banquo is wary of the witches and stays innocent during Act II. Macbeth however, become ravelled up in his plans and plots to murder the king. In this way, Macbeth and Banquo are almost opposed in their actions. On discovering Duncan's death, Banquo is still loyal to Macbeth and keeps quiet although he is suspicious of Macbeth and worries that Macbeth is taking the witches forecast too seriously: "Thou hast it now: King, Cawdor, Glamis, all, As the weird women promised, and, I fear, Thou play'st most foully for 't" (III, i, 1-3). Even when Macbeth prepares his death, Banquo stays silent although he is cautious. As the story continues, Macbeth and Banquo go from being close friends – battling together for king and country – to enemies and eventually Macbeth is merely warned about Banquo before having him killed.

It is possible that Banquo represents Macbeth's conscience – he tries to keep him from sinning and doing wrong. Nevertheless, Macbeth consistently ignores him, takes things into his own hands, and ends up worse off at the end of the play. Even after Macbeth thinks his conscience is dead, and he is rid of him, Banquo's ghost comes back to haunt him and remind him what he has done. This shows that you should not ignore your sense of right and

wrong; you cannot dismiss your conscience forever. Also, it does not pay to do wrong, try and take the easy route, as fate will always find a way.

Overall, I think that Macbeth is a play that incorporates a lot of antithesis and is better for it. These opposites and parallels add depth to an already thoughtful tragedy and make them a requirement for Macbeth to be the quality play that it is famed as. Shakespeare has done a fine job and clearly produced a play 'fit for a king'. James I would've been enthralled by the performance and it would've really made him leave the theatre thinking. This was especially because much of the content was tailored towards his interests. Antithesis is an essential part of Shakespeare's plays and Macbeth is a fine example of these.

The story is full of comparisons and conflicting themes. The "Nature versus Supernature" idea is especially strong as is the changing balance of power in the relationship between Macbeth and his wife. Macbeth is truly a play of antithesis including such a wealth of contrasting words and phrases – it would not be the same without the direct opposites. As this essay has hopefully shown, Macbeth is full of antithesis and an alert audience will pick this up and appreciate it. There is so much more to Macbeth than just antithesis though; psychology, poetry and moral teaching are buried within the play and the heavy use of antithesis highlights that this broad play has something to appeal to almost everyone.