

Macbeth essay example

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Equivocation is the practice of deliberately deceiving a listener without explicitly lying, either by using ambiguously misleading language or by withholding crucial information. What is the significance of equivocation in Macbeth?

Macbeth is a play about subterfuge and trickery. Macbeth, his wife, and the three Weird Sisters are linked in their mutual refusal to come right out and say things directly. Instead, they rely on implications, riddles, and ambiguity to evade the truth. Macbeth's ability to manipulate his language and his public image in order to hide his foul crimes makes him a very modern-seeming politician. However, his inability to see past the witches' equivocations—even as he utilizes the practice himself—ultimately leads to his downfall.

Sometimes, equivocations in Macbeth are meant kindly, as when Ross tries to spare Macduff's feelings by telling him that his wife and son are "well." Macduff initially takes this to mean that his family is alive and healthy, but Ross means that they are dead and in heaven. More often than not, though, such ambiguous statements lead to harm. The witches' deceptive prophecies are perhaps the most destructive instances of equivocation. They tell Macbeth that he can never be harmed by anyone "of woman born," but they neglect to tell him that Macduff was surgically removed from his mother's womb and therefore doesn't fall into that category. Similarly, they tell Macbeth that he can't be defeated until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane, but they don't alert him to the possibility that the opposing army might advance on his castle under cover of branches cut from Birnam trees.

Macbeth ignores several signs that might have alerted him to the witches' deceptive capabilities. Banquo warns Macbeth to be wary of their predictions since evil creatures will sometimes win people's confidence with "honest trifles"—small truths—only to betray them more deeply in the future. Indeed, the witches promise Macbeth fame and honor while withholding important information about the consequences that will follow. If Macbeth had been listening closely to the witches' language, he might have picked up on their potential for trickery himself. The three Weird Sisters greet Banquo with a series of riddling titles, hailing him as "Lesser than Macbeth, and greater" and "Not so happy, yet much happier." The phrases sound like nonsense, but in reality, both assertions in each statement are true. Banquo will have a lesser title than Macbeth but is the greater (i. e., more moral) man. He will not be as fortunate as Macbeth in the short term, as he will soon be assassinated, but will ultimately be much more fortunate because he won't be made to suffer the everlasting torments of hell. At no point do the witches lie to Macbeth—he simply hears what he wants to hear and ignores the rest.

It is ironic that Macbeth falls for the witches' equivocations because Macbeth and his wife are master equivocators themselves. Duncan laments that there's no method with which one may find "the mind's construction in the face," meaning that it is impossible to know what a person is truly thinking just from his or her outward appearance. Lady Macbeth mimics this language when she directs her husband to look like an "innocent flower" in order to hide the "serpent" that truly lurks in his heart. The Macbeths know how to use imagery and appearance to conceal the truth, and sometimes they even use those skills on themselves. Macbeth asks the stars to extinguish their

light so that his “ eye” cannot see what his “ hand” does. Similarly, Lady Macbeth asks the night to grow as dark as the “ smoke of hell” so that her knife cannot see itself slash its victim. The Macbeths know that their acts are wicked, so they try to hide the knowledge of their deeds from their own consciousness. In a sense, they wish to equivocate to themselves.

Just before Macduff kills him, Macbeth swears that he will never again believe those “ juggling fiends” that manipulate words and speak “ in a double sense.” However, it’s possible that the three Weird Sisters are not “ friends,” or demons, at all, but rather agents of morality who bring Macbeth to justice by trapping him with his own tricks. The drunken porter, imagining himself the keeper of hell’s gates, pretends to admit “ an equivocator that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God’s sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven.” One can imagine Macbeth receiving a similar welcome from the true porter of hell’s gates.