

Irony in Macbeth

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Shakespeare has been unanimously apotheosized for his mastery over the dramatic irony. Othello's superlative trust in Iago, Lear's concept of the most grateful Cordelia as the ungrateful, Ophelia's relying on the practical logic of Polonius instead of emotional validity of Hamlet's love—all these are examples of irony which contribute to build up the atmosphere of a drama. In Macbeth Shakespeare uses irony for the purpose of revealing Macbeth's character, his inadequacy in self-comprehension, Lady Macbeth's schism between her devilish exterior and her essential womanliness.

The dramatic irony lies in the contrast between the meaning to the speaker and an added significance to it to the audience. It is sometimes extended to include a situation also where one or more characters are ignorant of facts known to the audience or readers. In the play Macbeth this device is very much used. In order to intensify the tragic atmosphere, Shakespeare has made an opulent use of irony. Bradley in this regard comments, "In Richard III which has resemblances to Macbeth there is no such use of irony."

The very first speech of Macbeth "So fair and foul a day I've not seen" – is an instance of irony. It startles the reader, echoing the speech of the witches "fair is foul, foul is fair." Here Macbeth is ignorant of the fact about the significance of his speech, while the readers are much aware about it. Again, when Macbeth says to Donalbain that 'the head, the spring, the fountain of your blood is stopped', regarding the murder of Duncan, it is also an example of irony, as Donalbain is perfectly unaware that the speaker himself is the very murderer of his father. There is irony in the words of Macbeth when he expresses to Banquo that they would have been more hospitable to the King and Banquo, if they would have been aware of it. There is dramatic irony in Macbeth's speech in the royal banquet scene, as well as in his conversation with Banquo's ghost.

There is much irony in Duncan's speeches as well, when he greets Macbeth as 'O worthiest cousin', his words prove ironical because Macbeth commits the most treacherous act by murdering him. Again conferring the title of 'Thane of Cawdor' when he says 'what he hath lost, Macbeth hath won' – there is also an irony in the light what Macbeth does afterwards. When he treats Macbeth as 'a peerless Kingman', it also proves to be an irony because Duncan is completely ignorant that the man whom he praises so lavishly will murder him treacherously. When Lady Macbeth consoles and gives confidence to Macbeth after the murder of Duncan that 'a little water clears us of this deed', she is ignorant that the crime would put such a heavy weight upon her as to say later wards 'all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand'.

The porter's idea about himself to be the keeper of the hell-gate is also an example of dramatic irony, because after the murder of Duncan Macbeth's castle has indeed turned into a veritable hell.

Irony produces in us a sense of fate. There is irony in the assurances and promises of the supernatural witches about what they said to Macbeth. Macbeth too lately discovered the ambiguity and equivocation of their speeches.

In modern thought, accordingly to Moulton, irony is justice in a mocking humour. The act of Destiny exhibited in the plot of Macbeth is tintured throughout with irony. The rise of Macbeth, the fall of Macbeth, the rise-fall together, all are ironic actions.

Thus, the use of irony in the content of Macbeth is incorporated so integrally that the implication of the theme would almost be impossible without it and the device increases the intensity of horror & tragic atmosphere to a great extent.