

“Macbeth”: Literary Terms

DRAMATIC IRONY:

When the audience knows more about what is happening in the play than the characters.

e.g. “There’s no art to find the mind’s construction in the face.

He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust” (KING DUNCAN – I.3.13-16)

Duncan trusted the former Thane of Cawdor, but was betrayed by him. Macbeth is about to enter, and we know evil deeds are afoot.

Irony is a figure of disguise; it is a mode of expression in which the meaning is contrary to the words. Irony is displayed in Macbeth Act 1 Scene 4 when King Duncan appoints Macbeth to be the new Thane of Cawdor for his loyalty, but little did he know that he would be igniting Macbeth's ambition, which would ultimately lead to his death.

Another example of irony is when Lady Macbeth acted very cold and guiltless in Act 1 Scene 7 when she and her husband, Macbeth, planned to kill King Duncan; she even mocked Macbeth when his conscience was affected, however in the end it was her guilt and overwhelm that resulted in her demise. Shakespeare utilized irony to carry out the story.

TRAGEDY: A tragedy is a serious play with an unhappy ending, especially one concerning the downfall of the main character.

TRAGIC HERO: The central character – male or female – in a tragedy. The tragic hero starts off in a position of power and seems to have everything going for him/her. During the course of the play the tragic hero falls from this position and by the end, is dead.

FATAL/TRAGIC FLAW: The fatal/tragic flaw is the character trait which is responsible for the tragic hero’s fall from grace.

HYPERBOLE: A deliberate exaggeration.

e.g. “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand?” (MACBETH – II.2.63-64)

EUPHEMISM: A gentler way of saying something, when stating the truth is difficult.

e.g. “Is he dispatched?” (MACBETH – III.4.15)

Here “dispatched” is used instead of the words “dead” or “murdered”.

PATHETIC FALLACY: It is the "trick" of harmonising the weather with the events in the story so that the atmosphere is intensified and the significance of the action is broadened to affect not only the two or three people in the story, but the whole universe.

IMAGERY: As in poetry, imagery paints vivid pictures with words.

e.g. "Here lay Duncan
His silver skin laced with his golden blood"
(MACBETH – II.3.104-105)

Much of Shakespeare's language is very elaborate and poetic. Blood, sleep, darkness and light, illness, animals and children all feature in the imagery of *Macbeth*.

1. "[H]e unseamed him from the nave to th[e] chops" (1.2.24)
Shakespeare uses imagery to highlight Macbeth's destructive ability on the battlefield.

2. "As when the sun 'gins his reflection [s]hipwrecking storms and direful thunders [break,] So from that spring whence comfort seemed to come [d]iscomfort swells" (1.2.27-31)
Shakespeare uses the unpredictability of nature to relate the battle between Macbeth and Macdonwald. Weather is unforeseeable and can often go from peaceful to disastrous in a matter of moments. Similarly, immediately after defeating Macdonwald, Macbeth's army is attacked by the Norwegian King.

RHYMING COUPLETS: This is another technique borrowed from poetry, where two lines rhyme with each other.

e.g. "Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell." (MACBETH – II.1.63-64)

Shakespeare often uses this technique as a neat way of ending many of his scenes. It would signal to the audience that a scene was coming to a close.

COMIC RELIEF: A device used in tragedy to diffuse some of the tension after major scenes.

e.g. "Here's a knocking indeed: ...yet I made shift to cast him"
(PORTER – II.3.1-34)

ASIDE: An aside is when other characters are on stage and one speaks his/her thoughts without the other characters hearing. Often shows the contrast in how they appear to other characters and their private intentions/thoughts.

SOLILIOQUY: A character is alone on the stage and is speaking aloud his thoughts and feelings. This gives the audience a better

understanding of the character, and how their emotions lead to later actions. It can also be used to show a character is isolated from others or confused/conflicted.

A soliloquy is an act of speaking one's thoughts aloud when by oneself or regardless of any hearers, especially by a character in a play. Macbeth's extremely famed soliloquy below is palpably a turning point for the play.

"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.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heart-oppressed brain?
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw.
Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going;
And such an instrument I was to use.
Mine eyes are made the fools o' the other senses,
Or else worth all the rest; I see thee still,
And on thy blade and dungeon gouts of blood,
Which was not so before. There's no such thing:

It is the bloody business which informs
Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one halfworld
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's offerings, and wither'd murder,
Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace.
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost. Thou sure and firm-set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts,
And take the present horror from the time,
Which now suits with it. Whiles I threat, he lives:
Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.
A bell rings
I go, and it is done; the bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell"
(2.1.42-78).

Macbeth was waiting for the bell to ring to summon him to kill King Duncan. He was contemplating his decision one last time, when he saw a phantom dagger that affected him greatly. Macbeth alluded to the Goddess of Witchcraft Hecate, the Evil King Tarquin, and Murder itself influencing his decision. Shakespeare's purpose for this

soliloquy was so the reader could comprehend how vast and grand Macbeth's imagination is when he sees the dagger, which prepares the reader for Macbeth's mental torment for the rest of the play.

ALLUSION: The figurative reference of a person, place, or event, often of historical significance.

1. "Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds [o]r memorize another Golgotha, I cannot tell" (1.2.44-45)

Golgotha is the place where Jesus was crucified, but the captain refers to the crucifixion and its repercussions. Jesus is now a man worshiped by billions and is seen as a hero and savior worldwide. The captain is claiming that Macbeth fought so valiantly it seemed like he wanted to be martyred and instantly earn the admiration of his people.

2. "Approach the chamber and destroy your sight [w]ith a new Gorgon." (2.3.83)

Gorgons are horrifying female creatures from Greek mythology that can turn humans into stone by simply making eye contact. Shakespeare uses Gorgons to illustrate how horrifying King Duncan's corpse must have been and in doing so masterfully relates the traumatizing experience.

JUXTAPOSITION: The placement of two abstract places, people, or ideas to highlight the contrast between the two.

1. "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.13)

This line juxtaposes good and bad, almost making them out to be one and the same. Shakespeare's use of juxtaposition lays the foundation for Macbeth's pathetic downfall in addition to the witches' role throughout the story. It also introduces the theme of appearance vs. reality. The notion that the way things seem are not always what they are is prevalent in the play, with Macbeth and the witches chief examples of this.

2. "Stars, hide your fires; Let not light see my black and deep desires." (1.4.58-59)

Shakespeare juxtaposes the light produced by stars and the absence of that light, which is meant to represent the battle between good and evil, which is embodied by Macbeth and King Duncan in the play.

OXYMORON :The placement of two antithetical concepts together to allow for deeper understanding.

1. "I know this is a joyful trouble to you" (2.3.53)

Shakespeare uses oxymoron here to show that Macbeth takes pride and even enjoys serving King Duncan, which is ironic because Macbeth has just returned from committing regicide. This is another

great example of a recurring theme in the play, appearance vs. reality.

METAPHOR: The comparison of two abstract objects.

1. "If you can look into the seeds of time [a]nd say which grain will grow and which will not, [s]peak then to me"(1.3.63-64)

Shakespeare compares the future to a garden, with each possibility represented as a seed. The seeds that grow are the future, and those that are not are choices not made, goals not achieved, and dreams not realized.

2. "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player [t]hat struts and frets his hour upon the stage [a]nd then is heard no more"(5.5.27-29).

This metaphor is from Macbeth's famous soliloquy in reaction to news of his wife's death. In this passage, life is compared to a pathetic actor, who tries to be significant and memorable, but at the end of the play becomes the exact opposite. Shakespeare uses this metaphor to show how distraught Macbeth was at this point in the play.

EXTENDED METAPHOR: An extended metaphor is when an author exploits a single metaphor through multiple linked grounds throughout a poem or story. An example of an extended metaphor in Macbeth is when the drunk porter stated that "the Inverness (was) the dwelling-place of the Devil himself" (2.3.44), and what Shakespeare essentially was trying to imply was that the castle had become a living hell literally and figuratively. The castle had become a place of evil after this quote because of the King's murder, so the drunk porter's metaphor extended throughout the story.

EUPHEMISM: Euphemism is a figure by which a harsh or offensive idea is stated in an inoffensive manner. Euphemisms are present throughout the story when talking about murder. For example, Lady Macbeth said, "He that's coming (m)ust be provided for: and you shall put (t)his night's great business into my despatch" (I. v. 64-66). Lady Macbeth usage of the word "despatch" covers up the inappropriate act of heresy which was King Duncan's intended assassination. Another example is when Macbeth questioned the murderers if they had successfully killed Banquo by asking, "Is he dispatch'd?" III. iv. 15. The use of the word "despatched" again is used to mention a killing in an inoffensive manner.