***‘Macbeth’ is Shakespeare's profound and mature vision of evil. No summary can do justice to the play. At best, a commentary such as the one here can be no more than a map. It can show the roads, and even point out the important places; but it is no substitute for reading the play. The entertainment, the moral teaching, the psychology, and the poetry are often all contained in the same speech-even, sometimes, in the same line. Macbeth needs an alert reader- The irony gives us a complete feeling of Fate’s operation! ---And Yet Macbeth Is A Tragic Hero!***

‘MACBETH’ NEEDS AN ALERT READER-THE DRAMATIC IRONY OF THE PLAY, OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Who can tell us more about a man’s character than his wife? Shakespeare allows Lady Macbeth to explain her husband’s character as she understands it, and although she cannot see the *whole truth*, she tells us a great deal about Macbeth that is true. Two lines of her soliloquy in Act I, Scène 5 are particularly significant:

 *“Thou wouldst be great;*

*Art not without ambition, but without**The illness should attend it: ‘’*

By ‘illness’ Lady Macbeth means ‘evil’; but her metaphor is appropriate: Macbeth catches evil, as one might catch a disease. The play shows how his symptoms develop, until there is no hope of a cure, and the man must die…!

When Elizabeth I of England was dying, childless, she named James VI of Scotland as her successor. He became James I of England.

In August 1606 James was at Hampton Court, a palace near London, entertaining his brother-in-law, King Christian of Denmark. A play was acted for them, *Macbeth*, written by the best dramatist of the time, William Shakespeare. It was a new play, but the story was an old one, and James knew it well, because it was about the ancestors, Banquo and Fleance, through whom he had inherited the throne of Scotland.

Shakespeare found the story in ‘The History of Scotland’ by Raphael Holinshed, but his play is much more than a dramatic re-writing of the historical facts. He made many changes, and the biggest of these concerned James’s ancestor.

James also believed that he was descended spiritually from the long tradition of English monarchs, and that he had inherited the power of healing that **Edward the Confessor** (1042-66) possessed. Shakespeare’s description of this power **(Act 4, Scene 3,148-58)** is, to some extent, deliberate flattery of his king. Shakespeare also knew that James was extremely interested in witchcraft and had written a book about it.

*Macbeth* is certainly a play ‘fit for a king’.

But of course, it is more than this-more than flattery for an ancient British monarch; and although the story is largely true, we do not read Macbeth as ‘history’. We could interpret Shakespeare’s play as a moral lesson. Macbeth murders his king. To murder any man is a crime, but those who lived at the time of Shakespeare thought that the murder of a king was the greatest of all crimes. Kings were appointed by God, to rule as His deputies: rebellion against a true king was rebellion against God. By murdering Duncan, Macbeth gains the crown; but he loses love, friendship and respect-and, in the end his life. His crime is rightly punished.

***Porter:***

***“In conclusion, equivocates him in a sleep, and giving him the lie, leaves him.*”’**

Macbeth deliberately chooses--not once but several times in the play-the evil path. In the portrayal of Macbeth we witness the destructive power of evil in the inner life of a man. It is not a simple, smooth downward progress; but involves turmoil and conflict between conscience and other desires, between good and evil impulses that work within man. At every stage of Macbeth’s degeneration we witness the choice being made deliberately; at the same time there is a sense of inevitability about Macbeth’s choices. The Witches merely prophecy certain things for Macbeth. They do not influence him in any concert manner. It is a fact that his ambition impels him towards “the swelling act of the imperial theme” but his conscience fills him with horror at the idea that has come to him about how to gain the throne.

**[All the Witches:**

**The weird sisters, hand in hand,**

**Posters of the sea and land,**

**Thus do go, about, about,**

**Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,**

**And thrice again, to make up nine.**

**Peace, the charm’s wound up.”]……………….**

We hear a lot about Macbeth before he comes on to the stage, first from the Sergeant who has fought on his side, and then from Ross, who also speaks of Macbeth’s courage in battle. These reports lead us to expect a noble warrior and a loyal subject to Duncan. We have only one slight doubt about Macbeth, and we are not able to explain quite what this is. We know that, somehow, he is associated with the witches; and this, surely, cannot be good.

**Macbeth:**

**“Let every man be master of his time**

**Till seven at night; to make society**

**The sweeter welcome, we will keep ourself**

**Till supper-time alone. While then, God be with you.”**

 Macbeth is Shakespeare’s profound and mature vision of evil. It is a play depicting destruction, wrestling with creation. It is a study of the disintegration and damnation of a man. And yet Macbeth is a ‘tragic hero’, Therein lies Shakespeare’s art, evolving from a deep understanding of the complexity of the human nature.

**All the Witches:**

**“Fair is foul, and foul is fair,**

**Hover through the fog and filthy air.”**

Macbeth speaks very little when first the witches, and then Ross, hail him as ‘Thane of Cawdor’. Perhaps he is stunned to silence by his good fortune, but soon we hear him speak-or rather, think aloud, for he doesnot mean to be overhead:

**Macbeth:**

**“Glamis,and Thane of Cawdor;**

**The greatest is behind.”**

It is not, however, cowardice that restrains Macbeth. At the end of Act I he is wrestling with his conscience. He is acutely aware of the duty which he owes to Duncan:

**Macbeth:**

**“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.”**

Very soon he begins to admit ‘a suggestion’, some ‘horrible imaginings’, and then he says to himself the word ‘murder’ **(Act I, Scene 3, 133; 137; 138.Oxford University Press)**. Once this word has been spoken, we must regard Macbeth with suspicion grows when he confesses his ‘lack and deep desires’ in the scene that follows **(Act I, Scene 4, 51.Oxford University Press)**. It is confirmed when his wife, speaking as though he were in the room with her, tells Macbeth that she knows he wants

**Lady Macbeth:**

**“That which rather thou dost fear to do,**

**Than wishest should be undone.”**

It is significant that the play begins with a brief meeting of the three witches. A very short prologue is long enough to awaken curiosity, but not to satisfy it. We have come in Act I, Scene I ,where at the *end* of the witches’ meeting, just as they are arranging their next appointment before their familiar spirits-devils in animal shapes-call them away into the ‘**fog and filthy air**’. The apparent confusion implied in their words –“**Fair is foul, and foul is fair**” points to the general upheaval of order to which Scotland is led by Macbeth and that constitutes the main action of the play. “**So fair and foul a day I have not seen**”—a strange coincidence evidently establishes a connection-a kind of affinity- between Macbeth and the Witches, even before they meet. It also brings out the possibility that Macbeth, who has so far been referred to as a brave general in the heights of glory, has a somewhat tainted soul and is, therefore vulnerable to the Witches’ machinations.

**Porter**:

***“[Knock] Knock, knock. Knock. Who’s there in th’ other devil’s name? Faith, here’s 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. O come in, equivocator. [Knock]”***

Dramatic irony is a literary device often employed by dramatists of all times for heightening the tragic effect. It appears in a speech or a situation in which two opposite meanings are possible. It is discernible where, for example, the speaker makes a remark that has a special significance for other characters in the play or for the audience- a significance of which the speaker is unaware. Similarly, dramatic irony arises in a situation that may help the audience foresee disaster or calamity unknown to the character concerned. The fact of words reaching out to meaning in the future which is beyond the speaker’s imagination intensifies the tragedy considerably. Macbeth abounds in such examples of dramatic irony and this fact accounts for its success as a tragedy among readers and audiences. In Macbeth the effect of atmosphere is particularly marked; the atmosphere, indeed, is both the result, and cause of the artistic unity of the play.

**Ross:“And Duncan’s horses, a thing most strange and certain,**

**Beautous and swift, the minions of their race,**

**Turn’d wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,**

**Contening ‘gainst obedience as they would**

**Make war with mankind.”**

Duncan’s words of appreciation for the brave Macbeth come to be charged with dramatic irony in the light of the subsequent acts of villainy and treachery committed by the “**valiant cousin**” and “**worthy gentleman**”. Informed of Cawdor’s joining hands with the enemy he orders his death-

**Duncan:**

**“No more that Thane of Cawdor shall deceive**

**Our bosom interest.”**……………………but his words become ironical when the new Thane of Cawdor, i.e. Macbeth, proves him wrong and encounters him with a much greater amount of treachery. In Act I, Scene IV Duncan regrets having built “an absolute trust” on the treacherous Cawdor; the regret itself is full of tragic irony, but the fact of his saying this precisely when the new “Thane of Cawdor” is contemplating his murder makes the irony even more poignant and tragic. On Macbeth too Duncan has already been building an absolute trust. The tragedy is further deepened by Duncan’s ecstatic reception of Macbeth:

**Duncan:**

**“O worthiest cousin!**

**The sin of my ingratitude even now**

**Was heavy on me.**

Further, the irony here becomes more effective because the audience is now fully aware of the evil ambition in Macbeth’s mind. On the other hand, the good king Duncan cannot imagine that the worthy cousin to whom he is apologizing for his fancied ingratitude will soon commit the worst conceivable ingratitude by killing him. He creates a cruelly the worst conceivable ingratitude by killing him. He creates a cruelly ironical situation by inviting himself to Macbeth’s castle: the lamb committing himself gleefully to the wolves’ care. There is a dramatic irony in his extravagant tribute to Macbeth’s exit from the scene:

**Duncan:**

**“..he is full so valiant.**

***And in his commendations I am fed*.**

**It is a banquet to him.”**

He then goes on to describe Macbeth as “a peerless kinsman” without knowing that this kinsman of his would ultimately prove “peerless” only in the treachery and not in the sense of nobility that the term is usually associated with.

**Porter:**

***“Lechery, sir, it provokes, and unprovokes: it provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance. Therefore much drink may be said to be an equivocator with lechery: it makes him, mars him; it sets him on, and it takes him off; it persuades him and disheartens him, makes him stand to and not stand to.””***

The vision of the dagger before him with the handle dripping with blood unnerves Macbeth. The scene is a profound evocation of terror and uneasy gloom. The ideas of night and witchcraft and murder expressed in Macbeth’s words create an atmosphere of fear and evil- a fitting prelude to the murder. Fear tentacles are seen to spread fast and wide, as in the very next scene we see the so far invulnerable Lady Macbeth feels the first twinge of the emotion. She admits that she herself would have killed Duncan if only he had not resembled her father as he slept. Her courage now is the hollow courage derived from drink. Macbeth after his crime is shown to be in abject terror pitifully giving voice to his inability to pronounce “Amen.” While Macbeth expresses the inventible loss of peace mind as a result of his criminal action-his consciousness that he will no longer be able to sleep in peace-Lady Macbeth expresses her fear of a more practical kind. She tells him to wash his hands and place threw daggers in Duncan’s room, but fear has completely unmanned him; he cannot go back into the room, and it is Lady Macbeth who has to undertake the work. Every noise now appeals him and his bloodstained hands, he feels, will redden the entire ocean.

**Lady Macbeth:**

***“To bed, to bed; there’s knocking at the gate. Come, come, come, come, give me your hand; what’s done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed.” [Exit]***

Macbeth is guilty of committing the most heinous crimes. Lady Macbeth, as if she were a fourth witch, encourages and influences him with valour of her tongue and the crime, which might otherwise have remained undone, is committed. Lady Macbeth, too, soon realizes the futility of the crown that they have obtained through crime and soliloquies. She suffers like her husband, the tortures of Hell, a glimpse of which we get in the sleep-walking scene.

***Porter:***

***“[Knock] Knock, knock. Knock. Who’s there I’th’name of Beelzebub? Here’s a farmer that hanged himself on th’expectation of plenty. Come in time-have napkins enough about you, here you’ll sweat for’t.”***

When Lady Macbeth makes her first appearance in the play, she is seen reading the letter from her husband in whom he tells her “*his dearest partner of greatness*”, of his success in the battle, the prediction of the witches and their partial fulfillments. In her comments on the letter, she expresses her admiration for his greatness, and wishes for him all that he wishes for himself. Aware of her husband’s weakness, she is determined to further the schemes using the whole force of her superior will lead him into prompt action. Her cruelty is only assumed and meant for the betterment of her husband’s career.

***Gentlewoman:“ Since his majesty went into the field, I have seen her rise from her bed, throw her night-gown upon her, unlock her closet, take s forth paper, fold it, write upon’t, read it, afterwards seal it, and again return to bed, yet all this while in a most fast sleep.”***

As we look at the character of Macbeth we see, more clearly than we are able to see in real life, the effects of uncontrolled ambition on a man who is, except for his ambition, noble in nature. Macbeth has full knowledge of right and wrong; he knows that he has committed a very great crime by murdering Duncan. Shakespeare shows us how Macbeth becomes hardened to his crimes, and yet how he suffers from fears which he has created himself.

***Banquo: “Thou hast it now, king Cawdor, Glamis, all,***

***As the weird women promis’d and I fear***

***Thou played’st most foully for’t.”***

Gradually Macbeth discovers the unshakable truth of evil’s deception, but not before it has wrought deterioration of character in him. To him appearance is reality, but he has lost touch with the benevolent spirit, which gives meaning to life. The theme of false appearance is embodied in the very action of the play, so that Macbeth’s despairing recognition of mere ‘mouth-honor’ among his remaining followers echoes ironically his wife’s advice to be a serpent under the welcoming of Duncan. It is reinforced by the cloud of uncertainty that settles on Scotland during Macbeths’ despotism. After the murder of Duncan, the darkness that envelops the earth in daytime reinforces the disorder and equivocation in nature as aptly implied in the words of Rosse, Act II, SceneIV.

**Old Man: “Threescore and ten I can remember well;**

**Within the volume of which time, I have seen**

**Hours dreadful and things strange, but this sore night**

**Hath trifled former knowings.”**

The scene in which Lady Macbeth receives the royal guest is steeped in dramatic irony. Duncan’s immediate response to the surroundings on his arrival at Macbeth’s castle is charged with irony:

**Duncan:**

**“This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air**

**Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself**

**Unto our gentle senses...”**

Banquo’s expression of admiration for the castle, **“the heaven’s breath/smells wooingly here,”** is similarly imbued with a sense of grim irony. The irony becomes memorable when Duncan describes the conspiring Lady Macbeth as **“our honoured hostess”** and **‘’fair and noble hostess.”** The irony employed here effectively heightens the cruelty, ugliness and meanness of the act that Lady Macbeth proposes to commit in partnership with her husband. There is equally intense irony in Duncan’s final words on the stage. Duncan has no idea that his host and hostess whom he loves highly will prove the worst traitors to him; the audience, however, knows it through Lady Macbeth’s earlier announcement that Duncan would never leave their castle alive.

**Duncan: “Give me your hand;**

**Conduct me to miner host: we love him highly,**

**And shall continue our graces towards him.”**

Duncan has no idea that his host and hostess whom he loves highly will prove the worst traitor for him. The audience, however, knows it through Lady Macbeth’s earlier announcement that Duncan would never leave their castle alive.

**Porter: “[Knock] Knock, knock. Knock. Who’s there? Faith, here is an English tailor come hither for stealing out of a French hose. Come in, tailor, here you may roast your goose. [Knock] “**

Dramatic irony is present in many of Macbeth’s sayings. His opening words, “So foul and fair a day I have not seen”, bear, unknown to Macbeth himself,. Special significance for the audience on account of their being an echo of the earlier words of the witches, “Fair is foul, and foul is fair.” He does not know what we know, the close correspondence between his language and theirs, suggestive of a bond of spiritual kinship pre-existing between them. Again in the same scene Macbeth utters the well meaning words, “**Let us toward the king**.”, but what a grim suggestion the words have for us who know the full story. He is moving towards the kingship indeed in a sense in which he at least consciously does not mean it. Macbeth’s words to Banquo in Act II, Sc.I before Banquo retires to bed, is again ironical.

**Macbeth:**

**“I think not of them;**

**Yet when we can entreat an hour to serve,**

**We would spend it in some words upon that business,**

**If you would grant the time.”**

Macbeth tells him that he and his wife could have accorded greater hospitality to the king if they had been given ample time for it. The irony lies in the reader’s awareness of their plan to assassinate their royal guest. There is grim irony in Banquo’s delivery of the diamond sent by Duncan in appreciation of Lady Macbeth’s hospitality. Banquo still remains ignorant of the evil designs of his hosts and the irony is understood by Macbeth and the audience. There is much irony in Macbeth’s words to Macduff justifying the killing of the guards.

**Macduff:**

**“Confusion now hath made his masterpiece:**

**Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope**

**The Lord’s anointed temple.”**

Here Macduff’s ignorant of the identity of the murderer, takes the words at their face value; but the audience is now confirmed of the hypocrisy and villainy of the speaker. There is dramatic irony in Macbeth’s inviting Banquo to the banquet:**”My Lord, I will not.”** And indeed he does not fail to attend the banquet-much to the consternation of his lord: Macbeth’s decision to secure peace and safety by murdering Banquo is an irony in itself. That which was calculated to further his fortune most certainly marks the beginning of his decline.

Dramatic irony can be noticed in quite a number of speeches made by Lady Macbeth. Thus she tries to console a repentant Macbeth after he has murdered the king:

**Lady Macbeth:**

**“These deeds must not be thought**

**After these ways so, it will make us mad.”**

 But of, her words turn ironical in the light of the future happenings. It is she who goes mad. Again, in the same scene her words of reproach for her husband **“Brainsickly of things”** turn ironical when we find how she herself becomes “Brainsick” before her end.

**Lady Macbeth:**

**“A little water clears us of the deed:**

**How easy is it then.”**

We realize the irony of these words when we set them in the context of the words of a shattered and insane Lady Macbeth in the sleep-walking scene:

**Lady Macbeth:**

**” Here’s the smell of the blood still.**

**All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.”**

We also discover dramatic irony in several speeches as made by other characters. Act III, Sc.VI, where Lennox and another Lord are speaking about the late state of affairs in their rotten state, is full of pungent rhetorical irony. “**Things have been strangely borne**”, says Lennox. The gracious Duncan was pitied by Macbeth and **“marry, he was dead**.” The drunken remarks of the porter are again in some places, poignantly ironical. He compares himself with the “**porter of Hell gate**” without knowing that the castle of the Macbeths has indeed turned hellish with the assassination of the royal guest. After the discovery of the murder Macduff tells Lady Macbeth that he cannot tell her what has happened because” **the repitation,in a woman’s ear,/ would murther as it fell**.”

The dramatic irony in this case lies in the ignorance of Macduff as to the identity of the killers and in the awareness in the audience of the facts. Dramatic irony also underlies Lennox’s description of the ‘unruly’ night just before Macduff returns with the news of Duncan’s assassination.

**Duncan:**

**“There’s no art**

**To find the mind’s construction in the face**

**He was a gentleman on whom I built**

**An absolute trust.”**

Lennox while describing the nights is yet to know the truth of the murder but the audience linked up the strange happenings of the night with the foul murder of the innocent king. The dramatic irony in the account of the portents effectively intensifies the horror of the heinous crime.

**Angus:**

**“Now does he feel his title**

**Hang loose about him, like a giant’s robe**

**Upon a dwarfish thief.”**

A.C. Bradley thus comments on Shakespeare’s use of dramatic irony in Macbeth: “Not even Richard III is there so much of irony. I do not refer to irony in the ordinary sense (to speeches, for examples, where the speaker is intentionally ironical, like that of Lennox in Act III , Scene vi) I refer to irony on the part of the author himself, to ironical juxtaposition of persons and events, and especially to the Sophoclean irony by which a speaker is made to use words bearing to the audience, in addition to his own meaning , a further and ominous sense, hidden from himself and usually, from the other persons on the stage.”

Dramatic irony produces in the audience a sense of the working of Fate. The action initiated by the protagonist has in itself the seeds of his destruction though he is only aware of the glory and prosperity that he is aiming to get. Macbeth’s ambition makes him blind to the equivocation of evil forces. The Witches’ prophecies are taken in one sense by Macbeth and he lets his evil impulses take the upper hand. In the end, however, Macbeth realizes that he has misinterpreted the words of these “juggling fiends.” But for this knowledge comes too late; his actions must bear fruit and he must be destroyed. This is the awesome dramatic irony working at the level of the action of the play, and it is what makes the tragedy’s impact so powerful. At every step, the situational irony mocks at Macbeth. He kills Duncan, but the king’s sons live; he feels Macduff to be a threat but his murder of the rest of the family achieves nothing for him. He thinks he has killed one enemy in Banquo only to be tormented and led to what the protagonist expects happens. The irony gives us a feeling of Fate’s operation.

**Macbeth**:

***“*Stars, hide your fires.**

**Let not light see my black and deep desires,**

**The eye wink at the hand. Yet let that be**

**Which the eye fears when it is done to see.*”……………………..(!)***

***“As Caesar loved me, I weep for him; as he was***

***fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I***

***honour him, but as he was ambitious, I slew***

***him….Who is there so base that would be a***

***bondman? If any speak, for him have I offended.”***

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***REFERENCES, WORDS, SENTENCES EXCEPT IDEAS, SETTINGS AND CONTEXTUALIZE FROM DR.SEN, TEXT BOOK AND OTHER.***

-RITUPARNA RAY CHAUDHURI**.**