

Use of Irony in *Macbeth* (Part-2)

[BA (Hons.), Part-2, Paper-III]

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But the play abounds with tragic irony. The characters are sometimes unaware of the future significance of their statements, though the playwright shares this knowledge with the audience. It is noteworthy that these cases of irony cannot be grasped by one who reads or watches the play for the first time. That is why this kind of irony is often called irony in retrospect and it haunts Lady Macbeth mostly. She, who once planned ‘this night’s great business’ to achieve ‘solely sovereign sway and masterdom,’ realises the fruitlessness of the enterprise and exclaims, ‘Nought’s had, all spent.’ But the Sleep Walking Scene is decked with this irony. Lady Macbeth cannot stand darkness and ‘has light by her continually,’ though once she exclaimed, ‘Come thick night/ And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell.’ She once exhorted Macbeth to understand that ‘A little water clears us of tis deed,’ but now utters hopelessly, ‘What, will these hands never be clean?’ and finds that ‘all the perfumes of Arabia cannot sweeten this little hand.’

Macbeth also makes use of a complex vision of tragic irony, the Sophoclean irony, in which the characters say something or act in a way which is, as the author intends the audience to know, grossly inappropriate to the situation. The very first words of Macbeth, ‘So foul and fair a day I have not seen,’ startle one by recalling the Witches’ ‘Fair is foul, and

foul is fair,' and suggesting a spiritual kinship between them and Macbeth. Emerging from reverie of murder, Macbeth urges the nobles in apparently innocent but highly ambiguous words, 'Let us toward the King.' Duncan's comment on Cawdor's treachery, 'There's no art /To find the mind's construction in the face' is made highly ironic with the immediate entrance of Macbeth, the next Cawdor. Duncan exclaims, 'I have begun to plant thee.' But does he not plant Macbeth's dagger on his breast? Duncan frequently hails him as his 'worthiest cousin' and 'My worthy Cawdor, little knowing that he is committing himself to the wolf's care by vesting Inverness. The hellish aspect of Macbeth's castle escapes the eyes of Banquo who praises its delicate and sweet air, and the Porter unconsciously thinks himself the porter of hell-gate and working under a Beelzebub, who here is none other than Macbeth himself. Towards the end of the play Macbeth appoints the Doctor to find the disease of Scotland, unknowing that he himself is the ulcer of Scotland.

Irony fills *Macbeth* with a rare atmosphere of doubts, ambiguities, misinterpretations and mysteries, and, as A. C. Bradley says, excites 'the vague fear of hidden forces operates on mind's unconscious of their influence'.