



THE FLIPSIDE



ASSIGNMENT: Write an essay analyzing the themes suggested by the phrase “Fair is foul, and foul is fair,” spoken by *The Witches in Macbeth*.

Many ideas are suggested by use of the phrase “fair is foul and foul is fair” in *Macbeth*. They suggest themes such as reversal and confusion of order, chaos, and reality and illusion. Characters think one thing will happen based on their actions, but the opposite does.

The witches are the root of some of the meanings of this phrase. They seem fair, as they tell the future mostly accurately, but are foul, as they are mainly evil. They lead people towards evil actions and do them themselves, while they do not at first appear to be evil and seem even to be helpful or at least truthful.

One major illusion that basically causes the entire story is that if Macbeth and Lady Macbeth become king and queen, they will be happy. They assume this because Duncan is king and he appears to be happy. The problem is, though, that unlike Duncan, they are attempting to attain those positions by murdering the proper king, causing chaos. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth become king and queen simply because they desire more power, under the illusion that they are unhappy and this will make them happier and give them easier lives. In reality, though, they are already happy, and becoming king and queen just makes their lives difficult and miserable.

Both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, at different times in the play, believe they can kill people, get away with it, and go on with their lives perfectly content and normal. Each time, it is an illusion that there is no guilt; in reality there is. Blood is used to symbolize guilt, and Lady Macbeth, while sleepwalking, sees an illusion of blood on her hands, showing that she now feels guilty. Her confidence when planning to kill Duncan was an illusion as well, brought on by her desire to help Macbeth advance. Macbeth had “seen” massive amounts of blood after killing Duncan, an illusion, but indicating the truth. In reality, they cannot murder people and still feel innocent.

There are many obvious visual illusions in *Macbeth* as well. When Macbeth deliberately visits the witches, they show him four apparitions. The apparitions are illusions in every sense of the word. They warn Macbeth and also reassure him, while each apparition that appears is an image of what destroys him in some way, thus an illusion in another sense. For example, the second apparition is an infant telling Macbeth that no man born of a woman could hurt Macbeth. The infant happens to be Macduff being born from his mother who had just died, and was, therefore, a corpse and not a living woman. What is an illusion becomes and is a reality.



What is fair, the words of the apparition, is also foul, because it is making Macbeth overconfident while the image is really of his eventual downfall.

There is another major example that affects the story in a much wider sense: the murder of Duncan. First, the reality that the country is safe after the war is an illusion, as Lady Macbeth is plotting to kill Duncan. Then, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are under the illusion that killing Duncan and taking the throne will be good for them and the country and order will be maintained. This creates an illusion people tend to be attracted to: that they are really being a help to everyone in the world. The reality, on the other hand, is completely different. As soon as Duncan is killed, all of Scotland becomes chaotic until the kingship is returned to Malcolm, the proper king, at the end. Even so, the peace is an illusion, because eventually there will be fighting again; there always is.

A last illusion is Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane. The third apparition was a person carrying a tree branch. It represented a soldier carrying a large tree bough from Birnam Wood to Dunsinane, making it appear as though the forest were moving towards Macbeth’s castle, while the illusion was saying that the forest had to come to the castle before Macbeth was destroyed, which seemed impossible. The obvious illusion in this incident was that it appeared that Birnam Wood was coming to Dunsinane; the reality was that it was people carrying branches. The other, slightly less obvious illusion, is that nature itself is coming to destroy Macbeth. The reality is a bit different; it is everyone in Scotland and many from England fighting against Macbeth, including those he thought were loyal to him.

The phrase “fair is foul, and foul is fair” is very important to *Macbeth*. Many things that occur in *Macbeth* are not as they seem or as they are expected to be. Destruction is wreaked on Scotland, and order is found only where it seems it should not be. Everything is an illusion except that which should not exist and seems to be an illusion. The illusions are more real than what seems to be reality.

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