

AQA English Literature GCSE

Macbeth: Themes Appearance vs Reality

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Appearance vs. Reality

The **difference between appearance and reality**, and the **deception** that is possible because of this, is at the heart of the tragedy of Macbeth. The **outward appearance** of the Macbeths as trustworthy and innocent enables them to get away with their plot to murder Duncan and ascend the throne. Loyalty and trust are juxtaposed by the ultimate betrayal.

The ways in which reality and appearance can be **manipulated** and **altered** is facilitated by Shakespeare's use of the **supernatural**. From Witches and spells to hallucinations of knives, blood and ghosts, the **chaotic atmosphere** and **mental instability** of the main characters is central to the play.



<https://www.haikudeck.com/macbeth-education-presentation-AscTS2jywx>

The Witches

The Witches are the first **exposure** we get as an audience to the **chaotic** and **inverted** world of Macbeth. The opening of the play creates a **paradox**, the contradictory statements are reflective of appearance versus reality.

- One witch says, **“When the battle’s lost, and won,” (1.1)** which suggests there are **two sides** to every story. One side loses, but one side wins.
- One of the most famous lines is, **“Fair is foul, and foul is fair,” (1.1)**, the use of the **conjunction “and”** shows both good and bad can exist at the same time. Even the **weather** is reflective of this, as Macbeth declares **“So foul and fair a day I have not seen”**.



<https://theatrius.com/2019/09/24/macbeth-addresses-the-question-of-the-day-at-cal-shakes-orinda/>

Here Shakespeare warns his audience that **no one and nothing can be trusted**. In a wider sense, he suggests that there are **no certainties when it comes to morality**. What appears to be good on the surface may not be.

Despite the grotesque outer appearance of the Witches - Banquo describes them as looking **“not like th’ inhabitants o’ th’ Earth” (A1S3)** - what is interesting to note is the



Witches aren't **overtly violent or cruel** within the context of the plot. They don't tell Macbeth to kill Duncan. Instead, it is the **chaos and confusion** they create that is so frightening.

Shakespeare uses the Witches to show how **human greed makes us vulnerable to deception and betrayal**. Early after their meeting with the Witches, Banquo reminds Macbeth, *“Oftentimes, to win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths; / Win us with honest trifles, to betray's / In deepest consequences,”* (1.3). This shows that humans can be **easily fooled by lies** if they are given with small truths. These contradictions confuse us and lead us **astray**.

Lady Macbeth

Besides the Witches, Lady Macbeth is one of the most significant examples of the difference between appearance and reality, and the **conflict** between the two. Her **ambition** fuels her deception of others and she ensures she **disguises** her true intentions in order to **gain power**.

Feminine vs Masculine

Initially it is likely that her **outward appearance** as a **woman** would mean the audience would assume her to be weak and therefore superfluous to the story line. However, as the play progresses we see the inner workings of her mind and realise **internally she is stereotypically masculine**. As she becomes more powerful and masculine she is ultimately destroyed by her weak mind.



<https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/lady-macbeth-william-oldroyd-period-film-bones>

The audience can see Lady Macbeth is aware of the importance of outward appearance and how it can be **manipulated** when she teaches Macbeth how he should act.

- She tells him, *“To beguile the time, / Look like the time, bear welcome in your eye, / Your hand, your tongue,”* (1.5). Her use of **physical features**, such as **“eye”**, and **“hand”** emphasise the importance of outward appearance. The verb **“look”**, shows how he doesn't have to **be “like the time”**, only **imitate** it.
- A similar idea is expressed later when she instructs him to *“Sleek o'er your rugged looks, be bright and jovial / Among your guests tonight,”* (3.2).
- She finishes, *“Look like th'innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't,”* (1.5). Again she is stressing the important difference between **looking** like something and **being** something else. The juxtaposition of **“flower”**, which **connotes femininity**, with **“serpent”**, which **connotes masculinity and trickery**, shows how there can be a **dangerous divide** between a person's **outward appearance and inward nature**.
 - ◆ **“Serpent”** is an **allusion** to the **Biblical story** of Adam and Eve, where it is a **symbol of the devil**.



Shakespeare demonstrates how appearances cannot be trusted because they are **moldable** , meaning they offer no **insight** into the reality of a person.

Shakespeare shows how appearances can be used for acts of **self-denial** as well as deception, **keeping the conscience clear** even though a crime has been committed. After asking the spirits to take away her inner femininity, Lady Macbeth says, **“Come, thick night, / And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, / That my keen knife see not the wound it makes, / Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,” (1.5)** . This shows how she wants to use appearances to her advantage by **blinding** others to her actions.



<https://annanetrebko.com/2019/09/25/macbeth-at-the-metropolitan-opera/>

→ The **personification** in **“my keen knife see not the wound it makes”** implies there is a level of self-deception to her plan, where her **“knife”** appears to be a **symbol for herself** .

→ The **semantic field of darkness** , furthermore, implies our **reliance** on what we **can see** makes us ignorant and gullible. Shakespeare could be **criticising** his society’s focus on **obvious, black and white truths** .

Ultimately, though, her deceit is met with fitting consequences, as she is **caught between reality and imagination** . Her hallucinations are symbolic of her losing control of herself, which is ironic as she has tried so hard within the play to control everyone else. By the end she cannot control her mind and is ultimately destroyed by it.

Macbeth

Macbeth **benefits** greatly from the conflict between appearance and reality, managing to be viewed as an **honorable warrior and king** despite the awful crimes he has committed. He is a **symbol for deception and facade** , but also for the way people **lose sight of themselves** when they are constantly deceiving others. It becomes hard to tell **who** is the real Macbeth.

Descriptions of Macbeth

One of the first descriptions of Macbeth we get is from Duncan, who calls him **“O valiant cousin, worthy gentleman,” (1.2)** . Macbeth appears to be the **perfect subject and kinsman** . **“Valiant”** and **“worthy”** are **adjectives associated with honour and nobility** , particularly in the context of the **royal court** and the **Code of Chivalry** , which the Renaissance admired. This is **situational irony** because we soon see that Macbeth is neither **“valiant”** nor **“worthy”** , demonstrating that the way someone appears through their words and actions **reveals nothing** about what lays underneath the surface.



Macbeth's **first line** in the play is, ***"So foul and fair a day I have not seen,"*** (1.3), signaling how his **fate** is tied to the **confusion of contradiction**. Shakespeare **foreshadows** his indecision and **moral ambiguity**. Furthermore, the use of **"foul"** and **"fair"** echoes back to the Witches' opening chorus, **associating his character with the supernatural**. We can guess that Macbeth might be an example of someone who seems fair but **"is foul"**.

Outward appearance

Macbeth, too, sees appearance as something that can be **managed** to meet his **intentions**. He tells Lady Macbeth, ***"Away, and mock the time with fairest show, / False face must hide what the false heart doth know,"*** (1.7), with the **rhyming couplet** suggesting he finds **contentment** in this plan.

Shakespeare implies **deception** is a form of **playing God** because people believe they can defy **"time"** and truth, the **most powerful forces humanity is subjected to**. The juxtaposition between **"false face"** and **"false heart"** highlights the **divide** between someone's **outward looks and true nature**.



<https://bardonthebeach.org/news/2018/macbeth-the-story-in-photos/>

A similar sentiment is given later, when Macbeth says, ***"We / Must lave our honours in these flattering streams / And make our faces vizards to our hearts, / Disguising what they are,"*** (3.2). These **metaphors** about **"honour"** and **"fairest show"** suggest compassion is a **performance or scientific process** that can be **reproduced** without **meaning** behind it. The **verbs "disguise"** and **"hide"** imply the Macbeths' lies **shield** them. This shows how they are **scared of being discovered and losing their good reputations**. Shakespeare suggests people use their appearances to **protect themselves from judgement**, accusing society of being **afraid** of intimacy.

Overcome by reality

Like his wife, Macbeth **suffers** from his **exploitation** of appearances, as he starts to be unable to tell what his reality is anymore. The appearances of the **"dagger"** (2.1) and the **"Ghost of Banquo"** (3.4) both convey his **crumbling sense of reality**. The evil, corrupt parts of himself he tries to repress and **"disguise"** start to **express themselves** in the form of morbid hallucinations and spirits, suggesting your true nature can never be changed no matter how much you alter your appearance. He can't **trust his own mind** as a result of his deceit. The biggest conflict as a result of appearance vs. reality is within **Macbeth's own head**.



Secondary Characters

The other, secondary characters in the play get their fair share of confusion and chaos when it comes to appearances. Shakespeare shows that it's not just the Macbeths and the Witches who experience a **distorted, deceitful reality**. The whole world is **upside down**, and we're all just living in it.

Duncan

Though Duncan is a good king, Shakespeare implies he is **vulnerable** because he isn't **wary** of the difference between appearance and reality. He is too **gullible**.

He tells his subjects, ***"Signs of nobleness like stars shall shine / On all deservers,"*** (1.4), suggesting he believes a person's good nature is **reflected** in their face. The **imagery** of **"stars"** shining like a spotlight implies good people stand out in a crowd, almost as if **illuminated by God**. The **"stars"** are an **allusion to Heaven and God**, suggesting there is a link or connection between God and His people because the **"stars"** can reach down to earth.

Macbeth, in contrast, wants to be in darkness to do his crimes, asking for ***"seeling night"*** (3.2) suggesting it would be obvious to Duncan that he's not a **"deserver"**, but Duncan is unaware of Macbeth's plots. He remarks that the Macbeths' ***"castle hath a pleasant seat,"*** (1.6), calls Macbeth a ***"worthy gentleman"*** (1.2), and Lady Macbeth an ***"honoured hostess,"*** (1.6). He is **taken in** by their **"pleasant"** appearances. It is almost humiliating how drastically wrong his impressions of the Macbeths are, challenging these **ideologies**. Shakespeare suggests true evil is so **dangerous** because it arrives with the face of goodness. The most vulnerable people are those who don't **understand** that the world is an evil place.



<https://ruthmillington.co.uk/national-theatre-macbeth-review/>

Symbolism of darkness

The **distress** Duncan's murder welcomes into the world is **symbolised** by Shakespeare's use of **darkness and nightfall**. The **pathetic fallacy**, with furious thunderstorms and thick layers of fog and darkness that the sun can't get through, creates an **atmosphere of obscurity and fear**. Before the murder takes place, Banquo observes, ***"There's husbandry in heaven, / Their candles are all out,"*** (2.1). The night is dark and starless, an **omen** for the hopeless, devastating future to come. He suggests that even heaven is acting suspicious and secretive, so that **the whole world is against him**. Furthermore, it seems Macbeth's wish has come true: the **"stars"** have extinguished their **"fires"**. This is **significant** because it suggests Macbeth has a **supernatural ability to control his environment** and **reality, provoking fear** from the audience.



Analysis Tip

It's important to note small changes in the **atmosphere** of the play, these can be influenced by factors such as the **weather** and **changes from light and dark**. Often these things are easily overlooked if you've not bothered reading the play properly. For example, In the paragraph above a character mentions that "**candles are all out**" which could be easily missed. Analysing the effects of small things like this will stand you out from other candidates and will make your analysis seem unique and original.

Development of the Theme

Macbeth is **introduced** to us through the words of the Witches. The **opening scene foreshadows the use of trickery and witchcraft** in the play because of the Witches' presence, but it also **establishes Macbeth as an untrustworthy, corrupt character**. Equally, his first words **recall** the Witches' opening chants. The two are **tied together**, and their roles in the play complement each other.

- The Witches use appearance to deceive Macbeth, who in turn betrays his own kinsmen and friends.
- Macbeth's motive for his deception is his lust to be king, as Shakespeare suggests **power is behind all evil and manipulation in the world**.

The **hierarchy of power** in the world means there is a **chain of influence**: the citizens of Scotland obey their king, Macbeth, who obeys the prophecies of the supernatural Witches.

Structure

An interesting **structural** point to consider is how Shakespeare **organises** the **slow breakdown of order** in Scotland as the **plot** progresses. In the play, the idea of appearance vs. reality is closely linked to the idea of **order vs. disorder**, or chaos.

- If appearance is a trustworthy, accurate reflection of reality, then order is kept. If not, chaos breaks loose.



<https://www.pikrepo.com/search?q=stratford-upon-avon>

The play opens with **thunder and lightning while a battle rages**, but this is just a **glimpse** of the chaos that is to come.

For the most part, Scotland seems to be **controlled and organised**. We see that Duncan is a thoughtful king who is good at **maintaining order** and **honouring the hierarchy**. This all **changes** once Macbeth becomes king. The sky is permanently dark, more and more people die, and horses try to eat each other.

As reality breaks down the Macbeths are haunted by more and more hallucinations. Ghosts and hallucinations are a **symbol for the divide between appearance and reality**, as no



one can tell what exactly they are: imaginary, or real? Also note how, in their final scenes, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth stop talking in **perfect blank verse**. Their switch to **prose** indicates their **mental instability**. **Reality falls apart**, slowly exposing the villains in the story.

The final message

Overall, Shakespeare places his characters in **a world full of chaos and confusion**, but the resounding message seems to be that **their world isn't too different from our own**.

Anyone is capable of putting on a **mask** and mocking the time. Anyone could look like an innocent flower while being the snake under it. But all of this goes **against** the **natural order**, and more importantly, **against God**. It is only **rewarded with death and suffering**.

By the end of the play, the Macbeths' moods swing so violently, their decisions change so quickly, that it seems **their masks have tricked even them**. They no longer know **who** they are, their sense of self has been **destroyed**, because **they have driven their appearances away from their reality**.

