

Macbeth Essay

Macbeth and many of Shakespeare's other plays have stood the test of time because of their continued relevance in contemporary society, embodying the ethical and political ideas of both today and the time in which they were written. Now, just as under Elizabethan rule, themes such as power & the difference between Kingship and Tyranny, as well as that between appearance and reality are still prominent in the public conscious; explaining why audiences still regard *Macbeth* with high literary value.

In the past, all civilisations have had some form of social order, however, it's not been uncommon for rulers to abuse their power and act only in their own self-interests. Such tyrants as Macbeth can be seen repeatedly throughout history, both in antiquity and the present day, as can good and benevolent leaders such as Duncan. The play *Macbeth* originates from a historical account told in *Holinshed's Chronicles*. In his heavy adaptation of its events, Shakespeare identifies that when executives come to power, they are often surprised by how empty it feels and how quickly things can fall apart. Upon hearing of his wife's death, Macbeth laments: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player/ That struts and frets his hour upon the stage/ And then is heard no more. It is a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, /Signifying nothing." This soliloquy's metaphor is an expression of the character's anagnorisis, a key point in Aristotle's model of a tragic hero's journey: when a nihilistic Macbeth finally realises that all his machinations to seize power have amounted to naught. The political relevance of this message to modern Australians is not lost upon MP, Tim Watts. In a c.2016 [address](#) to the House of Representatives, Watts draws from this piece to exemplify the similarities between Shakespeare's play and our own parliament: "As we enter the final act of this tale of betrayal in service of nothing more than personal ambition, we see that the talented Member for Wentworth knifed the previous PM only to become him... And we all know how the play will end." Two years after this conjecture, Turnbull has met a similar fate, being not long ago replaced by Scott Morrison, once again "signifying nothing." *Holinshed's Chronicles* and many other sources show us that this lust for power is by no means a new thing and that its corruption can lead people to such acts of treachery, eventuating in their downfall. The profound applicability of Shakespeare's words to today is astonishing, and doubtless, their wisdom will continue to find new relevance in the centuries to come, just as they have reflected times past. There are also parallels between the eponymous hero's misuse of power and the modern-day: in recent years, North Korea has developed an extensive arsenal of biological and chemical weapons, along with nuclear missile tests, violating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The country's dictator, Kim Jong Un, is very much like the "abhorred tyrant," Macbeth, both whose "vaulting ambition" blinded them of all ethical considerations of their actions. Macbeth realises that "Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return/ To plague th' inventor: this even-handed justice/ Commends the ingredients of our poisoned chalice/ To our own lips" but instead disregards this metaphor, resolving "to [commit] this terrible feat." Shakespeare stresses in attempts to teach his audience, that by ignoring his conscience, and doing what he knew to be wrong, Macbeth's life became insufferable, costing him dearly. It is in this way that, even today, *Macbeth* remains still relevant in regards to the world's current ethical and political climate.

Throughout *Macbeth*, Shakespeare exploits equivocation and dramatic irony, presenting his spectators with two different aspects of this tale's events, that of appearance and reality, constantly manipulating semblance and verity, making the live audience feel engrossed in the drama. Before Macbeth's

introduction, Shakespeare writes of the previous Thane of Cawdor's betrayal of King Duncan, conspiring with the King of Norway; "No more that thane of Cawdor shall deceive/ Our bosom interest: go pronounce his present death,/ And with his former title greet Macbeth" commending his service to the crown. The playwright foreshadows the tragedy's end, using this epigram to exemplify Duncan's ignorance of the truth. With his keen awareness of the audiences' emotion, Shakespeare's expert placement of dramatic and visual irony is seen continuously upon his stage. No sooner does Duncan repent, "There's no art/ To find the mind's construction in the face./ He [Cawdor] was a gentleman on whom I built/ An absolute trust," who should appear but Macbeth, bringing timely comic relief, again highlighting the characters' blindness to Macbeth's perfidy. This one line near perfectly captures this performance's key theme. The irony constructed between these two figures, along with the good King's disregard for Donalbain's words, "There's daggers in men's smiles," is chief to Shakespeare's message, that ill-placed faith can lead to a ruler's downfall, and that there are very few people those in power can truly trust. This contrast between truth and perception plays a great role within *Macbeth*, just as it does today; whilst not as theatric, the importance of this contrast cannot be overlooked. In 1983, the Soviet Union's early-warning system misidentified, what in reality was sunlight reflecting off high-altitude clouds, as several American warheads. Without the logical and ethical forethought of Stanislav Petrov, the officer monitoring these systems, this error, and the USSR's retaliation would have resulted in Global Thermonuclear War. It is just this forethought that Macbeth lacked, and that Shakespeare wanted to underline through his anti-hero's demise. This pertinent example keenly demonstrates the importance of distinguishing appearance and reality, where it allowed a man to single-handedly save the world from utter destruction. When Macbeth hears of Malcolm's army at Birnam Wood, he exclaims, "To doubt th' equivocation of the fiend/ That lies like truth," now aware of the witches' double-meaning. Equivocation and the manipulation of meaning, however, are not limited to theatre, in the political scene, war-time Finnish President, Risto Ryti, signed an agreement with Nazi officials, cryptically wording it to be nullified upon his resignation, allowing Finland to secure military aid, leaving Germany unrecompensed. Concluding Shakespeare's first scene, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair," the sisters chant; as noted by [Professor Kranz](#), this fricative alliteration is mirrored in Macbeth's introductory line: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen." This reiterates the play's central theme, opposing appearance and reality; as Kranz says, "what is repeated in Macbeth's iteration is... morphemic and semantic, a matter of individual words and their juxtaposed contrary meanings." Though the fair actions of Stanislav Petrov indubitably saved humanity, for him, it led to the foul end of his military career. This paradoxical motif of foul being fair is maintained for the entirety of his theatrical production, and Shakespeare uses it to underline the profound certainty, that in this world, not everything is as it seems. This truth has remained unchanged to this day and continues to be just as prudent as the moment it was written. The Bard writes to enlighten his listeners, touting that prevarication, illusion and actuality, as well as double-meanings, can be used to fulfil a person's ethical or political agenda, a lesson our society would be foolish to ignore.

As discussed, Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* is one of great relevance to contemporary society, embodying many of today's fundamental ethical and political features. His themes of power & the difference between Kingship and Tyranny, as well as that between appearance and reality, have been shown to hold special significance to the modern world; aptly reflecting the feelings and events of recent history. There are many similarities between the tragedy's tale and the past years' moral and political atmosphere, it is this, and Shakespeare's unmatched use of themes and devices that have contributed to his plays' continued importance to humanity.