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English 9: Mr. O'Toole

Appearance Vs. Reality

“Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (1.1.12) is the infamous line that begins Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. This line highlights the relationship between one’s appearance and the reality of their nature. In this play the connection between appearance and reality is paradoxical; what appears in one a way in reality may not be that way.

Throughout the play Shakespeare uses paradoxes to show the connection between appearance and reality. He writes, “God’s benison go with you and with those/ That would make good of bad and friends of foes.” (2.4.55-56). His paradoxical words convey there is no relationship between one’s appearance and their reality; it is as if reality and appearance are complete opposites. Shakespeare uses character’s deception to prove his theory on appearance and reality.

In the first act of the play it is discovered that the Thane of Cawdor has been a traitor to Scotland. Duncan is deceived by the Thane’s false appearance:

No more that Thane of Cawdor shall deceive

Our bosom interest. Go, pronounce his present

Death, and with his formal title greet Macbeth. (1.3.73-74)

Once again Duncan makes the mistake of judging by appearance and gives the title to Macbeth. Now Macbeth the next Thane of Cawdor’s appearance will deceive him, which was Macbeth’s intention.

Lady Macbeth instructs him: “Look like th’ innocent flower/but be the serpent under’t.” (1.6.76-77). By using the serpent there is a biblical reference to the deceiving serpent that tricked Eve to eat the apple causing original sin. The serpent did not appear to Eve as being harmful just as Macbeth did not appear to Duncan as harmful, but just as the serpent did Macbeth had a destructive nature that was concealed by his false face and dishonest words. Duncan continues: “There’s no art/To find the mind’s construction in the face.” (1.6.76-77) There was no way that Duncan could have seen through Macbeth’s honorable appearance to his vaulting ambition that would kill anyone for the crown. His appearance deceived his destructive nature.

Shakespeare also uses language of borrowed clothes to convey Macbeth’s unfitness for his title. As the nobles learn of Macbeth’s nature they realize that his title was based on his appearance and not on his reality. To be king one had to be honorable, trustworthy, and good natured which was what Macbeth’s appearance conveyed, but his nature was the exact opposite: ruthless and immoral. The noble Angus replies, “Now does he feel his title/Hang loose upon him, like a giant’s robe/Upon a dwarfish thief.” His title was too great for the absence of greatness that he had. His appearance was deserving of his title, but his reality lacked all the greatness that his appearance carried.

Macbeth’s had a title, an honor, and a life all riding on his appearance. When his reality was discovered he lost all that he had. His appearance deceived all for sometime, but in the end his reality came out. Macbeth’s appearance was paradoxical to his reality. He seemed fair, but in reality was foul natured.