

Macbeth Literary Device

Writer: William Shakespeare | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Figures of Speech

- **Metaphor:** A metaphor directly calls one thing something else to show similarity, without using “like” or “as.” Example: “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage.” Macbeth calls life a “walking shadow” and a “poor player” (actor), meaning life is short, insubstantial, and meaningless.
- **Personification:** Personification is when non-human things are described as if they have human qualities. Example: “Let not light see my black and deep desires.” Macbeth talks as if “light” can see, giving sight (a human power) to light.
- **Irony:** Irony is when the opposite of what is expected happens, or when words mean the opposite of their literal sense. Example: Macbeth believes he is safe because the witches say, “No man of woman born shall harm Macbeth.” Ironically, Macduff was not born naturally, so he kills Macbeth—proving the prophecy tricked him.
- **Allusion:** Allusion is a reference to another famous story, event, or person. Example: “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood Clean from my hand?” Macbeth refers to Neptune, the Roman god of the sea, to show how much blood (guilt) he has; not even the whole ocean could clean it.
- **Symbols**
 - **Blood:** Blood is a major symbol in the play. It stands for guilt and murder. After killing Duncan, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth can never feel clean—their hands are “stained with blood,” symbolizing their guilt.
 - **The Dagger:** The imaginary dagger that Macbeth sees before killing Duncan is a symbol of his guilt and his temptation to commit murder. It represents his violent ambition that leads him down the wrong path.
 - **Sleep:** Sleep in Macbeth stands for peace, innocence, and a clean conscience. After killing Duncan, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth cannot sleep peacefully. “Macbeth does murder sleep” means Macbeth has killed his own inner peace.
 - **The Witches:** The witches symbolize evil, fate, and the supernatural. They tempt Macbeth and create chaos; their prophecies cause him to commit crimes.

- **Darkness and Night:** Darkness in the play stands for evil deeds and fear. Most of the crimes happen at night. When Lady Macbeth says, “Come, thick night,” she means she wants darkness to hide her actions.
- **The Moving Forest (Birnam Wood):** The prophecy that Birnam Wood will come to Dunsinane is a symbol of fate catching up with Macbeth—when the soldiers use branches from the wood as camouflage, the prophecy comes true.

Moral Lesson:

- Blind ambition leads to destruction.
- Crime and guilt always bring suffering.
- You cannot escape the consequences of your actions.