

33. DRAMATIC IRONY IN MACBETH

Macbeth is one of the greatest and the most Classical of Shakespeare's tragedies. It has both the grandeur and simplicity of a successful tragedy. *Macbeth* is the greatest effort of Shakespeare's genius; the most sublime and impressive drama which the world has ever beheld, says Drake, an eminent critic of English literature. Dramatic Irony is a device employed by dramatists to intensify tragic emotion. But irony is rooted in human life; we find certain schemes and calculations are often upset in an unexpected manner by the force of circumstances, we call it irony of fate. And this fate is nothing but man's explanation of what he cannot rationally account for. It is the recognition of a higher power that sits above human beings and controls human affairs. We may call it fate or destiny, or moral order or Providence. Moulton calls this irony 'justice' in a mocking humour. This irony, manifested in the mysterious working of fate, is capable of producing intense dramatic interest. It is called 'irony' because a character is unconscious of it when it is operating upon him. Dramatic irony is the discrepancy between the understanding of those on stage and those in the audience. It may manifest itself in speech, situation or even in the action itself. An ironical statement is that which indicates a meaning other than the one it professes to give. An ironical event or situation is one in which there is a contrast between expectation and fulfilment. It has also a double meaning; one meaning is plain and obvious and the other meaning ominous and mysterious. A person does something or says something but does not understand the full implication of his words or actions; in fact, they have a significance, not known to

him, but known to the spectators. He is not conscious of the doom that awaits him, and proceeds towards it in blissful ignorance, but the audience know it and watch the issue curiously. Dramatic irony thus produces an atmosphere of suspense and intensifies tragic emotions. The ancient Greek dramatist Sophocles used it with great effect in his famous tragedies.

Among Shakespeare's plays, *Macbeth* is the most remarkable for the frequency and power of its irony. In *Macbeth*, irony manifests itself not only in words and speeches but also in situation and action. The entire action of the tragedy is pervaded by a subtle irony. The prophecy of the witches is fulfilled no doubt, but Macbeth is ruined. He gets the crown but loses his soul. The later predictions are also fulfilled, but in a way different from Macbeth's expectation. Irony thus enters the very texture of the drama. In *Macbeth*, we find numerous instances of irony scattered here and there throughout the play. The irony used by Shakespeare in *Macbeth* is known as Sophoclean irony, that is, 'a speaker uses words which bear to the audience, in addition to his own meaning, a further and ominous sense, not perceived by himself or by other persons on the stage'. The very first speech uttered by Macbeth in the play "So foul and fair a day", echo the words of the witches in the opening scene of the play: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." Duncan praises Macbeth as noble when he says: 'What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won.' Macbeth murdered Duncan, but here so is Duncan praising Macbeth that one could not expect the crime from him. We come across similar irony in *Othello* where also the villain Iago is held to be a noble and trusted character till nearly the end of the play. Another instance of dramatic irony can be found in Duncan's commentary on the treachery of Cawdor when he says: 'There's no art/To find the mind's construction in the face;/He was a gentleman on whom I built /An absolute trust.' In

this statement of Duncan, Macbeth sees the illustration of his own person. The beautiful description of Macbeth's castle by Duncan and Banquo is full of irony, for within a few hours Duncan is cruelly butchered in it. In the famous Porter scene, the porter calls himself the porter of 'hell gate', he says it without knowing anything, but the audience know that he is indeed such, for he guards the door of a house, which has been turned into a hell. Another striking example of irony is the answer of Banquo which he gives to Macbeth when the latter reminds him, 'Fail not own feast.' Banquo replies, 'My lord, I will not.' and he keeps his promise to meet his doom.

The most tremendous use of dramatic irony in *Macbeth* is to be found in the sleep walking scene. After Duncan's murder Lady Macbeth had said to her husband "A little water cleans us of this deed." In the sleep walking scene, she is presented as rubbing her hands as though washing them, and urging with dread and disgust, 'Out, damned spot! Out, I say! ... Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, Oh, Oh!' There are several other instances of dramatic irony in this play. In fact, 'the entire atmosphere of *Macbeth*, as of no other tragedy is oppressive with the sense of something subtly malignant as well as inexorably revengeful in the forces that rule the world; of a tragic irony in the ultimate scheme of things.'