

**'The supernatural is always a vehicle for evil' Using language and literary techniques, discuss to what extent you agree with this statement in *Macbeth* with reference to *The Weir*.**

Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, written in the Jacobean era, and Conor McPherson's play *The Weir*, set in rural Ireland, both include supernatural elements which help the play's progression. However, both plays are about entirely different things; *Macbeth* is a play in which the main character plots to kill the King, whereas *The Weir* focuses a lot more on companionship and the importance of a community as well as the effects of loneliness.

In Act 1 Scene 1 of *Macbeth*, the setting, 'A desolate place' helps to create an ambiguous and misty atmosphere right from the beginning whilst the weather choice of 'Thunder and lightning' forewarns the audience of negative events and adds to the sense of equivocation, which is achieved through paradox like 'when the battle's lost, and won'. James I himself believed in witches and so did most of society in general therefore by including the supernatural, Shakespeare was clearly making the play relevant to his audience, as they would have believed in such matters. The opening interrogative, 'When shall we three meet again?' suggests that the witches are up to something which could be interpreted as the supernatural being meddlesome, if not evil.

The minor declarative 'Upon the heath' shows the witches making a prediction, alluding to the fact that a Jacobean audience would have believed in them having certain powers. Iambic tetrameter such as 'And thrice again, to make up nine' makes their speech sound chant-like, indicating something unusual about them as their speech contrasts with the blank verse of the other characters.

The supernatural first occurs in *The Weir* when Jack begins his story about Maura Nealon's house being 'built on what you'd call... that... road' where 'the fairies would come'. The suspension marks highlights Jack's uneasiness when talking about the supernatural, and though he goes on to say that it isn't a true story, it is clear that he is moved by it. Shakespeare's use of blank verse in *Macbeth* links to the dramatic tradition of the time and contrasts with the highly naturalistic style of speech used by McPherson, such as the interrogative 'Why not, says you, ha?' (Finbar) which helps to portray the Irish vernacular of the characters in the bar, whilst the tag question 'ha?' helps the characters to interact.

Banquo's interrogative 'why do you start and seem to fear ...?' in Act 1 Scene 3 suggests that the witches' predictions may be ones that Macbeth has already thought about, or desired, before. Here, the supernatural could be considered a vehicle for evil as the scene begins with the witches talking about how they will torture the farmer for his wife's actions. However, their prophecies are somewhat neutral and so it seems that Macbeth acts of his own will, rather than committing the murder because of the supernatural.

The debate of Fate vs. Free Will was common in the Jacobean era and people believed in witches and such folklore therefore their presence could be merely to fulfil audience expectations rather than as a vehicle for evil. The witches simply spot the weakness in Macbeth and let him believe it is his fate, suggesting that they may be evil themselves but don't create evil in others. Banquo's question to Macbeth shows how the witches are tempting Macbeth to proceed with an evil course of action that he has already thought about.

Similarly, *The Weir* uses interrogatives but in the form of tag questions such as '...here, *wouldn't it be?*'. Finbar seems to be seeking reassurance from the other characters which is similar to *Macbeth* in that Macbeth often seeks reassurance from Lady Macbeth, highlighting her as the dominant figure in their relationship. Similar to *Macbeth*, where the setting is 'upon a heath', the bar in *The Weir* is situated in an isolated place, which could be viewed as something typical of a ghost story, allowing a sense of mystery to build up.

Declaratives such as 'which *fate and metaphysical aid* doth seem/ To have thee crowned withal' in Act 1 Scene 5 highlight how Lady Macbeth believes that both fate and the witches want Macbeth to be King and the imperative 'look like th'innocent flower/ But be the serpent under't' reflects how Lady Macbeth herself is portrayed – she appears to be innocent and friendly but, as indicated by the contrastive conjunction 'but', she is instead planning treacherous acts, reflecting the play's theme of appearance versus reality. Saying that she will 'pour' her 'spirits in thine ear' suggests that the witches, who are arguably the main supernatural element of the play, only have a limited amount of power which they use to their advantage, and that evil actually resides in humans themselves.

Shakespeare seems to be suggesting that everyone is responsible for the actions they take, which could reflect the growing belief in Humanism during the Renaissance. Such references reflect the time in which Shakespeare was writing, as do archaisms such as the second person archaic pronoun '*thy*', which could be expressing Lady Macbeth's belief that Macbeth is inferior to her. Shakespeare is also touching on the theme of appearance versus reality which is clear throughout the play. The 'serpent' could be a reference to Satan in the Garden of Eden, highlighting how sinister and dark Lady Macbeth's character really is.

Contrastingly, the characters in *The Weir* do not make any implications of one being more inferior to the other. McPherson's use of humour shows irreverence for characters, usually Finbar, such as the interrogative 'you were making it all up, weren't you?'. This helps to create a chain of adjacency pairs, allowing the characters to interact, which is central to the play's theme of companionship and to an extent presents the supernatural as something that shouldn't be taken too seriously. Humour is also used in *Macbeth*, by the Porter (2.3), which presents itself in a satirical way. Such humour would not be as familiar to a modern day audience as it was to the Jacobean audience, therefore many modern directors choose not to include it.

Macbeth's 'fatal vision' in Act 2 Scene 1 symbolises the bloody course upon which he is about to embark and is part of his fatal flaw which leads to his downfall, as well as presenting the theme of appearance versus reality again. His interrogative, questioning whether it is a 'dagger of the mind' caused by his 'heat -oppressed brain' highlights his stress and tension, and the use of the premodifying adjective 'heat -oppressed' signifies just how extreme this stress that he is feeling is, as committing regicide is a sin that can't be forgiven.

An audience in the Jacobean era would know that Macbeth is about to break the Great Chain of Being and at the same time Shakespeare was maintaining the idea of the Divine Right of Kings - a doctrine hugely believed in by the Christians of the time. By maintaining this, Shakespeare could be showing King James' place in society and suggesting that no one should challenge Kingship. The tragedy therefore has a didactic purpose as it shows the

audience what the consequences of such actions would be. The parallel analogy of Tarquin violating an innocent emphasizes the extremity of what Macbeth is about to do and the use of opposites, mentioning 'to heaven' or 'to hell', builds up an antithesis between good and evil and shows his acknowledgement that both exist.

The audience is left to wonder whether the dagger is simply a figment of Macbeth's guilty mind, or whether it is being caused by a supernatural force. This could be considered similar to Jim's story of Declan Donnelly where he says 'And we'd been having the few little drinks' showing how he searches for a loophole in the possibility that the supernatural exists. The fronted coordinating conjunction 'And' conveys how he is building up reasons to show that the ghost might not have been real and the stage direction of 'A little laugh' highlights his uneasiness. McPherson seems to be suggesting that the supernatural does exist and that humans need to have beliefs and that it is this need to believe which makes us humans. The slight doubt here would be crucial to a ghost story and to a play being watched by an audience as it would add an air of mystery.

In Act 3 Scene 4 dramatic irony such as 'play the humble host' makes Macbeth's previous actions seem even worse as it reminds the audience that Macbeth's behaviour is a pretence. Lady Macbeth's asides to Macbeth (Are you a man?) along with his responses (Ay, and a bold one...) draw attention to her being more partner in their relationship as she questions his masculinity, and portrays her in a negative light by showing she is more concerned with getting caught than feeling guilty. Aristotle's idea of Peripeteia could be surfacing in this part of the play as Macbeth's fortune is slowly being reversed.

Here, the supernatural is perhaps presented in a good way and, from a Freudian point of view, Macbeth's repressed feelings seem to be manifesting before his eyes, which is possibly the power of good over evil. Macbeth's imperative, telling the ghost to 'Avaunt and quit [his] sight!' highlights the extremity of his current guilt. This is furthered through it also being an exclamatory, and the use of the pronoun 'my' could reflect how solely he feels the guilt, rather than Lady Macbeth also feeling it. The supernatural in this scene could suggest that justice is being served, and Macbeth's reaction to the ghost could be his punishment for his previous action.

Likewise, in *The Weir*, the supernatural is portrayed in a positive way as it is used as a source to unite the characters in the pub. This is shown in Finbar's comment 'Valerie, love, nobody's going to'. McPherson's use of the contraction 'nobody's' along with the term of endearment 'love' helps to mimic natural speech and also shows how close the characters have become after having spoken for the night, touching the play's theme of companionship.

Hecate's use of adjectives such as '*spiteful* and *wrathful*' in Act 3 Scene 5 highlight how she believes Macbeth wasn't worth the trouble, whilst the coordinating conjunction 'and' furthers this notion. The use of rhyming couplets such as 'illusion/confusion' enforces Hecate's power when she shows her displeasure and the pairing of the two abstract nouns suggests that the witches themselves cause confusion which is achieved through an illusion. Shakespeare may have been suggesting that witchcraft isn't capable of evil but can trigger things that have already been thought about (1.3). It is arguable that the witches have overreached, which forms a parallel with Macbeth's situation and conforms to Aristotle's ideas.

This scene is often omitted from productions as it may draw too much focus on the witches, making them seem a central part to Macbeth's action, and in turn making free will seem less important. The imperative 'Get you gone' highlights authority over the other two witches and diminishes their power as they are being told off. This implies that the supernatural is not a vehicle for evil, as the witches do not have much power to start with.

Unlike *Macbeth*, McPherson shows normal human-beings meddling with the supernatural rather than vice versa. Finbar's self mockery, like the 'low laugh' helps the audience watching to see the tale as genuine by showing his stifled fear. To balance the sinister atmosphere created by his story about 'a woman' at the bottom of 'the stairs', humour is used such as 'Luigi board!' followed by taboo lexis, 'Ah *fuck* off', to highlight familiarity between the characters and articulate a lack of refinement as well as a distinct honesty in them.

Equivocation in Act 4 Scene 1 such as 'for none of woman born' leads Macbeth to believe he can't be killed, and presents the witches as yet again interfering. The stage directions, which would be important considering it is a play, show the witches 'dance, and vanish' highlighting some level of power, but doesn't portray them as evil. The apparition of 'an armed head' could symbolize how Macbeth himself will be killed at the end of the play, however, the witches present fate to him in an equivocal and esoteric way.

Many references to time are made, such as 'Time, thou *anticipat'st* my...' where Macbeth uses the vocative 'Time' to personify it and emphasise how he is in battle with it. The many references to time, also including 'from this moment' and 'even now' indicate how time is of the essence for Macbeth and that he will be killed soon. As well as this, it helps to create irony as Macbeth is actually making decisions, even though they are the wrong ones, which shows that the evil is emanating from a human being.

Shakespeare, within the realms of the Jacobean era, was again highlighting the dominance of free will over fate and could have been showing that overreaching can lead to social deformation. In this scene, the supernatural is shown to have some level of power, but at the same time the audience is aware that Macbeth is making his own decisions when deciding to have Macduff killed ('thou shalt not live').

Unlike *Macbeth*, *The Weir* does not pay much attention to the matter of man being a responsible agent for his own evil actions. Instead, it presents more positive feelings about humans, such as the barman's gesture of a sandwich is just 'such a small thing', highlighting how the smallest of actions can have a big impact, and also helps to restore Jack's faith in others.

In spite of the many differences between *Macbeth* and *The Weir*, it is clear that the supernatural has a pivotal role in both. Overall, I believe that the supernatural is not a vehicle for evil in *Macbeth*, and that the inclusion of supernatural elements is merely to emphasise how evil resides within each human being themselves, which is emphasised through Shakespeare's use of equivocation and also the theme of free will vs. fate. The final effect of the supernatural in *Macbeth* is that it causes destruction, whereas McPherson uses it to bring the characters together, therefore portraying it as a bonding agent as it gives them a shared experience. The supernatural, such as the witches, in *Macbeth*, in my opinion are only there to cause mischief and aid the play's progression.

In both, the supernatural is far from a vehicle for evil, but could maybe be considered as a vehicle for catharsis as it helps to express the characters' inner thoughts and feelings.