

Dramatic irony

Dramatic irony occurs when a character says something that has one meaning for the character and another for the audience. Irony is used for dramatic effect in Shakespearean plays and to create tension. Because Duncan is naïve and unaware that he is doomed, his comments about the traitor, the Thane of Cawdor seem ironic, particularly as we know that Macbeth is planning to betray him. He says of Cawdor, the traitor, 'There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face / He was a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust' (I, iv, 12–15).



Immediately after this Macbeth enters and Duncan greets him warmly, 'O worthiest cousin'. This entry and Duncan's words create irony. Later, when Lady Macbeth speaks of the preparations for the arrival of the King at Glamis Castle, she says ironically to her husband, 'He that's coming / Must be provided for' (I, v, 64–65). In the following scene, when she welcomes Duncan under her roof, her speech is full of irony.

When Duncan and Banquo arrive at Glamis Castle, both comment on the beauty and peace that

surrounds the castle, unaware of the evil plans taking place inside. 'This castle has a pleasant seat' (I, vi, 1) notes Duncan. Banquo speaks of the 'temple-haunting martlet' (I, vi, 4) a bird, which makes its nest in places where 'the air is delicate' (I, vi, 10). The irony is that the castle, of course, is not a pleasant place for either of them.



'This castle has a pleasant seat' (I, vi, i)

Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 What is dramatic irony?

Understanding

- 2 Explain how Duncan's comments about the traitorous Thane of Cawdor and then his greeting to Macbeth is an example of the use of dramatic irony by Shakespeare.
- 3 Why is irony an effective technique for Shakespeare to use in *Macbeth*?

Analysing

- 4 Find three other examples of the use of dramatic irony in the play. Explain the irony of each example and why it has been used.