

Soliloquies

The use of soliloquies in Shakespearean drama is effective in creating an inner life for the character. In tragedy, it is especially important as often the hero or anti-hero is plotting evil and therefore does not want the other characters to know his plans. In *Macbeth*, we also learn of the internal struggle the protagonist has with his soul when he is debating whether or not to kill Duncan. Macbeth has two soliloquies in Act I, one in Act II, one in Act III, and then no more until the final Act. Each time Macbeth speaks in this way, he is speaking his thoughts directly to the audience and this helps to establish some sympathy for him. It is interesting to note that in Act IV, when he is acting brutally and callously with no thought or hesitation, Macbeth has no soliloquies and the audience loses sympathy for him.

Macbeth's soliloquies reveal his intense imagination—the language and rhythms are compelling and follow the see-saw nature of his thoughts. For example, Macbeth's opening soliloquy, 'This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good' (I, iii, 129–130), swings from one idea to another, using antitheses (opposites) to show how Macbeth cannot decide if the witches' news is good or bad. It gives us vivid images of the fear and horror created by Macbeth's imagined murder of his king. 'If good, why do I yield to that suggestion / Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair / And make my seated heart knock at my ribs / Against the use of nature?' (133–136).

This prevarication and doubt is expressed further in the second soliloquy, when he debates, 'If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly' (I, vii, 1–2).

This soliloquy relies cleverly on the repetition of the past participle 'done' in order to highlight Macbeth's desire for the deed to be 'over and done with'.

Macbeth speaks again in soliloquy when he hallucinates and sees a blood-spattered dagger pointing the way to Duncan's chamber. This soliloquy shows Macbeth's heightened imagination as he treads the path towards evil. Macbeth's final soliloquies occur in the last act of the play. The first is full of despair and a longing for death, 'I have lived long enough: my way of life / is fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf' (V, iii, 22–23). The second is prompted by his wife's death, 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow / Creeps in his petty pace from day to day' (V, v, 19–20).

The only other characters who speak a soliloquy are Banquo at the beginning of Act III, and Lady Macbeth after she receives her husband's letter and again shortly afterwards when she knows Duncan is coming to their castle. Banquo is revealing his suspicions of Macbeth. In the first of Lady Macbeth's soliloquies, she expresses her awareness of her husband's failings whom she says is 'too full o' the milk of human kindness' (I, v, 15). In the second soliloquy, she is praying to the spirits to 'unsex [her] here' so that she can steel herself to the murder and remain unfeeling and callous.

Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 What is a soliloquy?

Understanding

- 2 Why are soliloquies important in the development of a character in the play?

Applying

- 3 Identify each of the soliloquies in the play. Create a table which outlines who said each one and when, the important idea or theme being expressed, and its significance for both the character and the play as a whole.

Analysing

- 4 Examine Macbeth's first soliloquy, 'This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good' (I, iii, 129–130). In this soliloquy, Macbeth is debating whether the witches' news is good or bad.
 - a Quote the images which suggest that the witches promise good things and quote the images that suggest evil things.
 - b How is Macbeth feeling at this time?
- 5 Examine Lady Macbeth's first soliloquy, 'Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be / What thou art promised' (I, v, 12–28).
 - a What criticisms does she make about her husband's character? Quote examples.
 - b Why is she anxious for her husband to arrive at the castle?