

Analyze the significance of the role of the porter in the play *Macbeth*.

Act II: Scene 3 begins with a moment of light comedy, which serves to heighten the suspense. The porter of Macbeth's castle, drunk from the previous night's revels, complains that his job is worse than that of the porter of hell. In a private game with the audience, he engages in a piece of stand-up comedy in which he imagines himself as that beleaguered servant, opening and closing the gate on the damned. The first two examples he uses (that of a farmer and an equivocator) have specific religious and historical connotations. A few months before *Macbeth* was performed at court in front of the Protestant King James I, the infamous Gunpowder Plot (the aim of which was to murder the English king) took place. The conspirators, including Guy Fawkes, may have been encouraged by a Catholic convert called John Garnett, whose nickname was "farmer." The practice of lying in court about one's religion by employing confusing or ambiguous language was known as equivocation. Many examples of ambiguous language are heard throughout *Macbeth*, and of course the words of the Witches themselves are not entirely clear. So the porter's examples are not entirely without significance, even though they may be unintentional.

The humour continues when the porter unbolts the door to Macduff and Lennox and offers a series of bawdy jokes, momentarily distracting the audience from the fact that Macbeth must at this very moment be washing his hands of the blood of the previous scene. Then Macbeth enters, apparently at ease, to direct Macduff to the king's room.

The significance of the Porter within *Macbeth* is twofold. Primarily, the Porter functions as comic relief by lessening the tension in the audience following the murder of King Duncan. The Porter also functions thematically by indicating that the gates to Macbeth's home are synonymous to the gates of hell.

Shakespeare's tragedies generally contain comic scenes and characters to provide light relief for the audience. *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's shortest play and one of his darkest, has very little comedy and only one purely comic character, the porter. The porter's main function is to come between two of the most intense and harrowing scenes in the play, the murder of Duncan and the discovery of that murder, interposing his plebeian humour and down-to-earth persona to make the peaks of high tragedy stand out by contrast.

This apparently disjointed, discordant and drunken statement of the porter is sometimes criticized as not written by Shakespeare. Coleridge considered as spurious and declared emphatically that this low porter soliloquy was written for the mob by some other hand, perhaps with Shakespeare's consent. Even those who admit that it was actually Shakespeare, would contend that Shakespeare was compelled to incorporate such trivial stuff to satisfy, the plebeian audience's craving for sensationalism and grossness. There are still others who would find this scene to be a regrettable practical necessity, "to give a rational space for the discharge of certain action" as Capell says. It gives Macbeth time to wash his hands and put on his night gown. There is yet other who would justify the porter scene on the ground that this scene provides a dramatic need of comic relief.

But De Quincey finds the scene all Shakespearean but denies the part of comic relief. In fact, in his views it intensifies the tragic impact in the play. He believes that both Lady Macbeth formed to 'the image of devils'. The next world is getting prepared for this message. In this intermingling period, the porter appears in the scene. Like a great artistic skill here is the hell-

gate compared to Macbeth's castle. The one a tipsy, tip soliciting menial whose language is vulgar, whose jests are filthy but who after all is not a murdered; the other, Macbeth, a valiant warrior speaking poetry and yet a murderer. Thus the contrast between the porter and his master is also established. The imagination of the porter is also of hell minus tragic pangs, but a continuation of a tragic suspense.

Anyway the porter also provides some continuity of subject matter by likening Macbeth's castle to hell, varying the topical references and vulgar descriptions of drunkenness and its effects with more fantastical, supernatural material.

(Sources: <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/m/macbeth/summary-and-analysis/act-ii-scene-3>
<https://www.enotes.com/homework-help/analyse-significance-role-porter-play-macbeth-106219>
<https://ardhendude.blogspot.com/2011/01/significance-of-porter-scene-in-macbeth.html>)