

## Psychological Transformation in Macbeth

### Macbeth and Lady Macbeth

**Assistant Lecturer. Leila Tahmasebi**

College of Law & International Relation / Lebanese French University

laylamousa@lfu.edu.krd

---

#### ARTICLE INFO

##### *Article History:*

Received: 27/3/2018

Accepted: 3/5/2018

Published: Summer 2018

##### **Doi:**

**10.25212/lfu.qzj.3.3.35**

##### *Keywords:*

*charactertransformation, fate,  
sovereignty and power,  
character downfall*

---

#### ABSTRACT

This study is a psychological exploration of two major dynamic characters in *Macbeth* to say Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Famous as a scientist of human nature two major Shakespeare's characters change during the course of events in *Macbeth* to portray human nature under different circumstances. Fate is another element which plays a leading role affecting the action of the play. The role of fate is marked by bringing supernatural elements to the core of the play to point to the effect of uncontrolled forces in human life. But what is most important in this study is how the characters' hamartia leads them to their downfall eventually. Many scholars analyze *Macbeth* as a drama of human nature investigation. They put the main responsibility of personality decline and their doomed fortune on the shoulder of the character himself. The play's character exploration makes us think twice about how sovereignty and power lead human beings to corruption and reduce them to animal or even beneath animal level.

## INTRODUCTION

### Psychological Transformation in Macbeth: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth

William Shakespeare is incomparably the most famous writer of the English language, known for both his plays and sonnets. Though much about his life remains unknown due to incomplete evidence, the following biography conjoins the most widely-accepted facts of Shakespeare's life and career.

In the mid-sixteenth century, William Shakespeare's father, John Shakespeare, moved to the town of Stratford-upon-Avon. There, he became a successful landowner, moneylender, glove-maker, and dealer of wool and agricultural goods. In 1557, he married Mary Arden. The records indicate that William Shakespeare was John and Mary's third child. His birth is unregistered, but the date seems to be as April 23, 1564, possibly because it is known that he died on the same date 52 years later. In any event, William's baptism was registered with the town of Stratford on April 26, 1564. Little is known about his childhood, although it is generally assumed that he attended the local grammar school, the King's New School. The school was staffed by Oxford-educated faculty who taught the students mathematics, natural sciences, logic, Christian ethics, and classical languages and literature.

Shakespeare did not attend university, which was not unusual for the time. University education was reserved for wealthy sons of the elite, and even then, mostly just those who wanted to become clergymen. The numerous classical and literary references in Shakespeare's plays are a testament; however, to the excellent education he received in grammar school, and speaks to his ability as an autodidact. His early plays in particular draw on the works of Seneca and Plautus. Even more impressive than Shakespeare's formal education is the wealth of general knowledge he exhibits in his work. His vocabulary exceeds that of any other English writer of his time by a wide margin.

In 1582, at the age of eighteen, William Shakespeare married twenty-six-year-old Anne Hathaway. In 1585, Anne bore twins, baptized Hamnet and Judith Shakespeare. Hamnet died at the age of eleven, by which time William Shakespeare was already a successful playwright. Around 1589, Shakespeare wrote *Henry VI, Part 1*, which is considered to be his first play. Sometime between his marriage and writing this play, he moved to London, where he pursued a career as a playwright and actor.

With *Richard III*, *Henry VI*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *Titus Andronicus* under his belt, Shakespeare became a popular playwright by 1590. The year 1593, however, marked a major leap forward in his career when he secured a prominent patron: The Earl of Southampton. In addition, *Venus and Adonis* was published; it was one of the first of Shakespeare's known works to be printed, and it was a huge success. Next came *The Rape of Lucrece*. By this time, Shakespeare had also made his mark as a poet, as most scholars agree that he wrote the majority of his sonnets in the 1590s.

In 1594, Shakespeare returned to the theater and became a charter member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men - a group of actors who changed their name to the King's Men when James I ascended the throne. By 1598, Shakespeare had been appointed the "principal comedian" for the troupe; by 1603, he was "principal tragedian." He remained associated with the organization until his death.

The same year that he joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and several other plays. In 1600, he wrote two of his

greatest tragedies, *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*. Historians and scholars consider *Hamlet* to be the first modern play because of its multi-faceted main character and unprecedented depiction of the human psyche.

The first decade of the seventeenth century witnessed the debut performances of several of Shakespeare's most celebrated works, including many of his so-called history plays: *Othello* in 1604 or 1605; *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1606 or 1607; and *King Lear* in 1608. The last of Shakespeare's plays to be performed during his lifetime was most likely *King Henry VIII* in either 1612 or 1613.

William Shakespeare died in 1616. His wife Anna died in 1623, at the age of 67. Shakespeare was buried in the chancel of his church at Stratford.

### 1. Context

*Macbeth* was first performed in 1606, three years after James I succeeded Elizabeth I on the English throne. By the time, William Shakespeare was the most popular playwright in England, and his company, which had been called the Chamberlain's Men under Queen Elizabeth, was renamed the king's Men.

James I was a patron of Shakespeare's acting company, and of all the plays Shakespeare wrote under James's reign, *Macbeth* most clearly reflects the playwright's close relationship with the sovereign. In focusing on Macbeth, a figure from Scottish history, Shakespeare paid homage to his king's Scottish lineage. Additionally, the witches' prophecy that Banquo will found a line of kings is a clear nod to James's family's claim to have descended from the historical Banquo. In a larger sense, the theme of bad versus good kingship, embodied by Macbeth and Duncan, respectively, would have resonated at royal court, where James was busy developing his English version of the theory of divine right.

*Macbeth* is not Shakespeare's most complex play, but is certainly one of his most powerful and emotionally intense. Whereas Shakespeare's other major tragedies, such as *Hamlet* and *Othello*, fastidiously explore the intellectual predicaments faced by their subjects and the fine nuances of their subjects' characters, *Macbeth* tumbles madly from its opening to its conclusion. It is a sharp, jagged sketch of theme and character; as such, it has shocked and fascinated audiences for nearly four hundred years.

### 2. Review of Literature

There are many genuine studies about the drama of *Macbeth*. As a result of miscellaneous aspects of the tragedy of *Macbeth*, many critics have considered the play with different approaches. Nicholas Dungey (2012) interprets *Macbeth* through Hobbes's materialism. He views the crisis of *Macbeth* as caused by the material motion of Macbeth's senses, imagination, and desires. Carol Thomas Neely (1991) explores the reason behind Lady Macbeth's suicide. He believes what brings about her suicide is not madness but a sense of alienation derives her towards her dreadful destiny. Maria Cusimano looks at *Macbeth* as an allusion of stories from Scripture and Renaissance religious beliefs. There are other numerous studies about the tragedy of *Macbeth* which point to the genius of Shakespeare, as the master of both human nature and art, whose works lends to so many in depth interpretations and analyses.

### 3. Character Transformation in Shakespeare's Tragedies

Shakespeare's positioning as a Renaissance writer places him in the context of rapid change. The world in which he lived was fast transforming itself in science, art, philosophy, religion, medicine and many other areas. It was in the middle of the Copernican revolution, the Machiavellian influence, geographic exploration, and dynamic social change. Shakespeare's characters begin to display a Machiavellian duplicity, or are concerned with, or promote, as we see in *King Lear*, both a concern for the preservation, and the dismantling of, the received Elizabethan world view. In many characters we see the impulse to replace it with a modern, science-based sensibility. Living in the times he did means that Shakespeare could not have done anything else than have his characters respond. The context of fast and widespread change in Europe enters the fabric of the plays.

All Shakespeare's plays have transformation at their heart and we see that in his texts in several ways. The most visible manifestation of transformation in the plays stems from Shakespeare's pre-eminence in creating inner lives for his characters that are complex and evolving as they react to events. Before Shakespeare, literature did not present us with characters whose inner lives demand our deepest attention. But we see in Shakespeare's plays so many characters that are in the process of reacting to events and developing, as we watch them, in ways no other characters in literature before Shakespeare did, because Shakespeare's assumptions about character were different from those of earlier writers. Earlier characters had personality structures, and while they did react to events, we don't see process and the development of understanding in them that we see in Shakespeare's characters. That development of understanding in Shakespeare's characters is responsible for the transformation we see in all of them. With *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear* especially, we see this interiority which has become so much a part of our way of understanding human beings.

And so, transformation pervades all the plays. Something common to all of them is stability giving way to confusion. The ultimate ending in the plays is restoration, however – a change back to the state before the confusion, but with a transformation having taken place – usually in the form of deeper understandings on the part of the characters. At all times the context informs the action and the character development. Change may happen to individuals on the most basic level. In *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio is tricked by a false letter into changing from a puritan steward to a ridiculous would-be lover; in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Nick Bottom is magically transformed into an ass. As Ashley H. Thorndike (1908) puts on, "In each play a man of great attainment is presented as involved in a moral conflict that results in his death" (p.187). In every play characters change in some way: it could be the change from life to death, or the dawning of new insights. Figures of power come tumbling down and villains are exposed.

The center of the change is a tragic hero as one of the most significant elements of a Shakespearean tragedy. Tragedy is essentially a one-man show. It is a story about one, or sometimes two, characters. The hero may be either male or female and he or she must suffer because of some flaw of the character, fate, or both. The weakness in character's personality becomes very fatal in an evil environment. According to A. C. Bradley (1992), a Shakespearean tragedy, "is essentially a tale of suffering and calamity conducting to death" (p. 7). *Hamlet's* flaw is that he hesitates a lot and he cannot put his ideas in action. *Othello* trusts people easily. The biggest weakness of *King Lear* is that he cannot distinguish right and wrong. *Macbeth* is very ambitious. In Shakespeare's tragedies the horrible end is because the heroes' weaknesses make them unable to resist evil in evil situations.

Another important feature of a tragic hero is that he or she is an eminent personality in the society. This person holds a high position, often one of the royalties. Tragic heroes are kings, princes, or military generals, who are very important to their subjects. Because of the position of the tragic hero, the actions actually have far-reaching effects as A.C. Bradley depicts (1905):

His fate affects the welfare of a whole nation or empire; and when he falls suddenly from the height of earthly greatness to the dust, his fall produces a sense of contrast, of the powerlessness of man, and of the omnipotence-perhaps the caprice- of Fortune or fate, which no tale of private life can possibly rival. (p. 10)

The downfall of the noble heroes not only causes destruction of oneself, but most importantly it leaves behind a disastrous situation in the society. Another important implication of high social rank heroes is to examine how power can bring about corruption and debilitate the dominance of conscience. The relation between power, dominance and corruption can be considered as the most dominant theme in most of Shakespearian tragedies.

#### **4. Hypothesis**

This study is about Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as two pivotal characters in *Macbeth*. The core of the study is the progressive deterioration of two major dynamic characters. Due to some factors as fate, supernatural forces, hamartia and the circumstance around, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth undergo character transformation which finally leads to their downfall. This hypothesis holds this implication that the hero and heroine's downfall, though triggered by fate and supernatural forces, but so long as the final decision makers are the characters themselves, is affected by their own free will.

#### **5. Transformation of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth**

Macbeth is a character of powerful contradictions. He is a man, for the sake of his ambition, is willing to murder his king and his best friend. At the same time, he has a conscience that is so strong that just the thought of his crimes torments him. In fact, even before he commits his crimes the thought of them makes him miserable. He is both a humble monster and a sensitive man. Macbeth is like other human beings who according to Thomas Quincey (2004) possess, "human nature, *i.e.*, the divine nature of love and mercy, spread through the heart of all creatures, and seldom utterly withdrawn from man ..." (par. 4). In spite of the divine natures of Macbeth and his wife, there are several key moments which lead to the tragic hero's downfall: when Macbeth meets the three witches in Act 1 Scene 1, secondly when he decides to kill King Duncan in Act 1, and finally the order of killing of Macduff's wife and children just before lady Macbeth kills herself. The three moments are crucial in moving the play and Macbeth's collapse.

In the tragedy we witness the downfall of an already great man with hidden passions. Macbeth is introduced in the play as a warrior hero, whose fame on the battlefield wins him a great honor from the king. The introduction of Macbeth as a warrior hero is crucial to the play, for tragedy depends on our witnessing the downfall of an already great man. In the beginning of the play, at least, he appears to have a conscience that tells him what he is doing is wrong. Killing Duncan horrifies him. Macbeth's downfall is attributed to a sense of over-confidence and unchecked ambition, the impact of the witch's

prophecy all three seal Macbeth's fate and his destruction. William Hazlitt (2011) describes Macbeth's personality as, "His energy springs from the anxiety and agitation of his mind. His blindly rushing forward on the objects of his ambition and revenge, or his recoiling from them, equally betrays the harassed state of his feelings" (par. 2). In the beginning of the play Macbeth is a loyal, courageous servant of the king of Scotland, but he is a man who harbors a hidden ambition for power. He is both noble and brave in his defense of the king in battle; he is rewarded for his actions. Macbeth has an encounter with a trio of Witches and his life is changed.

At the very start of the play witches play a massive part. They predict Macbeth's future and they cast a spell on the play which changes everything. The lines 'Fair is foul, foul is fair' in Act I Scene I, mean that things that are good will become bad and things that are bad will become good. The witches and their prophecies are the first major influence on Macbeth's actions. Macbeth seems happy and content with his actions. Until the witches tell him he will be a king. Once the witches show him the future, he becomes obsessed with speeding up the anticipated coming into power. He is told he will be king of Scotland, so Macbeth makes it happen by killing the king, which casts shadow of doubt on his two sons, thereby allowing Macbeth to ascend to the throne.

The next key moment in the downfall of Macbeth is when he decides to kill King Duncan. The moment he has killed the king, Macbeth feels completely destroyed, he says 'Great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?' (II, ii, 77-78). At this moment he thinks that the guilt he has committed cannot be washed away, even with all the water in the ocean. He is a weak and vulnerable person now. This is because he has committed a murder which he now regrets. Shakespeare slowly takes Macbeth's character from a noble hero to a man who is so easily persuaded to change his mind. Macbeth's killing of Duncan only brought him trouble sleeping, loss of appetite, and nightmares. This is only the beginning of Macbeth's hardship. Macbeth feels agitated and on edge for the rest of the play. This causes the lords, thanes, and people to think there is something odd about him. The guilt caused from Duncan's murder definitely caused part of Macbeth's downfall of inner being and status.

Once Macbeth seizes power through violence and murder, his life is darkened with the crime of regicide, he has killed a rightful, good and much loved king. His life begins to fall apart after this because he develops a serious case of paranoia over having the crown stolen from him. He becomes a slash and burn murderer and loses sight of his humanity, he has no morality governing his action. He thinks that he will be able to maintain his power through murder and intimidation.

As Macbeth descends into insanity he becomes utterly obsessed with eliminating any threats to his power. In determining which threats to heed Macbeth becomes enthralled with all of the ideas that the witches give to him, believing that all of their prophetic warnings will come true. It is clear that Macbeth seeks to eliminate threats to his own power due to the fact that he first murders Banquo and his children in order to ensure that Banquo's children will not pose a threat to Macbeth's rule. Moreover, in heeding the witches' prophecy who warn him of Macduff, Macbeth is required to take action against Macduff. When murderers arrive to Lady Macduff's hiding place, they seek to find Macduff himself, perhaps not fully aware that he has fled, and instead find the family there. They kill the family in part to eliminate the threat to Macbeth, but also to send the message to Macduff that they will not fear him and that they believe him to be a traitor. Ironically, it is in this moment that Macbeth seals his own fate. By murdering Macduff's family he ensures that Macduff will retaliate and instigate an



insurgency against him, ultimately concluding in Macbeth's downfall. This is the final act in the course of events that guarantees Macbeth's eventual death.

Relative to Macbeth, Lady Macbeth had the same effects from guilt, but with a different outcome. Lady Macbeth, Macbeth's partner in crime influenced Macbeth greatly. Frances Dolan(1994) sees Lady Macbeth and the witches as catalytic executors who incite Macbeth's ambition (227). Lady Macbeth initially was the 'innocent flower, [with] the serpent under it" (I, V, 72-73).But she starts losing her mind and state of wellbeing after Duncan's murder. Lady Macbeth was very strong at the beginning, but the strength diminished after the effect of guilt disintegrated her life. Lady Macbeth was thought to stay strong, yet people now see how she is suffering from nightmares, troubled sleep, and loss of appetite; just as Macbeth. The mental and social state of Lady Macbeth in the play changes dramatically from the wife of a Nobel General, to an evil aggressive murderer, and finally a woman who had debauched to such an extent that she took her own life.

At the start of the play she is, as good strong of a wife as any nobleman's or officer's. She is worried that her man is not quite man enough to do what it takes to be a king; he is "too full o' the milk of human kindness" (I.V.15). When Macbeth decides not to continue with their plan to murder Duncan, his wife urges him to act on his desires or he will think of himself as a coward. She says, "Art thou afeard/ To be the same in 'thine own act and valour/ As thou art in desire?" (I, VII. 42-44). She makes sure then he will perform the deed by taking an active role in preparing for the murder.

Soon after Macbeth proves his "manhood" by killing Duncan and becoming king, Lady Macbeth disappears into the margins of the story and becomes the kind of weak, enfeebled figure she herself would probably despise. When she learns that the king's dead body has been discovered, she grows faint and must be carried from the room. Later, when Macbeth decides to murder Banquo in order to secure his position of power, he excludes his wife from the decision making altogether. By Act V, Lady Macbeth has been reduced to a figure who sleepwalks, continuously tries to wash the imaginary blood from her hands, and talks in her sleep of murder.

Michelle A. Labbe (2010) asserts, "Lady Macbeth is no longer able to sleep restfully—because her conscience finally begins to trouble her and because this affliction is perhaps a form of divine punishment for her" (p.16). She is grown so ill that the doctor says there is nothing he can do to help her. Lady Macbeth is so consumed by guilt for her evil acts that she eventually loses her mind. The tragedy becomes a portrayal of the psychological breakdown of a figure from power to enfeeblement. Clearly, the effect of guilt led Lady Macbeth to her demise.

## **6. Conclusion**

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth suffered the consequences of their actions by death. Macbeth's decisions were influenced by supernatural encounters, causing him to tragically meet a doomed fate. These paranormal experiences and influences caused Macbeth to choose certain paths, only to lead him to self-destruction. He begins the work as a good man, but later declines because of the desires of his wife, and bad choices. Macbeth does not want to kill anyone, but does it. He is a person of greatness, but is also of weakness. Macbeth is of nobility, is good, though not perfect, but he experiences a downfall that is his own fault.

Evidently, the effects of guilt caused the loss of Macbeth's life and status as a king. People all feel guilt, but some feel it at different levels. In *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare, the effect of guilt causes the downfall of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Macbeth is flooded with guilt because of the murders he committed, and this causes his downfall of inner being and status. Lady Macbeth also feels the same, and soon enough, she kills herself. One can be satisfied by being the greater man in a nation, yet to become the greatest, one must suffer the effects of guilt as that person travels up the steps.

**References:**

- Bradley, A.C. (1992). *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Cusimano, Maria (2015). Temptation, Sin, and the Human Condition in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. Retrieved from <http://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1969>
- Dolan, Frances E. 1994. *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England 1550-1700*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Dungey, Nicholas (2012, April 17). Shakespeare and Hobbes: Macbeth and the Fragility of Political Order. Retrieved from <http://doi.org/10.1177/2158244012439557>
- Hazlitt, William (2011, January 29). *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*. Retrieved from <http://www.gutenberg.org>
- Labbe, Michelle A. (2010). Corruption and Theories of Kingship in *Macbeth*. *Inquiries Journal*, 2(02), 16.
- Neely, Carol Thomas (1991). 'Documents in Madness': Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare's Tragedies and Early Modern Culture. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 42(3), 315-338.
- Quincey, Thomas (2004, January 13). *Miscellaneous Essays*. Retrieved from <http://www.gutenberg.org>
- Shakespeare, W. and Pearce, J. (2010). *Macbeth*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.
- Thorndike, Ashley H. (1908). *Tragedy*. The U.S.A.: The Riverside Press.