

In the play Macbeth, written by William Shakespeare, each characters destiny seems to be predetermined. This raises the ultimate question: who, or what, controls fate?

Existentialism is the belief that each person defines their future by their decided actions: that the future has not yet been written. Fatalism is the belief that the outcome of all events is preordained, and therefore, unalterable. Throughout Macbeth, the character Macbeth makes many decisions which clearly affect his future, but are they truly decisions? Or, are his decisions examples of fatalism, where another force is guiding his actions to their predetermined conclusion?

Many of the characters, events, and much of the imagery in Macbeth indicates that fate plays a prominent role in advancing the plot. The characters most easily identified with having supernatural powers are, obviously, the three witches.

The Witches' ability to see into the future is demonstrated when Macbeth becomes thane of Cawdor. The line, "What? Can the devil speak true?" shows Banquo's surprise at the realization of the prophecy.

But, would the Witches' prophecy of Macbeth's royal promotion have come true had they not made Macbeth aware of the possibility? There was no reason to warn Macbeth of the fate in store for him, since it is most likely impossible for a person to alter their destiny. It is quite possible that the witches have no real power at all, beyond that of suggestion. They may have only planted the idea within Macbeth, feeding off his already present ambition. Perhaps the only true controlling power comes from Lady Macbeth's uncontrollable greed.

Once Lady Macbeth had learned of the witches' prophecy, she immediately concluded that Macbeth would not, with his present persona, be able to attain that which fate had bestowed upon him.

"...Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear
And chastise with valor of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crowned withal."

Lady Macbeth believed that it was her duty to induce Macbeth to carry out the necessary deed (Duncan's murder) to fulfil the prophecy. However, if Lady Macbeth had not influenced him, it is doubtful that Macbeth would have taken any action towards his Royal future.

This substantiates the idea that the strength of the witches' words lies in the power of suggestion. Although Lady Macbeth stated her belief in Fate, she felt compelled to help it along. During the banquet, Macbeth realized that the path of his life was coming to a "fork in the road", and that he must choose the direction he will take. Lady Macbeth saw that Macbeth was unsure, and took it upon herself to help him decide.

"When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man."

and, later,

"...screw your courage to the sticking place,"

In the end however, it was Macbeth's decision to murder Duncan. Just as he chose to kill the grooms. The Witches' prophecy for Banquo, (that he would be the father of many kings) also contributed to Macbeth's decision to order the murder of Banquo and fleance.

But, the Witches' role did not end there. Macbeth returned to question them further. The three apparitions, conjured by the Witches, each told Macbeth more about the fate which was in store for him.

"1. Appar. Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! Beware
Macduff; Beware the Thane of Fife. Dismiss me. Enough."

"2. Appar. Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn the pow'r of man,
for none of woman born shall harm Macbeth."

"3. Appar. Macbeth shall never vanquished be until Great Birnam Wood to
High Dunsinane Hill shall come against him."

The first and second prophesies could actually be combined. It is the fate of Macbeth to be killed by Macduff, just as Macduff was destined from birth to kill

Macbeth. Malcolm's decision to use the trees of Birnam to hide his army's number was another action which was preordained.

Macbeth's decision to send assassins to murder Macduff, as well as his family and servants, is clearly a result of his fear due to the words of the first apparition. Though the second apparition assures him that he cannot be killed by anyone born of a woman, it was Macbeth's choice to play it safe.

"But yet I'll make assurance double sure
And take a bond of fate. Thou shalt not live!"

In conclusion, it is evident that Shakespeare wanted Fate to play a prominent role in the play, without overpowering a man's ability to make his own decisions. However it is not clear as to whether the characters had control over their own fate. So, if there is, a master plan which all existence must adhere to, then even something as simple as this essay is governed by it, and with this last sentence, another Fate is sealed.
