

The Character of Macbeth.

The play 'Macbeth' is a portrait of one man, Macbeth, showing how he changes. Although we are presented with his deterioration from good to evil, we can see his human side throughout the play, which makes it a tragedy. It is the shortest of Shakespeare's tragedies, and has a very fast pace. Once Macbeth's ambition has 'set the ball rolling', events happen quickly in the play as it gathers momentum. The themes of 'Macbeth' are ambition, effects of evil, and violence, shown mainly by the language of the play, as in Shakespeare's time plays were performed in daylight with very few props. Ambition is something that everyone can identify with, and 'Macbeth' is a compelling study of how ambition can destroy you, so the audience are interested in Macbeth's character.

Our first impression of Macbeth is of a heroic, famous, popular man who is well liked by the king - Duncan refers to Macbeth as 'noble Macbeth'. (Act 1 Scene 2 L67) Macbeth is tempted by two sources of external evil - the witches and his wife, but he was already ambitious, and they only increased this by making his ambitions seem like they could be reality. The war hero becomes a murderer and then dies a shameful and violent death. Shakespeare creates an atmosphere of evil and darkness mainly through his language, although scenes containing violent actions or the witches are often played in darkness. Shakespeare uses poetry (verse) as opposed to prose, as poetry often contains more metaphors and imagery, which he used to create a feeling of darkness and evil. The language gives an insight into the character of Macbeth - we see his ruthlessness and cruelty, but also fear, doubt and some scruples.

Macbeth's first words, 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen' (Act 1:3 L36) immediately associate him with the witches because they say in the first scene 'fair is foul and foul is fair' (1:1 L12), so evil is brought to mind. Macbeth is connected with the supernatural in the audience's mind from the onset. This is the first thing that is not consistent with Macbeth's image of a war hero.

In an aside later on in Act 1:3, Macbeth reveals that he is thinking of killing Duncan. Asides are very important because they give the audience an insight into the character's mind. Once the audience knows how the character thinks, they tend to sympathise with him, which is another reason why 'Macbeth' is a tragedy. The aside follows closely Macbeth's desires and doubts - he does not know whether 'this supernatural soliciting' is good or bad, but he dearly wants to be king. He describes the murder that he is imagining to be 'horrible' (1:3 L137) and 'makes my seated heart knock at my ribs' (1:3 L135), showing that the whole idea disgusts and horrifies him, as it would any man who was brave and noble, but Macbeth cannot stop thinking about it, showing that he is considering the idea and is drawn to it, and that he has ambitions to be king within him already.

Macbeth is drawn to darkness, because he believes that it will hide his evil deeds. This is first shown when he says 'stars hide your fires, let not light see my black and deep desires' (1:4 L50). Macbeth is afraid that people will realise that he wants to be king and is prepared to kill for it, so he calls on the stars to hide their light, so people cannot see what he is thinking. This is again in an aside, so the audience are the only ones who know what Macbeth is thinking. Asides and soliloquies help the audience understand Macbeth and also paint the scene. The audience can see that he has become yet more drawn to evil.

Evidence that Macbeth has a human side and is very worried is found in a long soliloquy - a speech where Macbeth is alone on stage so we can again see what Macbeth is thinking. He is worried about his eternal soul, and what his punishment will be in Heaven if he kills Duncan. He thinks of reasons why he should not kill Duncan - 'He's here in double trust: First, as I am his kinsman and his subject, strong both against the deed; then, as his host he should against his murderer shut the door, not bear the knife myself.' (1:7 L12-16) This shows that Macbeth is not totally evil, but his ambition spurs him on. Later in the scene, Macbeth decides not to commit the murder, but Lady Macbeth taunts him until he gives in, showing that he is weak, and Lady Macbeth is much the more dominant of the two. Lady

Macbeth had said earlier 'I fear thy nature, it is too full o'th'milk of human kindness' (1:5 L14-15), showing that she knew that Macbeth was not strong enough or evil enough to murder Duncan on his own, and she would have to push him into it. This shows that Macbeth was decent, but not strong minded.

As the time for Duncan's murder draws nearer and nearer, Macbeth becomes more and more nervous, and is prone to hallucinations; for example when he says 'Is this a dagger I see before me' (2:1 L35) and 'I see thee still and on thy blade dudgeon gouts of blood' (2:1 L45-46); he is imagining that he sees a dagger covered with blood pointing towards Duncan's chamber. He later describes another hallucination - 'Thou sure and firm-set earth, hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear thy very stones prate of my whereabouts' (2:1 L56-58). He is afraid that the stones will call out to the people that he is a murderer. Both hallucinations show that he is sensitive and has big doubts about the murder, and he is not entirely a cold-blooded murderer, who would have no such scruples.

However, his language becomes more and more to do with evil as is shown by a large part of his soliloquy - 'Now o'er the one half-world Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse the curtained sleep. Witchcraft celebrates pale Hecate's off'rings, and withered murderer alarumed by his sentinel, the wolf, whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace, with Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design moves like a ghost.' (2:1 L49-46). At the beginning of this quote, Macbeth thinks that the world seems unnatural, and everything belonging to nature is dead, and nightmares are left to disturb sleep. He then goes on to think about the supernatural - Hecate was a goddess of witchcraft - and he thinks of murder as being an actual being, and describes it as creeping like a ghost towards its design with Tarquin's ravishing strides (Tarquin was a Roman prince who raped a woman). Although this speech is all connected with evil, it shows that Macbeth is thinking deeply, and has a sensitive side.

When Macbeth has actually committed the deed, he is still imagining things, such as 'Methought I heard a voice cry, "sleep no more: Macbeth does murder sleep"' (2:2 L38-39). Macbeth is afraid that he will never sleep again because of what he has done. Before this, he also said that he had 'hangman's hands' (2:2 L30) which also shows that Macbeth feels guilty. The most significant imagery is when Macbeth is alone, and says 'What hands are here? Ha! they pluck out mine eyes. Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand? No: this my hand will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green one red.' (2:2 L62-66). Here Macbeth imagines that his hands are so stained with blood which signifies his guilt, that not even an ocean could wash his hands clean, but rather that his hands would stain the water with his blood, until everything he touched became as guilty as he was. The fact that Macbeth feels guilty shows that he is not just a cold-blooded murderer.

Macbeth by now is more dominant, and seems to rely more on darkness and evil than his wife, as he no longer tells her about his plans. When he decides to kill Banquo and Fleance, he does not tell her what he is going to do, but says 'Then be thou jocund: ere the bat hath flown his cloistered flight, ere to black Hecate's summons the shard-borne beetle with his drowsy hums hath wrung night's rote.' (3:2 L40-44) The language suggests that Macbeth is feeling more and more drawn to evil.

Macbeth shows that he is reliant on evil in his next speech - 'Come, seeling night, scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day and with the bloody and invisible hand cancel and tear to pieces that great bond which keeps me pale.' (3:2 L46-49). This also shows his insecurity after Duncan's murder - he needs evil to destroy his conscience, so that he will not be overcome with guilt and back down at the last minute. Macbeth later seems to be on the brink of madness, when he imagines that he has seen Banquo's ghost - his insecurity and guilt are driving him insane. At the end of that scene, Macbeth says, 'I am in blood stepped so far that should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er' (3:4 L136-138). He imagines himself to be in a river of blood, halfway across, so if he wanted to stop it would be as hard to go back as to go forwards. The blood signifies all of the evil and murders he has done and will do. Macbeth feels guilty, but he has gone so far that he is too consumed by evil to go back.

In the last act of the play, traces of Macbeth's old, better character become more apparent. Macbeth seems wistful in one speech - 'That which should accompany old age, as honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, I must not look to have; but in their stead, curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.' (5:3 L24-28). Macbeth has realised that when he grows old he will not have the things that other people have, and that he would have had had he remained merely Thane of Cawdor, and a hero. No-one will truly love and honour him, but they will praise him because they are afraid of him and his tyranny. He has realised that he has paid a heavy price to become king, and now he is not sure if it is worth it.

Macbeth's wife's death sets him brooding on life's futility. His speech: 'She should hereafter; there would have been a time for such a word. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time; and all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle, life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.' (5:5 L16-25), shows him to be bitter, and perhaps thinking about his own life ahead of him, now that his only ally is gone. He cannot see a meaning to his life.

Macbeth has been betrayed by the apparitions and Birnam wood is moving to Dunsinane, but Macbeth says 'Blow wind, come wrack; at least we'll die with harness on our back.' (5:5 L50-51). There is bravery in his decision to go down fighting. When MacDuff finally finds Macbeth, Macbeth says 'Of all men else I have avoided thee, but get thee back, my soul is too much charged with blood of thine already.' (5:8 L46). Macbeth feels guilty because he ordered the murders of MacDuff's family already, and he knows that if he fights with MacDuff, he will win because he has a 'charmed life'. There are traces of nobility in this - Macbeth does not want to use his unfair advantage unless he has to - he would rather not fight.

When Macbeth learns that MacDuff is not 'of woman born', he does not want to fight, but MacDuff says that he is a coward and he will exhibit him in captivity. Macbeth says 'I will not yield to kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet and to be baited with the rabble's curse. Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane and though opposed being of no woman born, yet I will try the last. Before my body, I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, MacDuff, and damned be him that first cries, "Hold, enough!"' There is nobility in the way that Macbeth chooses to die fighting, and his remnants of dignity and pride make the thought of being subservient to Malcolm and being exhibited as a tyrant unbearable. Although Macbeth was hated as an 'abhorred tyrant' (5:7 L10) by all, his pride and nobility were preserved by his decision to die rather than be captive.

