

Tragic Ambiguities: Unravelling Macbeth's Dilemmatic Existence in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Sumit Chaurasia

Alumnus, Hansraj College, University of Delhi

Abstract

Tragedy as a genre is vital as it is an emotional exercise which helps people learn compassion for others. William Shakespeare, also known as “Bard of Avon,” was an English poet and playwright, often considered by many to be the greatest dramatist of all time. The protagonist Macbeth, a noble and sensible person, highly esteemed Thane of Glamis and Cawdor, lets his ambition for power win over his morality despite being intensely self-conscious, leading him to commit atrocious crimes under an unjust monarchical system which made the bloodshed inevitable, making the audience empathize with him as well as feel outraged with him, which also reflects his own dilemma regarding his actions and the path he has taken. A series of murders and his recognition of the meaninglessness of his life eventually leads him to a warrior's death in the battlefield, leaving the audience feeling terror and pity together.

Keywords: Tragedy, Ambition, Catharsis, Dilemma, Paradox, Fate.

According to Aristotle, the protagonist in a tragedy should be morally good, who enjoys prosperity and a high reputation socially. The character should possess ‘hamartia,’ a defining tragic flaw that precipitates a misstep, culminating in ‘peripeteia,’ the dramatic reversal of the wheel of fortune. This represents a shift from one circumstance to its antithesis, a transition that adheres to likelihood or inevitability, where the alteration in fortune is a descent from success to adversity. In the play *Oedipus the King*, for instance, the messenger who came to cheer Oedipus and dispel his worries concerning his mother, inadvertently intensified his distress by unveiling his true identity. This reversal brings about the downfall of the protagonist. ‘Anagnorisis,’ or the discovery, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, and should be accompanied by reversal and it arises from the circumstances of the plot itself. It is followed by ‘catharsis,’ or the purgation of emotions, one which instils both fear and pity together in the audience and for this to happen, a tragedy should end in misfortune, for our pity is awakened by undeserved misfortune, and our fear by the plight of someone just like ourselves. For a tragedy, it is essential that a man of high social and moral stature is put into the path from prosperity to misery, not due to a vice, but a grave error on his part, for it is not possible to bring about purgation of emotions unless an undeserving man suffers. The construction of the plot is the source of the tragic effect, in which the sequence of events is so meticulously crafted that if any of them is differently placed or taken away, the effect of wholeness will be seriously disrupted.

Macbeth, the Thane of Cawdor, and a noble person has an ambition for power that drives him to commit regicide. This culminates in a progression where Macbeth is ensnared in an inescapable cycle of events, leading to a lot of bloodshed. Macbeth's high social stature is reflected by Lady Macbeth's speech in which she says, “Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be / what thou art promised” (*Macbeth* 1.5.13-14). His high moral stature can be evidenced by the faith of King Duncan in Macbeth and his loyalty can

be seen when he is in an agonizing dilemma over the murder of King Duncan and he expresses it to Lady Macbeth, “We will proceed no further in this business / He hath honoured me of late” (*Mac.* 1.7.31-32). Throughout the play, Macbeth’s ambition is the driving force behind his numerous misdeeds, something that is recurrently evident. When the witches prophesize Macbeth’s fate, he is taken aback by the fact that they echo his innermost yearnings, voicing the ambitions he harbors but dares not speak aloud. Following the announcement of Malcolm as King Duncan’s heir, Macbeth’s reaction reveals his deep-seated, burgeoning ambition:

The Prince of Cumberland: that is a step
On which I must fall down, or else o’erleap,
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires,
Let not light see my black and deep desires,
The eye wink at the hand. Yet let that be,
Which the eye fears when it is done to see. (*Mac.* 1.4.48-53)

He goes on to add that he may have to cut the thorn out of his way to become the king:

I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition which o’erleaps itself
And falls on th’other. (*Mac.* 1.7.25-27)

It is a speech in which Macbeth reveals his ambitious face and finally makes up his mind to kill King Duncan. These instances validate that Macbeth is a noble man, who is also ambitious, but it is the witches who first externalized his inner desire of becoming the supreme ruler. He fails to curb his temptation which, in turn, makes his life a living hell, where he finds himself committing a series of murders and losing the essence of his life.

The reversal in *Macbeth* is evidenced when Macbeth is left all alone after being deserted by his subjects, when he says that all those who are with him are mercenaries, who are there with him for money. Macbeth loses his peace of mind and kingdom’s respect after killing King Duncan and this is the moment of the reversal of his fortune. At his lowest point as a person, he grapples with the consequences of his actions and expresses profound remorse, articulating sentiments such as: “It will have blood they say: blood will have blood” (*Mac.* 3.4.122), “There’s not a one of them but in his house / I keep a servant feed” (*Mac.* 3.4.131-132), “I am in blood / Stepped in so far that should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o’er” (*Mac.* 3.4.136-138). The ultimate recognition comes with the following speech of Macbeth, in which he recognizes that life has no meaning and it is a tale told by an idiot:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty face 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. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing. (*Mac.* 5.5.18-27)

In the end, steadfast in his resolve to see his tumultuous journey to its end, Macbeth strides onto the battlefield to embrace his fate, engaging in combat with noble ferocity and falling with dignity, thereby meeting a warrior's death. This moment garners our sympathy for Macbeth because he recognizes his wrong-doings out of his inner good being. Malcolm's closing speech serves as a moment of catharsis for the audience, a purging of emotions, particularly a fear of being exposed to a similar fate, accompanied with pity for Macbeth, the undeserving sufferer.

We see that the play presents a paradoxical situation where Macbeth, fundamentally a noble person, finds himself committing heinous acts while wrestling with a torturous internal conflict over whether to proceed with them. Throughout the play, Macbeth is acutely aware of his conscience, yet he is driven by ambition – spurred on by the witches and Lady Macbeth – to override his moral compass and commit the grave mistake of murdering King Duncan. It is often said that the capacity of a man to do evil is checked by human relationships. In Macbeth's case, it is the prophecy of the witches which unsettles his present and he starts thinking about his future and finds no other way to quench his thirst for power. Moreover, it was Lady Macbeth who wanted to fulfill her ambitions through Macbeth, and therefore, she had a sense of urgency in her, and she always externalized Macbeth's desire to become the king. Hence, Macbeth becomes a victim of his own fate. Moreover, it is not justified that Macbeth is lauded as a valiant warrior for being a bloodthirsty slayer on the battlefield but he cannot kill King Duncan, who himself is in his position undemocratically, out of a monarchical system. There was no other way by which Macbeth could have become the king in such a system. This inconsistency reveals the complex moral considerations that govern Macbeth's actions beyond the battlefield. We feel terror because of the fate of Macbeth. A single error on our behalf might lead us to share a destiny akin to Macbeth's, for fate's magnitude surpasses us all. Tragedy transcends the mere narrative of a virtuous individual committing wrongful acts; it is, indeed, a concept that extends beyond the confines of human society. We feel pity for Macbeth, because, deep inside, we know that Macbeth did not deserve this fate. At the same time, we are also enraged that he ends up doing such deeds despite being so self-conscious. These are the reasons that we end up having two different readings of Macbeth's character, a sympathetic one and an outraged one. These examples testify the fact that even though Macbeth is a good person, he ends up doing terrible deeds, despite being in an agonizing dilemma, majorly influenced by the circumstances of the play. Shakespeare shows Macbeth as a character whose goodness still remains even after committing one bad deed after the other, so that we manage to retain our sympathy for him. We end up feeling terror and pity together, and it instils in us compassion for his sufferings, which is also how tragedy works.

As readers, the emotional effect of tragic form comes along with the tightly-knitted plot, and the unfurling of events based on its circumstances, which induces in us a distinctive paradoxical sympathy for the protagonist, which is precisely what Aristotle has prescribed. Many other tragedies by Shakespeare have the same effect on the audience, making Shakespeare an integral part of English literature, who has set a benchmark for the modern writers and without whom we cannot imagine the growth of English language as a mode of linguistic expression and literary works. Tragedy as a genre is indispensable as it brings people out of their own petty desires and into awareness of other humans' sufferings.

Works Cited

1. Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Edited by A.R. Braunmuller, Cambridge University Press, 1997.
2. Aristotle. *The Poetics of Aristotle*. United Kingdom, Macmillan, 1917.
3. Sophocles. *Oedipus the King. The Three Theban Plays*. Translated by Robert Fagles, Penguin Classics, 1984.