

MACBETH AS A TRAGEDY

Macbeth is the one play of Shakespeare that shows the audience that even the darkest of evil can also be human. It may as well be horrible, but pitiable too. Macbeth is far less complex than the other tragedies of Shakespeare and frequently raises the question as to if this play is really tragic; Macbeth does not feel guilt and so the question of punishment doesn't arise. What Shakespeare deals with in Macbeth is the consequence of unpardonable evil --- inescapable punishment. Yet at the same time the audience is moved by pity for the sufferings of the propagator of evil. This creates confusion in reactions to the fate of the protagonist.

Macbeth's end is a sorry end, but resulting from his monstrous career. Macbeth's death is a defeat. Pity or awe is not raised by his death. Dying off-stage seems to be a reflection of the world's desire to get rid of him. The sight of his severed head is an assurance of rightful kingship of Malcom. Macbeth is dismissed as "the dead butcher and his fiend-like queen." The audience feels the justice established, but strangely enough, a rush of pity. The last scene is a projection of the absolute destruction of a man; a complete destruction of everything that he stood for. Hamlet, Lear, and Othello's fortunes are terrible too, losing the beauty of their lives, but at the end they realise that all is not lost. The beauty and love of their life is not all forsaken; this eases the pain of death to some extent. The knowledge restores courage and nobility raising them above their enemies or the destruction of their worlds. There is tragedy but no defeat. The goodness of the defeated characters are confirmed.

Macbeth differs here. The end of the play is an elaborate picture of destruction; of the soul and the world of the hero. The spirit of Macbeth dies with bleak chances of recovery. At the end Macbeth does not have the comfort of restoration of what he lost. He knows that he has missed much; just before the death of Lady Macbeth he despairs the loss of "honour, love, obedience, troops of friends". However, the realization is no solace, and does not raise him beyond his conditions. Nor do they offer respite from his situation. Macbeth is not tortured by regret, but by despair, and broods alone, denouncing life as "a tale told by an idiot". The rest of the tragic heroes of Shakespeare, Lear, Hamlet, and Othello has suffered terribly; but unlike Macbeth, their life was not a void. All of Macbeth's dreams were shattered beyond repair because of the way he went. The final realization of Macbeth is that he has achieved nothing; Macbeth finds himself hopelessly lost in the world of Shakespearean tragedy where man's life is the ultimate truth, signifying everything. The despair and irony in his stance negating the value of man's life makes him miserable and pitiful. The human spirit faces complete destruction. Macbeth faces the enemy not courageously but

more instinctively, in a desperate move toward self-preservation:

At least we'll die with harness on our back.

This can only be uttered by someone who knows that things more possible and worthy of effort is possible; but, Macbeth can only see the condition from which he fails to rise. He does not even have the scope for rebellion to pronounce: "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods." What remains of the honourable Macbeth is just brute animal force. Macbeth's condition is worse than that of any animal; his life is caged without the possibility of anything to escape to if he can fight loose. All Macbeth's life has been reduced to meaningless action, lost without any hope.

However, Macbeth is saved from being reduced to the pathetic by saving touches of humanity we see at the end. He still retains some human virtue; he refuses to have any more of Macduff's blood on his soul. His bravery does not falter even when the last soldier is removed and he faces the enemy directly. Although these touches save him from being seen as the incarnation of the Devil, they do not succeed in re-establishing his former self. Death does not redeem him of his actions; there is no greatness in his death. His death embodies ruin in evil; not 'the human spirit's capacity for greatness in evil'.

From the very beginning of the play, Macbeth subsumes in temptation beyond retribution; the audience understands from the very beginning that he is submitting to hopeless suffering, will never be able to enjoy what he desires. His loss lacks the poignancy of Hamlet, Lear, or Othello's loss. Macbeth is tragic because he loses himself. Macbeth is the only Shakespearean protagonist who is completely aware of the viciousness of his act, and thus unleashes a chain of events leading to his ruin. The culpability of Macbeth takes away a great lot of the audiences' sympathy. In spite of it Macbeth is also seen as a victim of the witches, of Fate; imparting a vision of human life as Shakespeare saw it. However, Macbeth's responsibility can in no way be denied.

Macbeth's ruin is brought about by his voluntary act of murder. It is this awareness that makes the character tragic. Macbeth is essentially human; he succumbs to grievous temptation and the effects of his first sin define the actions of the play. The guilt and the circumstances do not reduce the pity and fear of the audience, rather they actively generate pity and fear. Macbeth is presented in such a manner that he cannot escape evil even if he wants to.

The temptation comes at such a juncture that it is like a trap. He is returning from a difficult battle that saves his country, a battle he has been instrumental in winning. That the witches make patent his latent desire to become king is an indication of the danger of the suggestion, or the ambition. The witches neither force, nor advise. They do not offer any explanations. They merely

state; they foretell in a manner which is baffling and indeterminate. Prophecies of the witches are alluring enough to disarm prudence; the true significance is difficult to derive. Depending up on conditions they may be harmless, or prove to be insidious; but impossible to be read correctly. The witches ignite desire in Macbeth when his head is filled with a sense of his own power. Immediate events seem to reinforce the truth of the witches' prophecies, and rouses hope enough to take their words seriously. For once he seriously attempts to put out the suggestions out of his mind, realizing the essential evil of his thoughts. However, the moment he relates all to his dear wife, events take a different turn. The events that follow press the matter more hastily. Immediately after declaring his eldest son as the crown prince, King Duncan announces his visit to Macbeth's castle. Obstacle and opportunity to greatness are both before him. Macbeth realizez that he must act fast: "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly."

Maybe Macbeth would have desisted if left to himself. Great as the opportunities were, greater were Macbeth's fear of the consequences. He owed double loyalty to Duncan; felt the goodness of Duncan so strongly that he shuddered at the notion of the possibility of killing him. It is a point that reveals the goodness in Macbeth. Lady Macbeth correctly assesses that her husband's was a nature that would have evaded doing evil, but his was a nature that could be worked up on, could be moulded; it was not firm in its goodness. His goodness was so ordinary that it wasn't enough to keep him away from overwhelming temptation; it wasn't enough to prevent disaster. Thus Macbeth's tragic downfall. It is the ordinariness of Macbeth that makes him vulnerable to circumstances leading to his destruction. It is the ordinariness that makes him susceptible to love, and his wife knows and loves him enough to be able to lead him on to his (and her) doom. This very ordinariness of Macbeth is used by Shakespeare to arouse in the audience pity and fear for Macbeth by virtue of which the he becomes the tragic protagonist and the play a great tragedy.