

# Analysis of how macbeth changes essay sample

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



Macbeth by William Shakespeare is the story of how one man's hubris destroys him. From it, we can extrapolate and comment on how in society people have a choice. We can live a life of altruism, valour and nobility or one fuelled by ambition, greed and violence. Macbeth's journey from the former to the latter showcases to the audience the dangers of selfishness. It prompts us to question our view of life – do we succumb to the false promises of evil, as tempting as they are, or do we remain defiant and true to ourselves. Shakespeare's play is a very clear warning against listening to the dark forces that are constantly around us.

In the initial scenes of the play, Shakespeare creates a very deliberate first impression of Macbeth and the witches. Before we meet Macbeth, we gain a favourable impression of him as the dialogue of others contains numerous approbatory adjectives. He is praised as being “ brave Macbeth” and “ well deserves that name”. In battle, he is like both “ valour's minion” and “ Bellona's bridegroom”. King Duncan rewards him for his bravery with the title of Thane of Cawdor. Shakespeare takes care to create a first impression of Macbeth that is noble and brave so that the audience may fully appreciate how his character changes throughout that course of the play.

The first impression that audience gets of the witches is that of danger and malice. They have already decided to meet Macbeth after the “ hurlyburly's done”, implying that they can foretell the future, Shakespeare also shows the witches to be malevolent and vengeful as they unduly punish a sailor's wife over a chestnut. The audience learns from their first impression of the witches that creatures with such power and ill will should be feared, ignored and avoided. Their appearance warns us of the evil that they possess – an

important cause of the change in Macbeth's character. This is the first glance the audience gets of the idea that evil is ever present and that we need to be alert and awake in order to not be caught.

The audience learns more about Macbeth's character from the scene in which he and Banquo meet the witches. When the witches prophesise that Macbeth will be king, he gives a guilty start " why do you start and seem to fair/things that so sound so fair". This dialogue conveys to the audience that somewhere in the back of his mind, Macbeth has thought about being king. We learn that he has aspired to become king and the prophecy results in him thinking more and more about it " All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis! / All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, thane of Cawdor! / All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter!". Macbeth is so enamoured by the idea of being king " he seems rapt withal" that he makes the mistake of engaging with the witches " stay you imperfect speakers, tell me more".

The audience realises from here that he is in trouble as we have already learnt, from our first impression of the witches, that they are dangerous and malicious. Though questioning the witches is a brave move, it is also undoubtedly a bad one and shows to the audience that Macbeth's common sense can be blinded by his ambition. Even though Macbeth knows that the witches are evil, he still parlays with them and so seals his fate by baiting evil. In contrast with Macbeth, Banquo sees that witches for what they are and knows that they should not be trusted, despite how promising the prophecies seem to be " what can the devil speak true". He warns Macbeth not to trust them " the instruments of darkness tell us truths/ wins us with

trifles, to betray us” as he understands that evil will tempt us with seemingly good things but in the end will always betray us. Shakespeare uses Banquo to highlight Macbeth’s fatal flaw of ambition so that through the course of the play the audience can see how Macbeth’s flaw proves to be his downfall.

At this point, Shakespeare uses asides to aid the audience in understanding Macbeth’s thoughts. This theatrical device allows the audience to see how “rapt” he is with the promise of kingship and just how much it is playing on his thoughts. It contains the ominous line “the greatest is behind”. These words, though ambiguous, suggest to the audience that that Macbeth believes the greatest has already been achieved (i. e. it is his destiny to be king) so the next steps will be easier. The next steps include getting rid of Duncan. Through his aside he describes to the audience the thoughts running through his head. He is battling with his innate goodness “if good, why do I yield to that suggestion whose horrible image doth unfix my hair” and make his “heart knock at his ribs”. His language reveals that he is considering murdering king Duncan, though he would loathe doing it.

However at the end of the aside Macbeth decides not to follow through with the murder “if chance will have me king, why chance may crown me without my stir” and instead leave it to chance as he knows he should be loyal to king Duncan “our duties are to your throne”. From this aside the audience learns that Macbeth wants greatness to be his but the horribleness of murder and his loyalty to the throne are preventing him.

At this point Macbeth is still a good man even though he is flawed. He is aware of his own ambition but is not allowing to undermine his integrity. An

aside is also used following a meeting between Duncan, Macbeth and Banquo. In this scene Shakespeare uses dramatic irony for when Duncan refers to the traitor Cawdor he says " he was a gentleman upon which I built an absolute trust". This foreshadows how Macbeth will also betray Duncan as Duncan refers to him as " worthiest cousin" - unaware of the ambition Macbeth is hiding " there's no art to find the mind's construction in the face". We also learn at this meeting that Duncan has named his son Malcolm as his successor. We learn in Macbeth's aside that though Duncan views Macbeth as steadfastly loyal, Macbeth is still plotting to become king and sees Malcolm as " a step on which I must fall down or else o'erleap".

Once again Macbeth is harbouring thoughts of murder. From this series of asides Shakespeare has communicated to the audience the important idea of how appearances and reality are not concurrent. Appearances may be deceiving so it is important that we look beyond the first impression or the impressions of others in order to see the true nature of people. This protects us from falling prey to dark minded people and links back to the idea that evil is omnipresent and we need to always be aware of it. False impressions are not restricted to people whom we do not know well and can also be adopted by people we know and trust.

In the next scene we are relocated to Inverness, Macbeth's castle, where Lady Macbeth has received a letter from Macbeth. Shakespeare uses this epistle literary device to show the audience Lady Macbeth's reaction to the news. She provided us with another view of Macbeth's character - which he is " too full of the milk of human kindness" and that although he is " not

without ambition” he “ wouldst not play false” in order to achieve greatness. Lady Macbeth’s reaction adds to the audiences understanding of Macbeth’s character. the audience is also ale to contrast her reaction to the prophecy to that of Macbeth’s. She does not have any second thoughts about murdering Duncan, Instead of worrying about her morality she invites in evil spirits to give her strength and courage and to “ fill me from the crown to the toe top full of direst cruelty”. She engages with evil without evil first tempting her and sees the murder as “ a great business” and is willing to commit the murder herself.

At this point, unlike Lady Macbeth, Macbeth still knows his duty; even though he wants greatness just as much as Lady Macbeth he is not ready to sacrifice his loyalty and soul. Since Macbeth is unmilling to act on his ambition and commit to the murder, Lady Macbeth must push him into it. She is currently the dominant figure in the relationship. She also instructs him to “ look like the innocent flower but be the serpent under’t”. This is another example of how appearance and reality are not one and the same. Macbeth, who Duncan believes is “ noble” and loyal to him is concealing his evil intent behind a façade of goodwill and hospitality. Shakespeare also introduces the idea of the danger of coercion. By pushing Macbeth into agreeing to murder she is condemning his soul. Without Lady Macbeth’s influence, Macbeth may never have acted on this ambition and remained a good man with a minor flaw.

The audience learns an important lesson from this – that we should stand up for ourselves and not let others undermine our beliefs and morals even if

they are our loved ones. Other people's influences can change our view of what is right and wrong and it is we who will have to face the consequences. Just this week Vicky Pryce, wife of former cabinet minister Chris Huhne, pleaded not guilty to perverting the course of justice using the defence of marital coercion. She could have her jail sentence if she had simply refused to be influenced by her husband and told the truth from the beginning. Her story shows how Shakespeare's messages are just as relevant today as they were in Elizabethan England.

After being coerced by Lady Macbeth, Macbeth, in a soliloquy, questions their plan. He is worried about not only the immediate consequences but also that the murder will cause him to be eternally damned to hell "lead his soul to hell". In contrast to his wife, he is concerned about his soul and frightened of the repercussion "we still have judgement here". He is also concerned that he, in turn, will be murdered "that we but teach bloody instructions... return to plague th'inventor". This philosophical thinking in the soliloquy shows the audience that Macbeth is intelligent. He knows that Duncan is both a good king "Duncan hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been so clear in his office" and much loved. The murder will not be received well by the court so Macbeth concludes "we shall proceed no further in this business". Macbeth is also very aware of his own ambition and the dangers that it brings "vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself and falls on the other".

Macbeth's ambition is his fatal flaw, a trait common to all Shakespearean tragic heroes such as Lear, Othello, Hamlet and Coriolanus who apart from

their fatal flaws were noble men. It is here that Lady Macbeth utilises his flaws to push him to murder “ when you durst do it then you are a man”. Act one finishes with Macbeth agreeing to the murder “ I am settled and bend up every corporal agent to this terrible feat”. Macbeth’s final line “ false face must hide what the false heart doth know”. This is similar to his wife’s statement earlier in the play and shows to the audience how Macbeth has been changed by his wife’s influence, he no longer “ wouldst not play false” in order to reach his ambition. He is now a participant in murder. This idea of appearance and reality is one that Shakespeare believed to be very important. It features in other plays of his such as “ A Midsummer Night’s Dream” and “ Othello” but is just as important in society today as it has become increasingly easy to hide behind false appearances, resulting in a greater chance of being tricked by evil which is ever present.

After the murder of king Duncan, Macbeth faces many consequences that cause even more changes to his character. He immediately suffers from a guilty conscience, resulting in him not being able to sleep and wishing he had not murdered Duncan. He grows increasingly paranoid and from this point on descends further and further into darkness. His paranoia causes him to believe that Banquo may out him as the murderer and so arranges for him to be murdered. This marks the greatest change in Macbeth’s character, Until this point, Macbeth’s ambition had been guided by Lady Macbeth, it was she who pushed him into the murder.

Now that the murder has been committed Macbeth does not consult with her or even inform her of his actions. He no longer needs to be pushed by his



wife and has become independent. He no longer cares about his souls and is instead blinded by the need to remain king and so murders his best friend. He also begins taking the lives of innocents. Macbeth orders Lady Macduff and her children to be murdered because Macduff deserts him. Macbeth has reached his height of evilness. He is still, however, plagued by his conscience as he sees the ghost of Banquo at his banquet. Macbeth's descent into evil is accompanied by a descent into madness. Shakespeare uses Macbeth to show the audience how we cannot escape from our bad deeds. Though they may go unpunished, they will haunt us no matter how much we regret them and in the end we will always have to face justice.

At the end of the play Macbeth has become a figure of evil. He is no longer even referred to by name, instead called a "tyrant" and "butcher". As the play draws to a close, Macbeth does manage to gain empathy from the audience when we realise how the witches have tricked him. They have given him a false sense of safety with the two promises: "Till Birnam wood remove to Dunsinane, I cannot taint with fear" and "Fear not Macbeth, for none of woman born shall taint thee". We feel sorry for him when he realises that he has been tricked and he regains our respect in his final actions.

When he realises the futility of his ambition to be king he accepts the fact that he is going to die and resolves to fight until the end "I'll fight till from my bones my flesh be hacked. Give me my armour".

In his final moments he renounces the witches and faces certain death with bravery "lay on Macduff" and we respect how he does not try to cling to life. Shakespeare shows the audience that even though Macbeth cannot redeem

himself, he can still act with the valour and bravery he possessed in the beginning of the play. Macbeth's final change shows to the audience how even the most evil people can gain back some vestiges of respect. Though their actions can never be forgiven and their reputation will forever be ruined, their conduct when facing the consequences of their actions can still be admirable.

Through the course of the play the audience can follow the change of Macbeth's character from an essentially good man to an evil man who has lost everything. At the time the play was written the cult of the individual was beginning to become more important than the wellbeing of society as a whole. On the surface, Macbeth is a play about how one man's fatal flaw destroys him. All his good traits are consumed by his ambition. His ambition pushes him to "deal with the devil" and as a result of this he changes for the worse. At the time, Macbeth was a warning from Shakespeare. Plays, like all literature, are products of their age and Macbeth is a warning against the murder of the king, an act of political terrorism that would upset the natural order.

On a deeper level, which is relevant across the ages, it is a universal warning about the power of the human conscience. It aims to prevent people changing as Macbeth did by warning us of the hallucinations, madness and other horrible things that our conscience will bring upon us so that we will never escape from our misdeeds. It is a universal message about how we may commit a crime but will never get away with it and will have to forever suffer the consequences.