

Macbeth was  
basically a good man  
lead into evil ways

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The statement ' Macbeth was basically a good man led into evil ways' is one I agree with, to a certain extent. His evilness certainly progressed throughout the play, but his influences from the witches and Lady Macbeth and degree of goodness at the start is debatable. I shall also discuss the reasons for his destruction, which ties in the plays themes - for example ambition, order and disorder and guilt and conscience.

The play opens with a scene of disorder - lightning and a coven of witches.

This really sets the scene for the rest of the play. The disorder finally reflects on Macbeth, therefore leading to his destruction. When we watch the first scene we wonder how big a part the witches will play and how influential they will be. At the end of the scene we know that they are going to meet Macbeth and we are anxious to know what is going to happen to him. We also know that they are evil creatures and they intend to play around, their final words leave us with a feeling of uncertainty and disbelief;

' Fair is foul, and foul is fair,

Hover through the fog and filthy air.

,

The audience asks themselves what does this mean? Can good be bad? These words sum up a lot of the play; the good can be bad and vice versa. ' Hover through the fog and filthy air' tell us that the play will be evil and full of cunning schemes and dirty tricks. It is also wondered why Shakespeare didn't introduce Macbeth in the first scene, as the play is entitled after his name. However, Shakespeare's use of the witches in the first scene

emphasises how influential they are. By going against the expected, the audience becomes more afraid of what will happen. The witches are unexpected and so add even more to the feeling of uncertainty and anxiousness.

But was Macbeth good from the start? Firstly, in his defence, the king thought highly of him. Regarding the treason committed by the Thane of Cawdor, he says

‘ What he hath lost noble Macbeth hath won’.

By referring to Macbeth as ‘ noble’ it gives him a good impression, that he is loyal and just, but in what sense it is directed is unsure. Is he referring to the character of Macbeth, or the military skills? As this scene is set on the battlefield and Macbeth is one of his best soldiers, he may have been referring to his military skills. But as the play commences we learn that Duncan and Macbeth are socially connected, as they dine at each other’s homes.

So it does seem that Macbeth was seen as a good man at the start of the play. If this is true, what made Macbeth turn to evil ways? Firstly ambition played a part to start his destruction. In Act 1 scene 3 we first meet Macbeth, who has his first encounter with the witches, which has immediate effects. The first thing the witches say to Macbeth is;

‘ All hail Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Glamis.’

‘ All hail Macbeth, hail to thee Thane of Cawdor.’

‘ All hail Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter.’

By saying these things the witches immediately have the attention of Macbeth. In these times, the 15th and 16th centuries, many people believed in witchcraft. Between 1560 and 1603 hundreds of people (nearly all women) were convicted as witches and executed. So it is no surprise Macbeth believed these things said to him, but maybe partly because he wanted to believe. Also the witches predict that Banquo's son will become king and at the end of the play he does. However Macbeth does not know this. The audience think that the witches intend to create evil but they are not sure where, when and with whom. So they are not sure what to make of the predictions. We also learn in act 1 scene 3 more about the witch's powers. One of the witches says;

' Although the bark cannot be lost, yet it can be tempest tossed.'

She is speaking about a sailor's wife who would not share her chestnuts so the witch will create a storm to sink the boat he is sailing in. This tells us that the witches have enough power to create a situation that could destroy, but not to physically destroy. So this is another argument to say that Macbeth was good from the start - the witches had him in their power.

On the other hand Banquo did not believe what the witches said - showing he was more level headed. But when Macbeth finds out that Duncan appointed him as Thane of Cawdor, he really does believe in what the witches say. The witch's power is well illustrated in this scene because they put Macbeth in the situation in which he could think of murder, but they do not suggest it directly. If they were trying to lead Macbeth on then this scene tells us he is an easily led person, as he seems deeply affected by the

witches words - this weakness is also shown later in the play concerning Lady Macbeth and the plotting of a murder.

This scene cleverly portrays the difference between how Macbeth and Banquo reacted to the witch's predictions. Banquo is also offered great hope that his sons will be kings but he does not believe that good news can come 'from voices of Satan' and does not trust them even though they could become true.

'Were such things here as we do speak about?

Or have we eaten on the insane root,'

Banquo was used by Shakespeare to show that Macbeth must make the choice between good and evil. From the structure of this scene we are fairly sure he will choose evil.

Yet Macbeth's degree of evil is not yet shown, it is only at its potential stage. None of his bad thoughts about Malcolm being the successor to Duncan have not been taken into action. Lady Macbeth is partly to blame for this. In Act 1 scene 5 Lady Macbeth receives a letter from Macbeth, telling of his experience. She too believes that the witches are true. Her power and strong

beliefs are soon shown when she says;

'Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here

And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull

Of direst cruelty; make thick my blood

.... Come to my woman's breasts

And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers.'

This really shows the power and strength Lady Macbeth has. It also relates to the latter part of the play where it is clear that Lady Macbeth is the dominant person in their relationship. An argument brought forth by some is that this speech is a spell. We are led to believe further in the play that Lady Macbeth has witch qualities when she thinks she has blood on her. This is another characteristic of these times - people believed that this was a sign of a witch.

So we cannot say that Macbeth was forced to murder King Duncan by the witches as the encouragement of Lady Macbeth is shown greatly in scene 7. The witches did not put the idea into Banquo's head that he should murder Macbeth to ensure his son would become king, so therefore we cannot say that they put the idea into the head of Macbeth. Critics argue that Lady Macbeth was the one who forced Macbeth into killing Duncan. However, it was Macbeth who had the first thoughts of murder, In act 1 scene 5 Macbeth writes a letter to Lady Macbeth telling her about his meeting with the witches;

' I have learned by the perfectest report they have more in them than mortal knowledge.'

This is untrue because Macbeth does not know that they were telling the truth and Banquo did not believe them in the same way. Therefore he does

not know anything by the 'perfectest report'. This shows us that Macbeth may have been trying to tempt Lady Macbeth into thinking the first thoughts of murder, leaving the blame lying with her, whilst attempting to clear his own conscience. Lady Macbeth's character takes blame for the murder as she shows no sign of repent once the crime has been committed, until the end of the play when she becomes insane. Before the murder takes place she takes matters into her own hands, criticising her husband;

'It (Macbeth's nature) is too full o'th'milk of human kindness.'

She then says at the end of scene 5;

'To alter favour is to fear, leave the rest to me.'

So the actual influence of Lady Macbeth is uncertain; she is either subconsciously persuaded by Macbeth to persuade him, or she has an actual evil inside her. Macbeth's evil really comes to its zenith when he becomes king. He has murdered, and lied just to gain power. Ambition overtook him, fired on by the powers of the witches.

It is debatable whether Macbeth was originally a good man who was led into evil ways, or if he was evil from the outset, but I believe that evil is made not born. The ethics and morals of people are created at childhood, through the observations of others, being told by parents what is right and what is wrong. This belief brings me to the conclusion that the witches had some uncontrollable force over him, whether this was a mental force - sparked off by Macbeth's great ambition or whether they had actual power I am uncertain. But for Macbeth to be so changed and affected by these creatures

when his friend was encountered the same and not affected at all leads one to believe that he has a weakness in his character. So it is well argued to say that yes, Macbeth was a good man led into evil ways.