

Certainly not tragic,
not even heroic essay
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The character Macbeth's personality undergoes a major upheaval during the play Macbeth. To depict what kind of a person he is entails describing what kind of fluctuations in probity and integrity his character goes through, and what kind of man he is perceived to be throughout the ages and his place in cultured history.

In the First Folio, Macbeth is branded as a definite tragedy. However, Macbeth has spawned a number of works of art, ranging from the operas both entitled Macbeth by Giuseppe Verdi and Ernst Blöchl to The Lion King (which is based loosely around Macbeth). This suggests a much deeper and more complex character in Macbeth, not simply a clear cut tyrant or a valiant hero with a tragic flaw that scuppers him despite his best efforts. Therefore, the definition of the Macbeths as a 'dead butcher and his fiend-like wife' does not do justice to the multitudinous perspectives from which one must view the Macbeths to get a complete picture of their thought patterns.

When considering whether Macbeth is a hero, it becomes evident that at the start of the play, before we even meet him, he is a successful general, noble and valiant in all he undertakes. This is shown particularly in the Captain's speech:

'Doubtful it stood,

As two swimmers that do cling together

And choke their art. The merciless Macdonald -

Worthy to be a rebel, for to that

The multiplying villainies of nature

Do swarm upon him – from the Western Isles

Of kerns and galloglasses is supplied,

And Fortune on his damned quarrel smiling,

Show'd like a rebel's whore. But all's too weak,

For brave Macbeth – well he deserves that name –

Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel

Which smok'd with bloody execution,

Like Valour's minion carv'd out his passage

Till he fac'd the slave,

Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him.

Will he unseam'd him from the nave to th'chaps

And fix'd his head upon our battlements.'

In this speech, the Captain is primarily telling King Duncan of how, despite the fact that fortune and sheer number of forces seemed to heavily favour the rebel movement headed by the traitor Macdonald and supported by the Irish and, as he later says, the Norwegians, Macbeth cut down every man in his path until he reached the traitorous Macdonald and killed him with a ruthless efficiency that suggests great loyalty and devotion to King Duncan.

The only doubt we have at that time concerning Macbeth is his association with witches, which cannot be likely to mean good things for him. After he learns he has become the Thane of Cawdor, he promptly writes to his wife, informing her of his promotion and the witches' prophecy. In the same way that most of the characters in the play exist only to interact with Macbeth and show the audience things about him, Lady Macbeth is used to describe her husband's character as she understands it. Although she cannot see the whole truth, the things she believes to be true about Macbeth are indeed true. In Act 1 Scene V, two lines from her soliloquy have great significance:

' Thou wouldst be great,

Art not without ambition, but without

The illness should attend it.'

Lady Macbeth describes evil as an ' illness' that Macbeth must catch to fulfil her desires for power by his side. The play shows the symptoms of this ' illness' ensue and develop, until there is no way that he can be cured and the morality in the man has ebbed away completely. Macbeth has many virtues, but his wife's dark mutterings evoke the few harsh qualities he has and rears them. He is also heavily influenced by the witches' prophecies:

" Hail Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor,

And king hereafter'

This prophecy, as well as the one given to Banquo, stating that his descendents will be kings, signals for the beginning of Macbeth's ambition

superseding his principles. Although he was incredulous upon hearing the witches' tidings of the future, the confirmation that he has indeed become Thane of Cawdor shortly after his meeting with the witches sows the first seeds of ambition and blind trust in the witches which flower to form the autocratic tormentor he becomes. Soon, he confesses to the audience that he is considering committing some awful crimes and has 'black and deep desires', and from this point, we begin to treat Macbeth with more and more suspicion. However, we do see that there is an internal struggle going on within Macbeth. Whereas at the start he has no clearly evil intentions, and by the end he is full of evil intentions, it is the period just before the murder of King Duncan in which he may yet stay a good man as before, with no desire for evil, or progress and transform into the tyrant he becomes. It is his morals, not any cowardice, which initially restrain him from killing King 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,

Who should against the murderer shut the door,

Not bear the knife myself.'

This proves that, while he may not be the same indefatigably loyal subject he once was, he is still good at heart and is still reasonable. Macbeth goes on in this soliloquy to admire the characteristics that make Duncan such a good king, and seems to stray from the murder more and more. He wrestles with <https://assignbuster.com/certainly-not-tragic-not-even-heroic-essay-sample/>

himself for some time in this vein, deliberating and worrying. Finally, though, he is convinced that killing him is the right thing to do by his amoral wife, Lady Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth, unlike her husband, has no conscience. Before the murder of Duncan, she is the stronger of the two. Shortly after it, Macbeth is horrified by what he has done, whereas she is confident and unmoved, as she doesn't understand that killing such a good man for her own benefit is immoral. However, as the play progresses, Macbeth becomes more and more ruthless to ensure that Duncan's murder was not in vain and that he should reap as much as he can from committing such a terrible crime (i. e. attempting to kill Banquo and Fleance to ensure that his sons inherit the throne.). Lady Macbeth, in a reverse situation to her husband, becomes more and more guilt-ridden by the murder and, in the end, commits suicide, which leaves the now stone-cold Macbeth indifferent.

After the first prophecy from the witches and everything that comes about as a result of it, Macbeth returns to their lair in an attempt to glean more information concerning his future from them. From their foresight, he learns that he should be wary and vigilant to Macduff, that 'no man of woman born shall harm Macbeth', and that 'Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him.' These three visions of the future give Macbeth a new font of confidence, which we, as the audience who have seen his great fall from moral eminence, know to be unfounded. It is this great show of hubris, his inner belief that he is now untouchable and invincible, that ultimately leads to his downfall. Of course the witches, being malicious and hateful beings, have twisted the truth in <https://assignbuster.com/certainly-not-tragic-not-even-heroic-essay-sample/>

order to goad Macbeth into believing that he will be the victor of every battle that comes his way. Indeed he has become madly over-confident:

‘ Till Birnam Wood remove to Dunsinane,

I cannot taint with fear. What’s the boy Malcolm?

Was he not born of woman?’

Even though Macbeth feels absolutely certain that the witches’ prophecies will come to pass, he wastes no time in ordering the murder of Macduff’s entire family, in order to ‘ make assurance double sure’. There is a great contrast now between the loyal, good-natured servant to the king he was and the tyrannical, power-crazy dictator he becomes. However, when he is alone, with no-one to mock, order around or threaten, he seems old and lonely; Macbeth becomes more reflective and thoughtful, brooding over the fact that his tyrannical regime has robbed him of all of his companions to the point that he has no-one faithful to call upon in his time of need, showing us that he is still every bit as intelligent and mentally strong as the ‘ old’ Macbeth.

And it is when he hears about the ‘ moving grove’ that he knows he is defeated. When he chooses to die in battle, ‘ with harness on our back’, the audience start to feel that, despite the inescapably appalling actions that have occurred by his hand, he still has a little of the courage and valour that made him such a noble warrior under King Duncan, and he revives a shard of respect that the audience have for him. When he is faced by Macduff, he is reluctant to fight him because of the witches’ warning that he should be

cautious of him above all others, or perhaps because of the guilt he feels after butchering his family. In the case of the former, it demonstrates that he still holds the mutterings of the witches that drove him to evil very close to heart. But in the case of the latter, it shows that he is beginning to rediscover the morals that initially stayed his hand from the murder of Duncan in the period where he was wavering between morality and immorality.

'Macbeth' gives an account of two different men. The first, an steadfastly loyal servant to the throne, who holds his friends close to his heart and would never do anything morally wrong; the second, a conceited tyrant whose actions directly benefit himself and bring unthinkable suffering to other, indeed a 'dead butcher'. However, while the statement 'Certainly not tragic, not even heroic' is not incorrect, it doesn't paint the whole picture. Macbeth is, at different stages of the play, heroic, such as in battle with the traitorous Macdonald and, to some extent, at the end when facing Macduff in his last epic showdown.

He also shows the characteristics of a hero when he acknowledges that he has been duped by the witches' apparitions before deciding upon the manner of his death. Also, though, he is tragic in a way, as his fall from nobility was a result of a flaw that arose from his evil wife and the witches; his hamartia, in a sense, was his ambition. However, there is no real anagnorisis; no point of illumination. In addition, Macbeth is still not moral or remorseful enough towards to latter stages of the play for the audience to identify with him as a tragic hero. He is not allowed (or does not utilise) any opportunity to learn from his mistakes. It is because of these points that, in a <https://assignbuster.com/certainly-not-tragic-not-even-heroic-essay-sample/>

classical sense, he is neither a tragic hero, nor and evil butcher, but something in between.