

Unchecked power in shakespeare's "macbeth" and "king lear" essay sample

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



In many of the plays by William Shakespeare, the central character goes through internal and external changes that ultimately shake their foundations to the core. Numerous theories have been put forth to explain the sequence of tragedies Shakespeare wrote during this period by linking it to some experience of melancholy, anger, despair, and the antagonist's ultimate fall from grace in their lust for power. But such theories overlook the fact that it is in this very same period and in the same tragic works that portray the heights to which human nature can rise and fall in its purest and noblest, if not happiest terms. Surely the creation of so much light alongside the darkness and the perfection of the artistic medium through which Shakespeare gives them expression argues against the idea that the greedy side of human nature is his chief concern.

His efforts to portray human life in its rarest form and not only the dark depths, but also the treasure rooms of our being. He tries to pierce beneath the superficial motives and forces of surface behavior, social, and cultural expressions and to the deeper levels of individual character and human nature. Shakespeare then places these aspects of human existence in their true relation to the wider field of universal life. In relation to the tragic hero, there are many similarities between the tragic heroes in Macbeth and King Lear. However, the differences between the two outline the re-occurring themes in both plays. In Shakespeare's plays the central characters' own weaknesses and lust for power lead to corruption. The unchecked power in Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear ultimately leads to corruption, tragedy, and the hero's fall from grace.

In Macbeth, Macbeth's power goes unchecked within himself, his wife, and within the kingdom. The title character is a tragic hero, a person of high rank who is brought to eventual ruin by his desire for power. At the beginning of the play, Shakespeare defines Macbeth as a valiant hero very clearly. His courage is unquestionable in defense of Scotland in the opening scene. When King Duncan names Malcolm Prince of Cumberland, Macbeth decides to murder Duncan. Macbeth is loyal to the King and he imagines murder but rejects the idea. Macbeth is aware that his thoughts are corrupt and he knows that justice will somehow punish him.

Then in Act I Scene 3, Macbeth considers killing King Duncan to make the witches' prophesy come true. He says, "Why, if fate will have me king, why chance may crown me." Yet increasingly his ambition defeated his good nature. Macbeth's limited power as Thane of Cawdor ignites his desire for complete and absolute power at any cost. The most apparent flaw, and perhaps the most tragic in Macbeth's character, is his lack of patience and hunger for total power.

Macbeth tries to upset the natural order established by the gods. Most important to the theory that Macbeth is responsible for his own actions would be a point that the infamous witches and Macbeth agree upon. Such an element exists in the form of Macbeth's ambition. In the soliloquy Macbeth gives before he murders Duncan, he states, "...I have no spur/To prick the sides of intent, but only/Vaulting ambition," (Act I, Scene 3.). These are not the words of a man who is merely being led down a self destructive path of doom, with no will of his own, but words of a man who realizes not

only the graveness of his actions. Later the head witch, Hecate, says, "Hath been but for a wayward son,/Spiteful and wrathful, who, as others do,/Loves for his own ends, not for you." (Act III, Scene 5), which again highlights Macbeth's inward nature.

The most significant part of the play is the paradox between Macbeth's ambitions and desire for power as he simply succumbs to natural urges, which take him to a fate of his own making. Everyone has character flaws that he must live with and Macbeth simply allowed those flaws to destroy him. These flaws ultimately haunt Macbeth and cause him to let his overvaulting ambition rush fate, and hasten his doom. He acknowledges his guilt in several places in the story. After Macbeth becomes king, his sanity begins to unravel. In Act III, Scene 4 he sees images of his dead friend Banquo at the banquet.

Lady Macbeth's questioning of Macbeth's manhood is crucial in fueling his ambition and desire to be king after he becomes Thane of Cawdor. Then his wife plants the initial seed of a "new" king in the thoughts of Macbeth. The reversal of control and power between he and his wife strikes Macbeth's manhood. She is well aware of the discrepancy between their respective resolves and understands that she will have to manipulate her husband into acting on the witches' prophecy. Her violent, blistering soliloquies in Act I, Scene 7, testifies to her strength of will, which completely eclipses that of her husband. Her soliloquy in Act I, scene V, begins the play's exploration of gender roles, particularly of the value and nature of masculinity. In the soliloquy, she spurns her feminine characteristics, crying out "unsex me

here" and wishing that the milk in her breasts would be exchanged for "gall" so that she could murder Duncan herself.

These remarks manifest Lady Macbeth's belief that manhood is defined by murder. When, in Act I, scene vii, her husband is hesitant to murder Duncan, she goads him by questioning his manhood and by implicitly comparing his willingness to carry through on his intention of killing Duncan with his ability to carry out a sexual act (I. vii. 38-41). Throughout the play, whenever Macbeth shows signs of faltering, Lady Macbeth implies that he is less than a man. By goading Macbeth, the "unseen power" she appears to have over Macbeth recalls the idea that Macbeth has no power or control in his own home or over his wife. He gains power by his murdering King Duncan, but in the end he loses it all even in death.

By killing Duncan, Macbeth unleashes a kind of primal chaos upon the realm of Scotland, in which the old order of benevolent king and loyal subjects is replaced by a darker relationship between a tyrant and his victims. However, even with all his power, Macbeth ceased to be a sympathetic hero once he made the decision to kill Duncan but by the end of the play he has become so morally repulsive that his death comes as a powerful relief. Ambition and bloodlust must be checked by virtue for order and form to be restored to the sound and fury of human existence. Macbeth makes no attempt to reverse the situation and is thereby responsible for his tragic fate. His tragic flaw is his lust for power, which leads him to a series of bloody and increasingly indefensible acts.

Shakespeare's King Lear, in contrast to Macbeth, begins with absolute power held by King Lear. He wants to be treated as a king and enjoy the title, but he doesn't want to fulfill a king's obligations of governing for the good of his subjects. The aging King of Britain, decides to step down from the throne and divide his kingdom evenly among his three daughters. First, however, he puts his daughters through a test, asking each to tell him how much she loves him. Goneril, and Regan, Lear's older daughters, give their father flattering answers. But Cordelia, Lear's youngest and favorite daughter, remains silent, saying that she has no words to describe how much she loves her father. Lear flies into a rage and disowns her. By the end of the play King Lear has transformed from a conceited and self-righteous king with all power, to a humble and caring individual with no power at all. Unchecked power in King Lear leads to internal tragedy first within himself, the relationship with his daughters, and to corruption within the kingdom.

As the play opens one can almost immediately see that Lear begins to make mistakes that will eventually result in his downfall. The very first words that he speaks in the play, "...Give me the map there... know that we have divided in three our kingdom, and 'tis our fast intent to shake all cares and business from our age, conferring them on younger strengths while we unburdened crawl to death..." As Lear bears the status of King he is, as one expects, a man of great power but sinfully he surrenders all of this power to his daughters as a reward for their demonstration of love towards him. This untimely abdication of his throne results in a chain reaction of events that send him through a journey from powerful to powerless.