

Macbeth's evolution

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In Shakespeare's Macbeth, Macbeth undergoes a profound and gradual evolution throughout the play. He regresses from a logical, compassionate, caring, and conscientious man, to an entirely apathetic, amoral paradigm of cynical numbness. Macbeth's erosion from logical to irrational, from compassionate to indifferent, progresses slowly but definitively. At his peak, Macbeth proves that he is capable of both rationality and love as he contemplates murdering Duncan. His final decision in this matter illustrates this ethical peak perfectly. Later, we see evidence of a descent from this when he is deciding to kill Banquo: his motives change, and he becomes less logical, less able to see the reasons "against the deed." Finally, Macbeth shows that he has lost it all. Sanity, compassion, logic, everything is gone that once had been so evident at the beginning of the play. Macbeth becomes jaded and cynical, apathetically hopeless, a mass of entity that had once lived in honor. In trying to decide whether or not to murder Duncan in his soliloquy in Act I Scene VII, both the process by which Macbeth makes his decision (a thoughtful pro-con list) and the final adamant decision ~~that~~ that he will not murder his king ~~are~~ are indicative of conscience and thoughtfulness, morality and compassion. This is the high point from which Macbeth will fall. It is important to understand that he overcomes both the temptation of inherent ambition as well as provocation from his wife in regards to his fateful decision. He is on top of his own actions and decisions: compassion, an ethical attribute, takes precedence over "vaulting ambition." However he firstly shows he is well aware of the punitive consequences of the murder, so he admits he would commit "th'assissination" if it were "the be-all and the end-all," lacking any negative repercussions. The fact that he can

understand the “ judgment here” (as opposed to the afterlife or “ life to come”) shows he is thinking ahead. Then, he literally states what may happen; that “ the bloody instructions,” murderous acts, “ may return to plague the inventor,” comeback to murder he who committed murder in the first place. Only a person in a focused state of mind is able to grapple with specific potential consequences. Furthermore, he then goes through a laundry list of ethical reasons not to murder Duncan: “ I am his kinsman and his subject/ Strong both against the deed.” He realizes, in a logical progression on these ethical points “ against the deed” that he should protect Duncan, “ shut the door” from “ the murderer” not “ bear the knife [him]self.” Here, he shows that he understands the responsibilities of being a host and a kinsman, and he is seen respecting the laws of hospitality in spite of tremendous external and internal pressure. He shows he cares. Then, Macbeth acknowledges that Duncan has “ borne his faculties so meek” 且 been so fair in office 且 “ that his virtues will plead like angels,” and “ pity, like a naked new-born babe, 且 / Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye.” Macbeth, in comparing “ virtues” to “ angels,” shows us that in his present state of mind, he sees morality as something to strive for, as angels are the representative pinnacle of morality. Furthermore he believes the murder to be a “ horrid” or in this case immoral “ deed,” proving he is able to differentiate good from bad. The metaphor of the baby, who represents “ pity,” shows that Macbeth understands that pity is pure, like a baby, untainted by immorality and “ vaulting ambition.” Macbeth shows he aspires to be moral, because his final and adamant decision is in accordance with what “ pity” demands. He is not at all numb to the idea of murder; he is

virtually repulsed by it. In his soliloquy in Act III Scene I, Macbeth is shown to have descended dramatically from his original state: he is jealous, fearful, and certainly not compassionate. He finds no reason not to kill Banquo as he had with Duncan, though Macbeth freely admits that Banquo has “ a royal nature.” The usage of “ royal” here means Macbeth still can tell wrong from right, good “ nature” from bad “ nature.” But this does not in any way deter Macbeth from killing Banquo as it did with Duncan. Macbeth says, “ To be [king] is nothing; /But to be safely thus” meaning that the only way to achieve safety, which Macbeth equates to happiness, is to slaughter Banquo. What is striking here is what is missing: there is no pro-con list, no reasons against the murder. We are also shown here by what is not said that Macbeth is losing his pragmatic skills, because logic dictates that for him to commit another cold-blooded murder, the first having already driven him to incurable insomnia, would cause him only to spiral further and further away from happiness. The fact that he doesn't consider Banquo's morality as a reason against killing him shows that Macbeth is on his way to being totally numb when dealing with death and murder. And, instead of being thoughtful, Macbeth is blinded by “ fear” and jealousy, because his “ genius is rebuk'd [by Banquo].” This fear is clear when he says explicitly that there “ is none but he /Whose being I do fear.” Banquo is the only one Macbeth fears. Also, before he was concerned with the laws of hospitality which include modesty, and now by contradiction he calls himself “ genius” and even compares himself to “ Caesar.” His jealousy, not ambition like before, drives him to have contempt for the “ wis[e]” Banquo, because Banquo, according to the witches, is “ father to a line of kings” which means Macbeth has a “ fruitless

crown." The why of the fear is explained by implication when Macbeth states that the "barren scepter" or pointless symbol of Macbeth's status as king, will be "wrench'd with an unlineal hand" from his "gripe." To wrench is to take forcefully, inspiring fear. This fear later turns to regret, as he says that only for Banquo's descendants, "only for them," rather than for himself has he murdered the "gracious Duncan." In his mind, this means that he has sold his soul, his "eternal jewel," to the "common enemy of man" Satan. This metaphor shows self-acknowledged moral decay, which is a double-sided coin: morally he has indeed decayed, and yet he can still recognize it, which is a step "in the right direction." But he is so melodramatic about this point (the two exclamation marks: "kings!" and "utterance!") that he is perhaps losing control over his words if not his sanity, which is confirmed concretely when Banquo's ghost emerges from Macbeth's tortured psyche later. Total descent is on the horizon. At first he cares about the morality of Duncan and himself. Pity had played an integral role in his life. Now he cares only for his own well-being. The next step is total apathy. By Act V Scene V, Macbeth has fallen entirely from his original state. He has lost all compassion, all conscience, even all fear. In essence, Macbeth is totally numb from life. He says explicitly that he cares so little that he has "almost forgot[ten] the taste of fears." Progressively his fears had narrowed: originally he feared the punitive and moral consequences of killing Duncan. At least later he had feared Banquo though for less noble reasons. Now he fears "almost" nothing. A "night-shriek" can no longer "rouse and stir" him because he has "supp'd full with horrors." The only way "horror" could become unable to "start" Macbeth would be if he is too numb even to be

able to recognize it. At the beginning, as shown, he is repulsed by the horror of murder; now he is too "familiar" with "slaughterous thoughts" even to be frightened. The word "slaughterous" implies violent, almost gory thoughts, which convey the extent to which Macbeth truly is numb to blood. Macbeth is then told that his wife is dead. Summarily his reaction is one of apathetic despair, which is a huge fall even from caring about being safely king (in deciding to murder Banquo). He only says about his wife that she "should have died hereafter," that she would have died sometime in any case. By saying this, Macbeth shows he no longer thinks of time as we do. Obviously, everyone dies, including his wife, but he fails to acknowledge or even care about the time that he could have spent with his "dearest partner in greatness" between her present death and when she would have died naturally. In fact, his new attitude of time is jaded, awful, hopeless. The monotony of the sound of the phrase "to-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow" shows he feels that time truly is just many different paths leading to the same inevitable conclusion: "dusty death." All of "our yesterdays" lead to this death. He leaves no loophole to beat this cynical system of existence. He even urges death on, in relation to himself, saying "Out, out brief candle!" The image of a candle slowly flickering away is Macbeth's way of conveying poetically that life is truly nothing more than an empty shell approaching death, "a walking shadow that frets his hour upon the stage." The word "frets" implies wasting time. This candle is then "heard no more," so therefore its existence, Macbeth's existence, is pointless. Even though life is "full of sound and fury," powerful events, it still "signif[ies] nothing." Life is hollow. The descent is complete. He doesn't care for his wife, nor himself,

because life is just “ a tale told by an idiot.” Life, that which Macbeth had hoped to live “ safely” and happily, has now been concluded to be insignificant, a waste of time. Concerning the difference between good and bad, life now for Macbeth is all gray, clouded by cynicism. He simply does not care anymore, because if something “ signif[ies] nothing” then it means nothing. And if one finds no meaning in life, one certainly doesn't care about “ petty” distinctions, such as good versus bad, morality versus immorality, life versus death. Nothing can be lower, emotionally, than this point in Macbeth's regression. By depicting Macbeth's regression from compassion to apathy, Shakespeare warns us that one should not try to exceed one's set manhood, as Macbeth says, “ I dare do all that may become a man; /Who dares do more, is none. He does “ dare” to do more and consequently ends up as “ none.” Shakespeare summarizes the entire play in a single quotation. By trying to please his wife, trying to prove to her his love, Macbeth violates his idea about what a man is. Up to that point he had been brave and even moral in defending his king Duncan on the battlefield. To him, this is what a man is. Now, for his wife, he goes beyond this definition, in a realm that is paradoxically so “ manly” that it truly is not manly; it is a bravado. It is as if Macbeth is dared into drinking so much of the wine of ambition that he ends up first drunk, then dead. The first wife-inspired big sip is in murdering his king. This is clearly where he goes wrong, because his decision to kill Duncan ultimately leads to his destruction.