

# Is macbeth a traditional tragic hereo

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There is one thing that seems to be common to all tragedies, whether classical or more contemporary. The tragedy is titled with the name of the central character, the tragic hero. This signals that the play is concerned with the fate, destiny, actions and consequences of this main character. The two methods of Reversal and Recognition are used masterfully in 'Macbeth'. Reversal, the change from one state of affairs to its exact opposite, occurs when Macbeth begins the play noble and honourable; he is loved and respected as a skilled warrior.

He kills many people in battle and spears their heads upon his battlements.

At the end of the play Macbeth is killed, and it is his head upon the battlements, ironically put there by the same people he was fighting with. He begins the play heralded as 'valiant cousin' and 'worthy gentleman', he ends as a 'tyrant', 'usurper' and 'butcher'. This is a complete reversal of the situation. Recognition, the change from ignorance to truth, is used very powerfully at the end of the play.

Macbeth thinks he is invincible because the witches have told him that he will not be vanquished until 'Great Birnam Wood (moves) to High Dunsinane Hill'. They also told him that 'none of woman born shall harm Macbeth'.

He assumes he is safe then because a wood cannot move and no man can not be born of woman. But Macbeth is blinded by what he wants to be true. So when he is informed that Birnam Wood appears to be moving, we can imagine how he feels, though he still has the other prophecy to fall back on until he comes face to face with Macduff, who informs Macbeth that he was 'from his mother's womb Untimely ripped'. This is the recognition, the

realisation that he is not invincible and that, in all probability, Macduff will kill him because there was another prophecy that said 'beware Macduff'.

This revelation is very powerful because it turns Macbeth, who was arrogantly oblivious, into a frightened, overwhelmed man. It makes him human again because he had become a cold-blooded, ruthless monster. A classical tragedy is usually a straight-down, unrelenting spiral leading to the death of the tragic hero. Tragedies usually begin with the hero at the pinnacle of his success, and then things just get progressively worse, until the hero dies. In 'Macbeth', there is a build up to Macbeth reaching the high social status of King. He goes up before he starts to tumble down, at least with regards to his social standing.

If, however, you look at it from the point of view of his morality and his mental and emotional welfare, he definitely starts at the top and then begins his fall from grace. I think Shakespeare uses this very cleverly because in this respect, the more important aspect of Macbeth, there is a vertical drop to destruction, so he is keeping to the classical principle, but he is still able to build Macbeth up in terms of his social rank. This amplifies the effect of the downfall when it comes. Before we can analyse Macbeth as a tragic hero we must define what a tragic hero is.

Traditionally, a tragic hero is defined by five fundamental points. He is of high social status; a king, or of royal blood, or highly respected for some skill as in the case of Macbeth and Othello. Through this high social standing, the hero's downfall is made more significant. A tragic hero must also be powerful, and hold the happiness, or otherwise, of many others in his hands.

This means that his downfall will affect many people and be more momentous. A tragic hero reveals fundamental truths about humanity through his suffering. This follows as a tragedy deals with universal themes.

These essential truths help to make the hero's rise and fall more poignant. A tragic hero should also have a great character or talent, which is tragically wasted. This greatness makes the character a hero and not just tragic. But despite this greatness of character, a tragic hero must have a 'tragic flaw'. This flaw is one unconquerable failing that ultimately leads to the destruction of the hero. In Macbeth most people say it is ambition, in Othello it is jealousy. The tragic flaw is fundamentally important to the tragic hero, because it is what leads to his demise, and what makes him tragic, not just heroic.

A tragic hero usually finds some release or resignation when facing death. This death is often inevitable. The hero might repent, or he might just be resigned to his fate. This acceptance is an element of the hero without the tragedy. Now we have the definition of a tragic hero, we can relate it to Macbeth. 'Macbeth' is all about social standing, or the battle for it. In his essay, 'Tragedy and the Common Man', Arthur Miller says that all tragic heroes are trying to gain their rightful position in society, that they are trying to 'evaluate themselves justly'.

I believe this is certainly true for Macbeth. He starts the play as Thane of Glamis, as a renowned warrior, related to and loved by the King. He has a high social standing already. Yet as soon as he hears the witches' prophecy that he will be Thane of Cawdor and king, his ambition takes over. He seems

to believe that the crown is his due and his right. He has no qualms about killing the present king that are not selfishly related to his own welfare, and he thinks nothing of robbing the rightful heir of the crown.

So it would seem from this that he believes being king is no more his due than his desert, and that it is the social standing he was meant for. He never seems to doubt this. Macbeth fulfils the criteria of having noble status, and this is emphasised as he builds up to the highest rank possible, King. His destruction is made more poignant and significant by this build up and the supreme power he has as King, and his tyrannical rule and his death naturally affect a lot of people. Macbeth's suffering reveals many fundamental truths about humanity. We see through him the dangers of loving someone too much.

Macbeth's love for Lady Macbeth, which is shown when he addresses her as 'my dearest love' and 'my dearest partner in greatness', is so strong that it enables her to use it against him. It makes him weak and susceptible to manipulation. It allows her to direct him, ridicule and bully him into murdering Duncan, when he was adamant he would not. He had reasoned himself into this decision and then she robbed him of his conviction using many different means. If Macbeth had not been so enamoured with her, then this manipulation could not have taken place.

Macbeth shows us how a weak mind and bad judgement are just as dangerous as a firm mind and cunning intellect. Through his weakness he is liable to persuasion and inducement, and through his bad judgement he is unable to deal with awkward situations. Macbeth also reveals how nothing is

sacred; everything is disposable. He loves his king but he murders him for his own mercenary advancement. He loves his best friend but he murders him to prevent detection. He is indifferent to Lady Macduff, her children and servants yet he kills them all out of sheer cold-blooded butchery. Finally there is his wife, Lady Macbeth.

We know how much he loves her from his previous treatment of her, but we see how as he slips further into bloody sadism he even becomes indifferent and cold towards her. When she is going mad he hardly seems to care, and when she commits suicide he doesn't seem very concerned, saying only, 'she should have died hereafter; There would have been a time for such a word'. He has learnt that maybe it's better not to have a confidante, or perhaps as he has become more inhuman he no longer needs one. Macbeth is blind to the possibility that there are holes in the prophecies, which at first seem to pronounce him invincible.

We are made aware of the dangers of taking something in a certain light because that is the way we want it to be. Macbeth wants to be safe and secure so he takes the prophecies to mean that he is so. Near the end of the play, Macbeth makes a speech where he says, 'life is but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more.' Macbeth has realised the truth about the insignificance of man. He probably feels that his life, everything he has been through, is just a frivolous charade.

I suppose the overriding truth that comes out of Macbeth's suffering is the danger of ambition and greed. Ambition causes you to do things you

wouldn't normally do; it can be blinding and though it is necessary in some degree, it can be painfully consuming. Macbeth had everything he wanted at the beginning of the play, and then added to that was the title of Thane of Cawdor. But after the witches dangled something more in front of him, he was no longer content with his lot. He became greedy, and driven on by a combination of greed and ambition, he was prepared to do anything to get the title he wanted.

A tragic hero's greatness of character and talent is wasted through tragic circumstance. On one level we cannot really say whether Macbeth has a greatness of character because in the play we don't meet him until after he's under the influence of the witches, and then of his ambition and his 'fiendish' wife. But we can make some assumptions. At the beginning of the play everyone seems to love, admire and respect him. Duncan refers to him as 'valiant cousin' and 'worthy gentleman'. The captain refers to him as 'brave Macbeth' and compares him to a lion and an eagle.

Duncan demonstrates his love for Macbeth by giving him the title of Thane of Cawdor. Lady Macbeth thinks he is 'too full o'th'milk of human kindness' to kill Duncan. In short, everyone thinks he is great. If Macbeth was really a closet murderer, would he have been able to fool everybody, even his wife? We see his poor acting skills and inappropriate, almost farcical ramblings when the body of Duncan is discovered. If he had been harbouring bloody, murderous thoughts prior to the beginning of the play, I don't know if he could have kept them secret, especially not from his wife who appears to know him inside- out.

From this I can only conclude that Macbeth must have had a good character before he was under the witches' influence and before he became consumed by ambition. In this case he matches this point in the definition of a tragic hero because his greatness must have been wasted through the circumstance of fate, and of his being an instrument to the witches. The only talent that we do know of is his prowess on the battlefield; he is very good at killing people. This talent was not wasted though as he put his skill to good use in the furthering of his career as a tyrant.

Probably the most defining feature in the definition of a tragic hero is his 'tragic flaw'. Every tragic hero has one and it is the cause of his death and destruction. The problem that arises is that Macbeth has maybe more than one. The obvious flaw that springs to mind is his ambition. He admits himself that it is the only thing spurring him on. But after acknowledging this he goes to Lady Macbeth and says, 'we will proceed no further in this business.' Obviously then, his ambition is not enough to allow him to risk everything in murdering Duncan.

His ambition is conquerable and he conquers it. It would seem then that it is not a tragic flaw. But one element of his character that could be is his abiding weakness with Lady Macbeth. After disregarding his ambition, he is resolute that he will not murder Duncan. Yet immediately Lady Macbeth starts to work on him. She bullies, ridicules and manipulates him; she makes him feel guilty and she questions his manhood, and after quite a short time she succeeds. She has turned him 180 degrees to do the bloody deed he was convinced he would not.



This persuasion and manipulation was made possible by his own weakness, stemming from his love of his wife, which proved too much for him to master. So he committed the first in a long sequence of crimes on account of Lady Macbeth. But only the first; he needed no coercion to kill all the other people. These crimes were perpetrated as a result of his own ambition and greed. So, Lady Macbeth was able to persuade him to begin the process of gaining complete power, which would also lead to his death, as a result of his weakness.

But he only told her of the prophecies and of what they might have to do to gain the crown because of his ambition. I think, then, that Macbeth's tragic flaw is a combination of weakness and ambition; they feed off each other, and both play some part in Macbeth's destruction. The last point in the definition of a tragic hero is that he finds some degree of release and resignation when facing death. I think Macbeth is resigned when facing death, even if it is after a spell of despair and cowardliness.

The scene in which Macduff slays Macbeth is perhaps the most typical to examine, but even before then he is starting to weary of his life. In act five, scene six, Macbeth says, ' I ' gin to be aweary of the sun, And wish th' estate o' th' world were now undone. ' He says this after it has been reported that Birnam Wood appears to be moving. He sounds as if he has had enough of being King, and wants it all to be over. Perhaps at this point he has realised that the end is nigh, and that that end is undoubtedly his death. He does not sound repentant because he then says, ' Blow wind, come wrack'.

He is commanding a storm, which is the sign of discord as we saw earlier in the play whenever the witches were around. He also says, 'at least we'll die with harness on our back.' This does sound resigned, and he seems to expect his death. If he is expecting his death, then he must be resigned to it. The scene in which Macduff meets, fights and slays Macbeth is for me the most poignant and powerful in the play. Macbeth believes he has a 'charmed life', for he cannot be hurt by any man born of woman. He also thought that he would not be vanquished until 'Birnam remove(d) to Dunsinane', but this has happened.

Macbeth, though shaken, is not yet despairing because he still believes himself to be safe. After all, what man is 'not born of woman'? Macbeth is arrogant and tells Macduff that he 'bear(s) a charmed life which must not yield To one of woman born'. Macduff tells him to 'despair thy charm' and reveals that he 'was from his mothers womb Untimely ripped'. The effect this revelation has on Macbeth is remarkable; only shortly before he said, 'I have almost forgot the taste of fears', and now he says 'it [the revelation] has cowed my better part of man'.

Then he refuses to fight with Macduff. On the surface this may not seem surprising to us, but we must remember that he was a soldier, and soldiers fought to the death, however inevitable that death was. Macduff calls Macbeth a coward and then Macbeth says, 'I will not yield To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet'. Here he sounds more resentful than resigned but he goes on to say, 'though Birnam Wood be come to Dunsinane, And

thou opposed being of no woman born, Yet I will try the last'. Here he is resigned, almost reconciled to his probably unavoidable death.

Yet the element of him that is a soldier has emerged; he will not die a coward, he will fight to the last, even though there is no hope, and may be fighting honourably and nobly makes him feel human again. It is now obvious that Macbeth fits the classical definition of a tragic hero; he has high social status; he reveals many primary truths about mankind and humanity through his suffering; he has a great, noble character which is tragically wasted through circumstance; his otherwise great personality has a tragic flaw which ultimately leads to his destruction; and he is resigned to his inevitable death, exhibiting his truly heroic side.

If we looked at Macbeth under a modern-day view of a tragic hero, he probably would not be described as one. Nowadays, a tragic hero is a person who had a talent or skill; who had a great character; usually someone who achieved something momentous, and who died tragically, often for the furthering of mankind. Some examples of modern-day tragic heroes are Captain Oates, who died on a return trip from the Antarctic to enable his team to survive, Martin Luther King, who was assassinated because he was a black rights activist, and Gandhi, who was again assassinated while fighting for independence in India.

Whichever way you look at him, Macbeth is contemptible, even if you think he was just an instrument of the witches, and unable to escape his fate. In that case he is still loathsome because of the weakness he exhibits with Lady Macbeth and the unnecessary murders of Lady Macduff and all her

household. Macbeth achieved nothing terribly momentous in his life, apart from his success as a soldier. But his latter behaviour ruins any favourable impression you might have formed of him.

Macbeth did not die in tragic circumstances; he was killed by the husband and father of people he had murdered without a cause; he was defending his unlawful position as King against the claims of the true heir to the crown, and he died as he lived his life: selfishly and thoughtlessly, without putting right or seeming to regret any of the vile acts he has committed or the self-interested pain he has caused.

Macbeth does say to Macduff ' But get thee back, my soul is too much charged With blood of thine already', this could be taken that Macbeth doesn't want to commit any more murders, and that maybe he regrets killing Lady Macduff and her children. But I believe that Macbeth doesn't want to fight with Macduff because he was told to ' beware Macduff', and that this is an excuse.

I think Macbeth maybe also wanted to reinforce and perhaps gloat over the fact that he had killed Macduff's family while he was in England. So while in a classical sense Macbeth fulfils the criteria for a tragic hero, in my eyes he is neither heroic nor tragic; only selfish, feeble and insatiable. But then I am judging him by the standards of today, and not in the context in which he was written.