

The Downfall of Macbeth

The tragedies of William Shakespeare often include a tragic hero. A tragic hero is not necessarily evil; he is simply human, with human flaws. Often, there are factors which lead to his downfall. Macbeth is a play that shows the downfall of a noble man who becomes a violent killer. The three factors that contribute to Macbeth's downfall are the prophecies which were told by the witches, the influence of Macbeth's wife, and Macbeth's own ambition.

The prophecies that are told by the witches are one of the factors that cause the degeneration of Macbeth. If it had not been for the witches telling him that he was to be the Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and the King of Scotland, Macbeth would not have changed. Macbeth does not consider killing King Duncan before hearing the prophecies. Even after the first of the witches' predictions comes true, Macbeth does not plot against the king. Instead, he decides to leave it to chance, even though he considers murder later on. This is proven in Act I, scene iii of the play, after King Duncan plans to elevate Macbeth to Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth says, “(Aside) If chance will have me king,/ why, chance may crown me,/ Without my stir.”(I, iii, 142-144) Macbeth's over confident attitude is the first characteristic the witches detect, and they take advantage of this trait to bring about his downfall. If the witches did not play up his confidence, he would not have got himself killed. As the play progresses, Macbeth slowly relies on the witches' prophecies. He returns to seek their guidance again when he realizes that everyone is turning against him. This is when the witches give him three apparitions that make him extremely confident about his position on the throne. The first one of the three apparitions tells him to watch out for Macduff. The second one tells him that no one born of a woman can harm him. The third apparition tells him that he will never fall until the woods at Birnam attack Dunsinane Hill. His confidence is proven in Act I, scene iii, when he says:

Why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor:

If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings;
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smother'd my surmise, and nothing is
But what is not. (I, iii, 133-143)

At this point in the play, Macbeth is sure of himself and his position on the throne. He believes the prophecies that he was told by the witches. While the witches' prophecies change Macbeth's character significantly, his wife also influences him by convincing him to follow through with the murder of King Duncan.

Lady Macbeth is the second persuasive factor that leads Macbeth to his downfall in the play. Lady Macbeth takes advantage of Macbeth's love for her, because Macbeth does not want to do anything to displease her, and he does not realize the power his wife has over him. Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth what the witches see in his future. She sees the horizon for her husband is now broader, and this gives her scope to an ever grander possibility. Her ambition is ignited and she thinks that they can kill the king and make the prophecy an actuality. Lady Macbeth's convincing thoughts are revealed in Act I, scene v, when she says:

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be
What thou art promis'd. Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way; thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it; what thou wouldst highly,
That thou wouldst holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win; thou'dst have, great Glamis,
That which cries, 'Thus thou must do, if thou have it;'
And that which rather thou dost fear to do
Than wishest should be undone. (I, v, 14-24)

Lady Macbeth is telling Macbeth that he has to do the wrong thing to get what he wants, even though she knows he does not want to commit crimes. She wants the best for her husband but she does not realize that he will get the worst in the end. After Lady Macbeth convinces Macbeth

to kill King Duncan, he later regrets his wrongdoings. At this point in the play, the audience can note the change in Macbeth's character. Macbeth's first murder is a tortured experience for him, however, after the first murder, killing seems to be the only solution to maintain his reign over the people of Scotland. It is Lady Macbeth who introduces the concept of murder to Macbeth in the first place. Without his wife, Macbeth would never have been such a horrendous man, but he also chooses the wrong path for himself; he chooses to follow his greed.

Macbeth's own ambition leads him to his downfall. Macbeth's ambition influences who his character becomes in the second half of the play. This new character of Macbeth contains greed, violence, and is power hungry. Macbeth shows this when he kills King Duncan. He brings about the death of those he loves, just by being himself. However, by this time, he loses his love for his wife. He is empty and emotionless. He does not mourn her death. After becoming king, he loses many friends. He orders Banquo's murder, simply because he thinks Banquo is a threat since he knows about the witches' prophecies. Macbeth's evil ambition is proven in Act I, scene iv, when he says:

(Aside)The Prince of Cumberland! that is a step
On which I must fall down, or else o'er-leap,
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires!
Let not light see my black and deep desires;
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. (I, iv, 48-53)

At this point in the play, Macbeth wants his thoughts to darken so that he can commit a crime. He wants his crime to be concealed so that no one else knows. Macbeth listens and considers what may be true about the witches' prophecies, but he should have thought about what information may have been misleading. His belief is that he cannot be defeated and he reads the apparitions as being safe. He thinks that no one born of a woman can harm him, but what he does not know is that Macduff was born by a Cesarean section, which Elizabethans consider “not of woman born.”(IV, i, 80) Macbeth's over confident attitude gets him killed along with the one

person he loved, his wife. If it was not for Macbeth's strong will and passion, he would not have been strong enough to carry out the plan to kill King Duncan, which ultimately leads to his destruction.

Shakespeare's Macbeth demonstrates the transition of a person of nobility and respect into a cruel murderer. The witches' prophecies, Lady Macbeth's influence, and Macbeth's own ambition all contribute greatly to the deterioration of his character, which results in his downfall.

Macbeth realizes that he has lost everything when he says:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (V, v, 19-27)

This is when Macbeth understands that much of his life is based on “fair is foul and foul is fair”(I, I, 11), which means that evil can triumph over good. He disguises his whole life, the evil that he causes, his insanity, his wife's mental condition, and the fact that he murders people and destroys lives, just to guarantee a seat on the throne and play King of Scotland, which ultimately causes his death.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. Macbeth. Ed Margaret Kortes. Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Company. 1988.