Heaven and Hell in *Macbeth*

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Shakespeare has written this tragedy *Macbeth* to highlight the effects of one’s ambition and the ensuing evil action that leads to the downfall and death of the hero. Macbeth's actions are a result of the persuasion and his manipulation by the hands of his Shakespearean counterparts. But it is not fair to say that he was a weak man who was incapable of making his own decisions. Rather, he was a man whose own personal beliefs became actions upon seeing similar views from those close to him. Through its exploration of universal themes, such as the deceptive nature of appearances, the role of fate in determining our lives and how ruthless quests for power blind us to reason is seen. Thus Shakespeare shows how Macbeth's ultimate undoing was a result of ambition and tragedy, not manipulation and weakness.

It is impossible to find the true nature of a person through his outward appearance, as demonstrated in *Macbeth*. One may see many characters misjudged and overlooked. This theme is foreshadowed in the famous lines:

Fair is foul and foul is fair (Act-I, scene-I, line:1-10)

The use of paradox, alliteration and repetition add to the spell-like imagery of the witches' lines. This seemingly nonsensical phrase evokes the question 'Is all what it seems?' and is a recurring motif in the play. Macbeth's first line is:

So foul and fair a day I have not seen (Act-I Scene-III)

Alluding to the mystical incantation of the witches and the theme of misleading appearances. This theme is further highlighted by King Duncan's failure to recognize the treacherous nature of the Thane of Cawdor, and later on, Macbeth. King Duncan states:

He (Thane of Cawdor) was a gentleman on whom I built an absolute trust. (Act-I Scene-IV lines 10-20)

The use of dramatic irony and the juxtaposition of 'gentleman' and Cawdor's treason emphasize the naivety of King Duncan and his inability to look past outward facades. King Duncan's ignorance can be seen again when Lady Macbeth tells the King that:

All our service, in every point twice done and then done, double. (Act-I, scene-VI, line: 1-10)

Not only is this dramatically ironic that she tells him this just before Macbeth murders the King, but it also alludes to the witches' famous lines:

Double, double, toil and trouble, (Act-IV, scene-I, line: 1-10)

Showing that Macbeth and his wife's motives are dubious and witch-like. This then demonstrates the importance of ignoring appearance, as this caused King Duncan's downfall.

Perhaps if Macbeth had disregarded the witches' prophecies, then he would not have chosen this path. Perhaps if he had not taken them as reality then he would have been safe. But this does not mean that the witches manipulated Macbeth. Due to the emergence of deceptive appearances, it is extremely difficult for one to know what truly reality is. Macbeth was not a political pawn in the witches' game of chaos, but was an unfortunate victim of his uncertain reality; spurred on by his undying ambition and the mistakes of other similar victims, especially the mistakes of King Duncan.

Not only was Macbeth a victim of his uncertain reality, he was also a victim of fate, his unfortunate future unraveling before him. Macbeth questions whether fate or human will determines a man's future. Macbeth relies on the role of fate to positively influence his life, saying:

If chance will have me King, why chance may crown me without my stir. (Act-I, scene-III, line:140-145)

This suggests that Macbeth does not see the witches' prophecy as fate but 'chance'. The personification of chance shows how Macbeth is relying on this chance, but later decides that chance is not enough to get him the throne and so murders Duncan. This suggests that Macbeth was not helpless but was able to control some of his future. On the other hand, Macbeth cannot dictate everything. This can be seen when Banquo's ghost appears, when Macbeth muses:

It will have blood they say; blood will have blood. (Act-III, scene-IV, line:120-125)

The personification and repetition of blood and its spell-like diction emphasizes Macbeth's fear. It seemed that the witches had known his future; however Macbeth deliberates and broods before taking action. Macbeth's reflections suggest that he controls at least part of his future. In this sense, he is not a weak man manipulated by his wife or the witches, but a man who makes decisions and has control of his destiny.
Macbeth makes many decisions regarding his future, one being the relentless quest for power, blinding him to reason and morality. However, this search for power blinded him to reason and quickly turned into a evil. After Macbeth kills King Duncan, he asks

Whence is that knocking? (Act-II, scene-II, line:120-125)

This is a religious and contextual allusion to knock on Hell's door. This is further explored through the porter, who symbolizes the Gate Keeper to Hell. This shows that Macbeth's ruthless, murderous and immoral quest for power has drawn him to evil and to Hell. Furthermore, we can see how Macbeth has been blinded to reason when we see the results of the regicide (www.wikipedia.com).

A falcon tow 'ring in her pride of place was by a musing owl hawked at and killed. (Act-II, scene-IV, line:10-15)

The use of animal imagery detailing unnatural acts highlights the perversion of nature that has resulted from the disruption of the Great Chain of Being. Another perversion that has resulted from the regicide is the degradation of Lady Macbeth's mental state. She sleepwalks, saying in her sleep:

Here's the smell of blood again; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this hand. (Act-V, scene-I, line 31-51)

The use of hyperbole emphasizes her insanity as a result of her ambition and lust for power. Macbeth has an insatiable lust for power, and upon stealing the throne, becomes incredibly afraid of losing it. He always wanted to be King, emphasized by how he was started after hearing the witches' initial prediction. He never let anyone persuade him otherwise, and so was not manipulated or controlled by anyone in his quest for power. He listened to and took advice from other influential people but ultimately made the last decision. It was his own choice and lust for power that led to his moral decay.

Macbeth was not a weak man manipulated by others to further their ulterior motives. He was an independent man who made his own decisions, however, morally misguided they were. Shakespeare has shown us this through his exploration of universal and timeless themes, such as the tendency of appearances to be misleading, the role of fate in shaping our lives and how an insatiable lust for power can only blind us to reason and moral judgment. Macbeth, as a tragic hero, resonates with us today because of his immediate fall from grace and status, leaving a great man in ruins and destitution.

The age of Shakespeare still believed in ghosts and witches, and it is a matter of perfect indifference for the justification of the use which, in Hamlet and Macbeth, he has made of pre-existing traditions. No superstition can be widely diffused without having a foundation in human nature; on this the poet builds; he calls up from their hidden abysses that dread of the unknown, that presage of a dark side of nature and a world of spirits, which philosophy now imagines it has altogether exploded.

These repulsive hags, from which the imagination shrinks, are here emblems of the hostile powers which operate in nature; and the repugnance of our senses is outweighed by the mental horror. With one another they discoursed like women of the lowest class; for this was the class to which they were ordinarily supposed to belong; when, however, they address Macbeth, they assume a loftier tone; their predictions, which they either pronounce or allow their apparitions to deliver, have all the obscure brevity, the majestic solemnity of oracles. They are governed by an invisible spirit, or the operation of such great and dreadful events would be above their sphere. A monstrous crime is committed; Duncan, a venerable old man, and the best of kings, is, in defenseless sleep, under the hospital's roof, murdered by his subject, whom he has loaded with honors and rewards. Natural motives alone seem inadequate, or the perpetrator must have been portrayed as a hardened villain. Shakespeare wished to exhibit a more sublime picture—an ambitious but noble hero, yielding to a deep-laid hellish temptation, and in whom all the crimes to which, in order to secure the fruits of his first crime, he is impelled by necessity, cannot altogether eradicat the stamp of native heroism. He has, therefore, given a threefold division to the guilt of that crime. The first idea comes from beings whose whole activity is guided by the lust of wickedness. The weird sisters surprise Macbeth in the moment of intoxication of victory, when his love of glory has been gratified; they cheat his eyes by exhibiting to him as the work of fate what in reality can only be accomplished by his own deed, and gain credence for all their words by the immediate fulfillment of the first prediction.

Lady Macbeth, who of all the human participators in the king's murder is the most guilty, is thrown by the terrors of her ambition and lust for power. Macbeth has an insatiable desire for power, and upon stealing the throne, becomes incredibly afraid of losing it. He always wanted to be King, emphasized by how he was started after hearing the witches' initial prediction. He never let anyone persuade him otherwise, and so was not manipulated or controlled by anyone in his quest for power. He listened to and took advice from other influential people but ultimately made the last decision. It was his own choice and lust for power that led to his moral decay.

Shakespeare has also used supernatural elements which thrusts Macbeth to his doom. Everyone has a slightly different interpretation of the supernatural but the interpretations which start with are Shakespeare’s. Every one of Shakespeare’s time found the supernatural fascinating. Shakespeare interpreted the supernatural as witches, magic, unnatural and evil and he expressed his beliefs in the play, Macbeth very clearly, as he portrayed the three deformed women with control over the weather and the ability to predict the future. These three evil witches with magical powers were the creation of Shakespeare’s interpretation of the supernatural. Shakespeare’s contemporaries believed in the supernatural very strongly and a majority of them were frightened of it, including the king of that time, King James I of England. The play begins with a supernatural scene, where the three witches meet and give many clues as to who they are or what they have control over,

...we three meet again in thunder, lighting or in rain?....

When the battle’s lost and won....
This scene sets the atmosphere for the rest of the play. If this scene was not there it would be difficult for the audience how later scenes are linked or how these three women can tell Macbeth’s future. Also if elements of the supernatural were not used in Act1 Scene 1, as they have been, the witches could not be shown as sinister and evil. These two elements of honour, ‘sinister’ and ‘evil’ would later be used to explain the cause of the three witches’ behaviour further on in the play.

All hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor, All hail, Macbeth! That shall be king hereafter.

The witches predict Macbeth’s future and tell him that he shall become the Thane of Cawdor and then king. The supernatural soliciting of the weird sisters suggests to him an, image, not a thought merely, but an image so horrible that its contemplation ‘doth unfix my hair. And make my seated heart knock at my ribs, against the use of nature’ (www.enote.com).

This passage was scarcely intended to describe an actual hallucination, but rather that excessive predominance of the imaginative faculty which enables some men to call at will before the mind’s eye the very appearance of the object of thought; that faculty which enabled a great painter to place at will in the empty chair of his studio the mental delineation of any person who had given him one sitting. The rest of the play is to become King of Scotland. The play follows Macbeth’s plot to get rid of King Duncan and then Macbeth’s life after the murder.

Macbeth is now The Thane of Cawdor and has a strong belief in the witches’ predictions. King Duncan is to stay at Macbeth’s castle. Macbeth is overwhelmed to hear this and travels ahead of the King to warm his wife of King Duncan’s arrival the following day. Lady Macbeth is aware of Macbeth’s meeting with the witches and what they have said. She is more wanting of the royal title than her husband, and has deviously plotted to murder the King during his stay. Again the supernatural is bought in once again to the immediate attention of the audience.

Is this a dagger I see before me (Act-II, scene-I, line: 30-50)

Macbeth has a vision of a dagger just before he is to murder the King. This surreal vision of dagger is another example of the supernatural. This dagger encourages or ‘pushes’ Macbeth to commit the crime. Although it is meant to encourage Macbeth to do the murder, it is at the same time, showing the audience that what Macbeth is about to do, although it being obvious, is evil. Shakespeare uses the supernatural to guide the audience to show what evil is.

Macbeth is now the King of Scotland since both of Duncan’s sons have fled the country in fear of their lives. The only obstacle in Macbeth’s path now is his close friend Banquo, because Banquo suspects Macbeth of Duncan’s murder since he was also present when the witches told of Macbeth’s Kingship’s,

…I fear, thou play’st most foully for’t. (Act-III, scene-a, line:1-10)

Banquo tells Macbeth that he suspects him of the Kings murder; Banquo is clearly suggesting that Macbeth has played foully to achieve his Kingship. Also, it is not only Macbeth who was given this, ‘supernatural soliciting’ (www.studymode.com).

Thou shalt get Kings, though thou be none. (Act-I, scene-III, line:60-70)

Banquo is told that he will not become a King but he shall be the father of many Kings. This is a problem for Macbeth because the only way Banquo’s children will become Kings is if the present King, Macbeth, dies and so Macbeth fears being murdered and being discovered to have murdered King Duncan. So he has Banquo murdered and on the same night invites him to a feast. Macbeth obviously does not expect Banquo to attend, but Banquo does attend as a ghost, and through the supernatural Shakespeare shows Macbeth’s fear and guilt. The King Macbeth is about to sit down at his table with his wife and some nobles when he sees no space for himself, although there is, but according to him a figure seems to be already sitting there, which we later discover is the ghost of Banquo. The reality of the air-drawn dagger he did not believe in, but referred its phenomena to their proper source. But between this time and the appearance of Banquo the stability of Macbeth’s reason had undergone a fearful ordeal. He lacked ‘the reason of all natures-sleep’ (www.directessays.com).

The murder of Banquo was attended with no expression of remorse, although it highly stimulated the imagination; for this also he had temptation. But shortly afterwards we find him committing a wholesale and motiveless deed of blood, in the assassination of the kindred of Macduff—far more atrocious and horrible, if they can be degrees in the guilt of such deeds, than all he has done before. He knew Banquo is dead. When he stands up, making a speech praising Banquo, then Banquo's ghost appears. Only Macbeth can see the ghost and he is terrified. He reacts with horror and upsets the guests.

Macbeth declares, ‘What treachery is this, which of you have done this’ (www.wikipedia.com) his fellows are confused and some are apprehensive and begin to link King Duncan’s death with Macbeth. But none speak of what they think instead they try to calm the maddened king. After this supernatural occurrence some, more strongly, believe that Macbeth had a hand in the Kings murder. This supernatural happening is very important, since it is one of the first signs of Macbeth’s fear and guilt. This scene was designed with great subtlety to make Shakespeare’s audience spit on Macbeth’s face when he began to fear for himself, even after committing the murder of a king and having his closest companion murdered.

Beyond this scene the play becomes more sinister and the atmosphere transforms into cold, darkness and raging evil. Macbeth goes to the moor to meet the witches where he makes them promise to answer his questions and they conjure up supernatural apparitions to answer him. At first these apparitions seem to be on Macbeth’s side and do not alarm him in any way and when told by the witches, ‘None of women born shall harm Macbeth’, he feels more confident. As he thinks more about the apparitions he feels there is something darker about them. Shakespeare uses the supernatural apparition to show the audience that evil is present.
These supernatural apparitions are as important as the earlier predictions made by the witches since they display several characteristics which Macbeth has obtained during his first meeting with the witches and now. This scene shows how Macbeth no longer follows his own instincts but instead relies completely on the supernatural. These apparitions are one of the reasons for Macbeth’s end. He relied on the supernatural so much that he lost his strength of suspicion; this leads Macbeth into being tricked by the witches. When Macbeth meets Macduff at his end he is not scared but threatened Macduff not to fight him since he has too much of Macduff’s family blood on his sword already. Macbeth is suggesting that he can kill Macduff if he wants to. The apparitions are also important in the fact that Shakespeare expresses his view that the supernatural is evil, and can trick even the strongest of people. This is the last meeting between Macbeth and the witches before the play ends and also the last time any supernatural things occur.

Macbeth does not understand that he is being tricked by the fact that Macduff was born premature or by caesarean section, it is not clear which one, but by being born that way he is not of, ‘woman born’, therefore it is possible that Macduff could harm Macbeth. The contradiction in the apparitions makes Macbeth double minded, unsure and scared. Though eventually, with great apprehension, he manages to convince himself that not even Macduff can harm him. Macbeth, as well as the audience, at this point, are unclear as to what the third apparition means. The apparition involves a child holding a tree and is crowned. Macbeth ignores it, but is still fearing of death and his kingship is becoming strained and confusing for both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

Although Lady Macbeth seems to have a stronger mental character at the start of the play, she is now suffering from remorse and confusion. She feels, ‘Tis safer to be that which we destroy than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy’ (Kenneth Muir, ixvii). Lady Macbeth describes the supernatural as her, ‘destruction’, and she refers to her royalty and wealth as, ‘doubtful joy’, this quote from Lady Macbeth shows how even the most desperate of people regret relying on the supernatural. At the beginning Macbeth is informed of Lady Macbeth’s death. Macbeth shows no emotion or extra stress; this suggests that he doesn’t really care. This scene, though it is not directly linked with the supernatural, shows how selfish Macbeth has become due to it.

Macbeth has knowledge of Malcolm’s army moving in to attack his castle and has ordered his army also to attack. Shakespeare finishes the play very dramatically with Macbeth being slain by Macduff, and Malcolm being crowned the rightful King of Scotland. This is the third and final apparition which was given to Macbeth by the witches. This apparition has also come true. The little child with a crown on his head in the apparition is meant to be Malcolm once he has been crowned the rightful King of Scotland. The significance of the tree which was held by the child in the apparition is, ‘Great Birnam Wood’, where Malcolm hid his army in the following up to the final battle.

At the start of the play Macbeth is portrayed as a tactful and intelligent soldier but in his final battle he uses none of these skills. The reason for this is that the evil supernatural has made Macbeth lose these Virtues. The supernatural theme is a very important one in, Macbeth. Otherwise the play could not have been concluded to its fullest extent, and Macbeth could not be vanquished as ironically as he was when, Great Birnam Wood moved! Macbeth caused his own destruction when he relied on the supernatural. As the play follows a man to his complete destruction and loss of integrity the supernatural is very crucial as it is the reason behind, Macbeth’s destruction.