The Puppet or The Puppeteer? Examining Macbeth’s Agency

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Seminar Paper and Viva Voce

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This seminar paper delves into the intricate theme of agency in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* through the lens of the titular character's moral journey. By analyzing Macbeth's pivotal decisions and interactions with other characters, the paper explores the extent of his control over his own destiny. The complex interplay between fate and personal choice is examined to determine whether Macbeth is a victim of circumstance or an active participant in his tragic downfall. Through a detailed study of key scenes and character dynamics, the paper aims to shed light on the blurred lines between manipulation and autonomy in Macbeth's narrative. Ultimately, the seminar paper seeks to unravel the timeless question of whether Macbeth is a puppet manipulated by external forces or the puppeteer orchestrating his own fate through ambition and moral compromise.

In William Shakespeare's renowned tragedy *Macbeth,* the titular character's agency stands at the crux of a moral and existential dilemma that has captivated audiences for centuries. The play, believed to have been first performed in 1606, delves into the tumultuous journey of Macbeth, a nobleman whose ambition propels him towards a path of treachery, murder, and ultimate downfall. As the audience navigates the intricacies of Macbeth's choices and actions, a fundamental question emerges: is Macbeth merely a pawn manipulated by external forces, or does he wield agency over his own fate as the puppeteer of his tragic narrative? This seminar paper, titled "The Puppet or The Puppeteer? Examining Macbeth's Agency," embarks on a scholarly exploration of the thematic significance and narrative complexities surrounding Macbeth's agency within the context of Shakespeare's tragic masterpiece. By unraveling the layers of ambition, guilt, and fate that entwine Macbeth's character, this paper seeks to illuminate the dichotomy between external influences and personal responsibility in shaping the trajectory of one of literature's most compelling antiheroes. Through a critical analysis of key scenes, character interactions, and thematic motifs in *Macbeth,* we aim to unravel the enigma of agency in the play and uncover the profound insights it offers into human nature, moral culpability, and the timeless allure of tragic narratives.

In *Macbeth,* critics have debated whether the titular character is portrayed as a puppet manipulated by external forces or as a puppeteer orchestrating his own downfall. Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis can be related to *Macbeth* through the concept of the unconscious mind and the influence of repressed desires on human behaviour. In Freudian terms, Macbeth's character can be analysed through the lens of the id, ego, and superego. Macbeth's ambition and desire for power, as well as his guilt and internal conflicts, align with Freud's ideas about unconscious desires and internal struggles. For example, Macbeth's ambition to become king drives him to commit regicide, reflecting the id's pursuit of pleasure and gratification without considering moral consequences. His guilt and hallucinations after the murder can be seen as manifestations of his repressed desires conflicting with his superego, the internalised moral compass. Therefore, Freud's theory provides a psychological framework to understand Macbeth's complex character and motivations in the play.

 Some argue that Macbeth is a puppet, driven by the prophecies of the witches and the influence of Lady Macbeth, ultimately losing control over his actions. On the other hand, others view Macbeth as a puppeteer who makes conscious choices that lead to his tragic fate, suggesting that he is fully responsible for his actions. The line "Stars, hide your fires; Let not light see my black and deep desires" (Act 1, Scene 4) exemplifies Macbeth's internal struggle and ambition, showcasing his agency as he grapples with his dark desires while also hinting at the external forces at play in his life.

There is substantial textual evidence to support the argument that Macbeth is portrayed as a puppet manipulated by fate and supernatural forces. One key example is when Macbeth encounters the three witches who prophesize his rise to power, planting the seed of ambition and manipulation in his mind. Macbeth's actions and decisions thereafter seem to be influenced by these prophecies, as he becomes consumed by his desire for power and his fear of losing it. Additionally, the apparitions he sees, such as the floating dagger and the ghost of Banquo, further illustrate how he is being guided and controlled by supernatural forces beyond his control. These instances highlight Macbeth's lack of agency and free will, emphasizing the idea that he is merely a pawn in a larger, predetermined scheme orchestrated by fate and the supernatural.

Lady Macbeth also  plays a crucial role in goading Macbeth into action by questioning his masculinity and challenging his resolve. Her manipulation and ambition push Macbeth to commit heinous acts that he might not have otherwise considered. Her famous soliloquy in Act 1, Scene 5, where she calls upon the spirits to "unsex me here" and "take my milk for gall," reveals her desire to shed her femininity and adopt a ruthless demeanour to bolster Macbeth's resolve. By questioning Macbeth's manhood and appealing to his ambition, Lady Macbeth exerts a potent influence on his decision to assassinate King Duncan. Her persuasive language and cunning strategies push Macbeth to commit regicide, setting in motion a chain of tragic events.

There are  several key scenes that depict Macbeth taking initiative and asserting control over his actions. One such scene is when Macbeth decides to murder King Duncan to fulfill the witches' prophecy of becoming king. In Act 1, Scene 7, Macbeth grapples with his internal conflict but ultimately takes matters into his own hands by plotting the regicide. Another crucial scene is when Macbeth hires murderers to kill Banquo and his son in Act 3, Scene 2, showcasing Macbeth's proactive approach to eliminating threats to his throne. Additionally, in Act 5, Scene 5, Macbeth demonstrates his resolve by refusing to surrender despite facing inevitable defeat, highlighting his determination and agency in the face of adversity. These scenes underscore Macbeth's transformation from a noble warrior to a ruthless tyrant driven by his ambition and desire for power. Here, the titular character undeniably plays the role of the puppeteer of his own destiny through a series of choices and decisions that ultimately lead to his downfall. Macbeth's initial encounter with the three witches sparks his ambition and sets in motion a chain of events driven by his own desires. His decision to heed the witches' prophecies, fueled by his unchecked ambition and the manipulation of Lady Macbeth, leads him to commit regicide and descend into a cycle of violence and paranoia. Despite receiving further warnings and prophecies that could alter his path, Macbeth continues to make choices that align with his thirst for power and his fear of losing it. Each decision he makes, from the murder of Banquo to seeking out the witches for reassurance, further entangles him in a web of fate that he weaves himself. Ultimately, Macbeth's tragic end is a culmination of his own choices and actions, solidifying his role as the master of his own undoing in the intricate tapestry of destiny portrayed in the play.

The puppet and puppeteer perspectives offer contrasting views on Macbeth's agency. From the puppet perspective, Macbeth is portrayed as a character whose actions are controlled by external forces beyond his control. This viewpoint suggests that Macbeth is merely a puppet manipulated by fate, the witches, and Lady Macbeth, leading him to commit heinous acts. On the other hand, the puppeteer perspective sees Macbeth as a character with agency and free will, making conscious choices that ultimately shape his destiny. This viewpoint highlights Macbeth's responsibility for his actions and emphasizes his role as the master of his own fate. By examining Macbeth's agency through these two lenses, a deeper understanding of the complexities of his character and the themes of fate versus free will in the play can be gained.

In the context of Macbeth's downfall, the puppeteer perspective places more liability on Macbeth himself rather than external forces. While the puppet perspective suggests that Macbeth is a mere puppet manipulated by fate, the witches, and Lady Macbeth, the puppeteer perspective emphasizes Macbeth's agency and free will in making the choices that lead to his tragic end. By exercising his own decisions and giving in to his ambition and greed, Macbeth sets into motion the events that ultimately result in his downfall. Therefore, the puppeteer perspective holds Macbeth accountable for his actions and underscores the role of personal responsibility in shaping his tragic fate.

In conclusion, the seminar paper delves into the intricate analysis of Macbeth's agency as either a puppet or a puppeteer in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth.* Through a detailed examination of the text, it becomes evident that Macbeth demonstrates characteristics of both roles throughout the narrative. However, the paper argues in support of Macbeth as a puppeteer rather than a mere puppet. By showcasing his ambitious nature, strategic decisions, and manipulation of those around him, Macbeth emerges as a character who actively shapes his own destiny and the fate of others. This perspective highlights the complexity of Macbeth's character and challenges traditional interpretations, emphasizing his active role in the tragic events of the play.

To further explore the theme of agency in Shakespearean tragedies, particularly focusing on Macbeth's agency as a puppeteer, avenues for research could include delving into the interplay of fate and free will in Shakespeare's works. Analyzing how characters like Macbeth navigate between being manipulated by external forces and actively shaping their own destinies can offer insights into broader questions of human agency, power dynamics, and moral responsibility. Additionally, investigating the role of manipulation, ambition, and control in other tragedies such as *Hamlet*  or *Othello* could provide a comparative lens to understand the nuances of agency across different contexts. Exploring the psychological motivations behind characters' actions, the influence of gender dynamics on agency, and the theatrical interpretations of agency on stage can further enrich the scholarly discourse on the intricate portrayal of agency in Shakespearean tragedies.

Works Cited

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