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Macbeth Unit Assessment

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Macbeth’s Tragic flaw

In Aristotle’s *Poetics*, he outlines what is now considered to be the basic structure to which all tragedies must adhere. The hero begins with favorable fortune and is a fairly good person, with the exception of one flaw which is essential to the plot and which gives the tragedy its tragic aspects. While Shakespeare does not completely coincide with the ancient Greeks in his story structure, the basic premise remains the same. The hero of his tragedy, *Macbeth,* likewise follows this structure. Macbeth, introduced as a brave and loyal soldier and national hero for his services in war, is tempted by a promise of greater power. For this promise, he betrays everything that he once stood for by killing his king and sends his life spiraling deeper into chaos and destruction until it is at last put to an end by Macduff, the thane of Fife. For this, it should seem that Macbeth’s flaw, as described by Aristotle, would be his greed and ambition. Yet this explanation cannot hold under further and deeper inspection. He was ambitious before he was promised the crown, and yet he did not seek it to such an extent. Furthermore, having achieved his goals, Macbeth does not stop his murderous actions, believing that he deserved to be king. Upon this more comprehensive look, it emerges that Macbeth’s tragic flaw, which caused his undoing is only his sense of entitlement from the world.

During the first scenes of the play, Macbeth meets three witches who promise him that he will become the thane of Cawdor and the king of Scotland. Moments later, Macbeth receives the news that the current king, Duncan, has decided to grant Macbeth the title of thane of Cawdor. However, after Duncan decided his heir to be Malcom, Macbeth states, “The Prince of Cumberland! This is a step on which I must fall down or else o’erleap ,”(Shakespeare 1.4.55-56). This is the time where he truly expresses his desire to become king. He views this decision as a mistake saying that it impedes his progression. He thinks of this as an obstacle, which he must “fall down” or conquer and thus “o’erleap”. Shakespeare shows this because it allows the audience to understand how Macbeth has changed. It is this change that allowed for Macbeth to commit the horrible acts that he does in the later scenes of the play. So, Macbeth’s fatal flaw would be the change that happened from this moment. One may argue that Macbeth became ambitious from hearing the witches’ prophecy. That then because he was ambitious, he killed Duncan. But Shakespeare demonstrates to us through conversations between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth that he was always ambitious. Lady Macbeth chastises her husband saying, “Art thou afeard to be the same in thine own act and valor as thou art in desire?”(Shakespeare 1.7.42-45) The use of past tense in his wording here suggests that Macbeth has been ambitious for a while. His word choice suggests that Lady Macbeth thinks the only reason that Macbeth won’t achieve what he should achieve is because he is too afraid. In this way, it is suggested that Macbeth deserves many things that he is simply too scared to reach and get himself. So, his ambition was already present and could not have been the catalyst for his fall. Instead it is the sense of entitlement that was instilled in him when one of the two predictions came true and the other did not. A sense further reinforced by Shakespeare’s use of language in Macbeth’s conversations with his wife.

After his killing of Duncan, Macbeth is crowned king. His prophecy is fulfilled, but he is not satisfied with ruling a kingdom. Instead, Macbeth starts wanting more. He begins to gain a sense of entitlement for things that were not even promised to him, and was willing to kill his close friend in order to achieve this end. He begins to feel jealous of the prophecy that the witches give to his friend, Banquo, and he laments that “For Banquo’s issue I have filed my mind; for them the gracious Duncan have I murdered”(Shakespeare 3.1.70-71). Ambition would not consider this. He is already at the highest rank that he can climb, but he believes that because he did so much work to secure the position of king, it should belong to his children instead of what the witches prophesized even though they already granted him the crown. Shakespeare also specifically describes Duncan here as being “gracious” which echoes back to how horrible an act that this was, stressing Macbeth’s twisted thought process. He also characterizes this relationship as “for them”. This is for the reason that Macbeth is trying to justify what he is about to do. It is unlikely however that ambition would play a role here. Ambition concerns achievement, and is the result of Macbeth’s desire for a greater influence. While this could explain Macbeth’s earlier actions killing king Duncan to a slight extent, it is completely inapplicable here. Macbeth could have stopped at Duncan, but it was because of his belief of superiority that he kills Banquo. This is demonstrated by Shakespeare’s dialogue with Macbeth and his attitude towards other characters. He is demanding and overbearing, saying to the witches “I will be satisfied. Deny me this, and an eternal curse fall on you! Let me know!” (Shakespeare 4.1.119-120). He shows here little concern for others while at the start of the play, he chooses his words carefully and is kind to the people around him. Shakespeare uses many exclamation marks here to emphasize the nature of the conversation. He also curses the witches and says that he “must be satisfied” although there is no reason he should be. This paints a picture for a very entitled character in the place of an ambitious one.

Macbeth’s flaw is at first glance, obvious. But it is not as simple as it first may seem. Many of the traits and situations through the play oppose the idea of Macbeth being a noble warrior who is destroyed by as ambition. In his place is a person who was always ambitious but always accepted that he needed to earn his success, who became obsessed with the idea that he deserved the rewards that he didn’t earn. From this, he loses everything, including what he did rightfully earn. An arguably more tragic fate.