

Macbeth: The Quintessential Tragic Hero

William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, written in the early 17th century, chronicles the rise and fall of the play's namesake, who assassinates the king of Scotland from his position as a nobleman and claims the throne for his own. Through a series of events, he falls from honor and is eventually slain in battle by a fellow nobleman, Macduff, fulfilling a supernatural prophecy. Overall, Macbeth begins as a noble figure, then is shunned and reviled as a direct result of his actions, ambition, and hubris. At the end of the play, after his entire downfall, he confronts his situation and accepts it before his death, lending catharsis to the conclusion. Overall, because of these aspects, Macbeth is a perfect example of the classical Greek and Shakespearean tragic hero.

First, it would help to define what a tragic hero is, exactly. Aristotle described a tragic hero as one that evokes a feeling of pity or fear from the audience, specifying that the focus should be the downfall of the hero's fortune as opposed to their prosperity. As well, the downfall must be brought upon "not through vice or depravity but by some error of judgement." (Aristotle) Additionally, the hero must be virtuous yet not intrinsically good, i.e. subject to the weaknesses of human reasoning, which is the central aspect driving most stories involving a tragic hero. The hero usually makes a decision under a lapse of judgement, then later comes to realize the error of their ways, frequently the result of a fatal flaw (hubris being the most common).

At the beginning of the play, Macbeth is in a position of nobility and virtue. He himself is the ruler of a castle and the Thane of Glamis (a medieval Scottish position similar to that of a lord or ruler of a fief). This position was second to only that of the high-ranking Earls and the King. However, while not all tragic heroes were of high societal ranking (although most were), they were all virtuous. Macbeth was described as to have "...carved out his passage/Till he faced the slave;/Till he unseamed him from the nave to th' chops,/And fixed his head upon our battlements." (Act I Scene II) With the quote showing him effortlessly fighting his way through enemies to the "slave" (an insult to the slain rebelling commander Macdonwald), Macbeth is certainly valorous in battle, a trait that one can easily analogize to virtue. And overall, with the combination of his high

place in society, valor in battle, and virtue in life, the first major requirement for a tragic hero is fulfilled.

The arguably most important theme overall to Macbeth, that of unchecked ambition, is directly related to the next important aspect of Macbeth as a tragic hero, i.e. the grounding via lapses of judgement. Throughout the play, Macbeth seems near unable to truly stand up for and make decisions for himself, leading to most of his downfall, namely his wife convincing him to assassinate King Duncan; “He that's coming/Must be provided for: and you shall put./This night's great business into my dispatch;/Which shall to all our nights and days to come/Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.” (Act I Scene V) Macbeth barely puts up any opposition, despite clearly knowing the immorality of his actions. As he showed strong loyalty to the king before — protesting on basis of loyalty in his retorts to his wife — a strong case is made that the outside influences of the witches and his wife combined with a brief lapse in judgement (which he shows great regret for afterwards) was to blame instead of truly murderous ambitions. As well, his final fall from rule — culminating in his death — was predicted by the witches, a prediction which he immediately chose to refute: “That will never be./Who can impress the forest, bid the tree/Unfix his earthbound root? ... Macbeth/ Shall live the lease of nature.” (Act IV Scene I) Macbeth once again goes against what would be more or less common sense, and, blinded by pride, interprets the witches’ words to mean he will reign to the extent of his natural life, as opposed to treating it as a cryptic warning. With this being almost textbook hubris, Macbeth fulfills another requirement of a tragic hero.

Finally is the topic of the downfall of fortune and final catharsis. We can agree that Macbeth is generally a fortunate person; he is of noble birth, was the thane of Glamis, became the Thane of Cawdor and finally the king of Scotland. However, his luck takes a sharp downfall near the end of the play, with the fleeing of his political opponents, then with the death of his wife and his overthrowal happening in quick succession. One moment, he’s the king of Scotland, and the next, he’s dead at Macduff’s feet. But this is not without catharsis, with Macbeth’s soliloquy providing closure and a shred of redemption as he progresses towards his death, saying “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

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is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury.” Overall, the audience feels pity for Macbeth, his entire downfall being easily avoided and wrought with dramatic irony, effectively setting up an ideal cathartic conclusion to the play, fulfilling the final aspect of a tragic hero.

Overall, we can see that Macbeth truly is almost the cookie-cutter Greek/Shakespearean tragic hero. He is full of virtue and valor, yet flawed and human in his judgement. He rises in his nobility, only to endure a misfortunate and largely self-induced downfall. Finally, he reflects on his misdeeds, setting up the catharsis and a conclusion to Shakespeare’s play.