
Macbeth's Character And His Guilt

Guilt, or described by Macbeth as "Life's fitful fever", is prevalent in all of our lives. In some cases, guilt is perceived as a destructive and consequently pointless emotion, stemmed from the fear of judgment or the burden of insecurity that can lead to paranoia and ultimately, drive one to insanity. But at other times, it is seen as the emerging of one's moral conscience at the hand of wrongdoing, in which the distressing effects of remorse can reinstate one's morals and hinder the carrying out of future catastrophic actions. Being a human emotion, guilt undoubtedly will affect people in different ways, for different people will experience and encounter guilt in different ways. However, it does not linger in and out of existence or fluctuate throughout time, so it is fair to say that this was relevant in Shakespeare's Elizabethan era, as it is substantially addressed in Macbeth and so this text can be considered highly significant in today's context.

Macbeth's character is one that attempts to suppress and deny his feelings of remorse, yet they always resurface and sometimes in the form of visions and hallucinations. In Macbeth's soliloquy after planning Duncan's murder, he exclaims "Is this a dagger which I see before me, / ... / A dagger of the mind, a false creation, / Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?". Even before he has committed the murder he is already so consumed in internal conflict, however instead he misinterprets his hallucination as a sign that is goading him to carry out the crime. Furthermore, as he meets Lady Macbeth after the murder, he expresses through a metaphor, "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather / The multitudinous seas in incarnadine" He refers to Duncan's blood on his hands as a representation of his guilt in respect to the severity of his cruel act, implying that the blood could stain all the world's oceans red and yet they will still not be cleansed, he will still not be free of his guilty conscience. Instead, his guilt will poison the world around him. However, his constant paranoia and refusal to recognize his remorse eventually turns him delirious, and results in him impetuously causing further calamity.

Lady Macbeth's character and her experiences of guilt contrasts with those of Macbeth's, as during the planning and perpetration of Duncan's murder she is highly adamant on carrying out the execution and is composed afterwards, scolding Macbeth on being weak and reassuring that they can easily be erased of the crime "but I shame / To wear a heart so white / ... / A little water clears us of this deed." However, as the play unfolds and continues to go downhill while Macbeth goes on his maniacal killing spree, she descends into insanity through constantly obsessing over the murders, accumulating up until a breaking point where she commits suicide. Furthermore, unlike Macbeth's conscious guilt, hers is subconsciously expressed through dreams and is evidenced by her sleepwalking. Within her dialogue it can be deduced that she is so deeply engulfed in remorse and paranoia. 'Here's the smell of the blood still: all the /

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perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little / hand.' Her futile attempt to rid blood from her hands is a metaphor for the gravity of her crimes and extent of her guilt, also parallel to the scene when Macbeth agonizes over washing away blood. Her remorse being displayed this way suggests that we are unable to escape guilt from wrongdoing, regardless of how feverishly we may try to cleanse ourselves.

We all in a way have a moral conscience within us, but when we choose to deviate from it, it still manages to materialize, forcing us to obsessively dwell over our actions. And to suppress and deny awareness of this guilt is what makes life a truly fitful fever. Macbeth uses this phrase to express the agony that is the never-ending guilt which will always remain in our consciences so as long as we live. For him and Lady Macbeth, this remorse impeded the glory of their success and satisfaction of reaching their ambitions, eventually instigating their downfall. Different people will always feel guilt in different ways but to experience the emotion, frankly, is inevitable, and for this theme to be addressed in Shakespeare's play is what makes it still significant to this day.

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