
The Dangers of Ambition in William Shakespeare's Macbeth

Shakespeare's play "Macbeth", written in 1606, deals with a man named Macbeth who develops the ambition to become king. The main theme of Macbeth is the corrupting nature of unchecked ambition, which is deployed through his struggle between his ambition and morals, driven by his desire for power. Dramatic techniques used include foreshadowing and dramatic irony. Language devices create the imagery such as Hallucinations and soliloquies. Both techniques are fundamentals used to create meaning to demonstrate the metamorphosis of Macbeth's character as a result of his deep ambition. In Macbeth, uncontrolled ambition is presented as a dangerous quality; it results in the downfall of both Macbeth and his wife Lady Macbeth. Ambition becomes the driving force of the play, a warning to every individual against its dangers.

Macbeth's uncontrolled ambition is driven by a number of factors. At the beginning of the play Macbeth is shown to be a loyal, strong, brave warrior who has won in battle and brought victory to Scotland. Shakespeare uses foreshadowing as a dramatic technique in Scene 1, Act 1 to allow the reader to predict what might occur later on in the story. The witches set the tone in this scene with a storm and predictions that Macbeth's life will become so confused he will find it difficult to differentiate between right and wrong, "fair and foul". When Macbeth thinks he hears a voice while killing Duncan, it foreshadows the insomnia that plagues Macbeth and his wife hence presenting the consequences of ambition.

Lady Macbeth is more ambitious than her husband and has fewer moral ethics. It is Lady Macbeth's driving force that encourages Macbeth to overcome his strong sense of guilt and take action on the prophecies. She does this by attacking his manhood and declares that she would have murdered her child while it was feeding at her breast, rather than break such a promise as Macbeth had done. Macbeth can't find a reason to kill Duncan and also realizes that too high a leap can only lead to a fall. This is expressed in Act 1 Scene 7:

"To prick the sides of my intent, but only vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself and falls on th'other".

Macbeth's ambition causes him to murder many close friends, which in turn leads to his ruin. Macbeth murders Duncan, a guest in his own castle for his own selfish reasons. Dramatic irony is used when Duncan arrives at Macbeth's castle. He is commenting on the pleasantness of Macbeth's castle while the audience knows that Macbeth has planned his murder to take place

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there that very night. Furthermore, Macbeth orders his men to kill Banquo and his son, one of his closest friends, as he poses a threat to him. Macbeth also arranges for the murder of Macduff's entire family. Therefore, the problem, the play suggests, is that once one decides to use violence to further one's quest for power, it is difficult to stop. This directly leads to Macbeth's downfall as it causes Macduff, to despise him. By letting his ambition corrupt his morals, and murdering the family of Macduff, Macbeth sets the stage for his own downfall.

Languages devices help create the vivid imagery in Macbeth that presents to the audience the warning against the dangers of ambition. Hallucinations are a very important motif throughout the play; it not only shows the warning against the dangers of ambition but also the mental effect this uncontrolled ambition has done to the character. When Macbeth is about to kill Duncan, he sees a dagger floating in the air. Covered with blood and pointed toward the king's chamber, the dagger represents the bloody deed on which Macbeth is about to get on with, hence a warning is created. Macbeth exclaims in Act 2 Scene 1

"Is this a dagger which I see before me?"

Later, Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost sitting in a chair at a feast. The ghost of Banquo warns Macbeth that his ambition has corrupted his moral sense. He sees the ghost as an after effect of killing his greatest friend. Macbeth's ambition eventually became his weakness. Though he suppressed this weakness for a long time, Macbeth was eventually overcome by it; this led to insanity. However it is Macduff who eventually kills Macbeth as a result of killing the king and his family. Lady Macbeth is also mentally affected. She sleepwalks and believes that her hands are stained with blood and cannot be washed away by any amount of water. The symbolism of hallucinations and blood is portrayed as a supernatural sign of guilt and weakness of character, hence leading to the downfall of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. It is this mental issue which leads Lady Macbeth to commit suicide, as a consequence of her actions.

The words and the actions of the characters don't always express the true character of the people. Only when they think aloud are their true nature and thoughts are revealed. Shakespeare uses soliloquies in a magnificent way to display the dangers of ambitions that led to Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's downfall. In Act 1 Scene 7 Macbeth is thinking about whether he should kill Duncan or not. He says

"If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly. If th'assassination could trammel up the consequence and catch with his surcease, success, that but this blow might be the be-all and the end-all"

This soliloquy suggest that Macbeth is afraid, almost as if he knew that he would not be able to put up with the consequences of his dangerous ambition. Hence through the use of soliloquies

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we see that Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's ambition completely overthrow their reasoning abilities and eventually lead to their downfall.

In conclusion, the tragedy of Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's downfall was caused by their ambition, which is seen through Shakespeare's use of dramatic techniques and language devices. Hence, Macbeth is a warning against the dangers of ambition. Macbeth degenerates from a powerful and respectable general to a desperate and insecure tyrant. Though ambition drives many people to accomplish great things, being overly ambitious may lead to one's downfall.

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