

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Shakespeare

Macbeth (Emotional)

Character Macbeth himself is ambitious for power, the kingdom of Scotland, and unable—thanks to the prodding of his Lady Wife—to resist the temptation of killing the current King, and replacing him in a royal coup. Driven emotionally to this murder, and to a subsequent second murder, to consolidate his power, Macbeth begins—like Orestes in the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus—to feel himself fate-doomed and unable to escape. He has up to now been geared to action, but finding his wife's spirit broken by anxiety and remorse, Macbeth too crumbles emotionally, and in the end, at the news of wife's death, declares life a meaningless 'brief candle.'

Imaginative Imaginative and speculative, Macbeth allows his ambition for kingship to grow in him. He has just proven his power as a successful general, in battle against the Norwegians, and is considering the tempting possibility of doing away with the current King, Duncan. His thought of murdering the king is still just 'fantastical,' part of 'horrible imaginings,' and yet Macbeth has already taken fatal steps, in his mind, toward what will be calamitous action. Macbeth, like Hamlet, is emotionally involved with the plans and hopes he keeps hidden in his mind.

Uncertain Having written to his wife about forecasts for his own ascension to Kingship, and having thus awakened power ambitions in Lady Macbeth, as well, Macbeth begins to calculate the psychology of regicide. 'If it were done when tis done, then twere well it were done quickly.' Thoughtful and self-reflective, like Hamlet, Macbeth needs inner reassurance that he will be able to carry through the act that is brewing inside him. However the more he reflects on the act of regicide, the more his emotions take control of him; he becomes aware of the actual nobility of the King, who is his guest at this point, and whose soul will damn Macbeth, from heaven.

Introspective Macbeth inspects a dagger, a fearful tool, the vehicle of his murderous ambition, and yet he asks: 'art thou but a dagger of the mind, a false creation, proceeding from the heat-oppressed mind?' Macbeth had, in a sense, already committed murder, for in his mind he is obsessed with the consequences of the deed which, under the hasty evil approval of his wife, he is prepared to commit. After he has committed the actual murder, Macbeth and his wife will begin to realize the consequences of their action. Macbeth looks at his hands, dreadful witnesses from which he will never be able to cleanse himself.

Remorseful Macbeth, having carried out the murder of Duncan, begins to reflect that he has also murdered sleep. When his wife responds that this thinking, on Macbeth's part, is 'brainsickly,' emotionally wild, and adds that he should wash his hands clean of stain, Macbeth replies that his hand will rather 'the multitudinous seas incarnadine,' stain the universe with blood of the present murder. A knocking is heard at the castle door, and Macbeth wishes, already, that it might be someone capable of waking the ex-King Duncan. So ready is Macbeth, already, to be where he was before he committed the murder.

Parallels The male reliant on the executive power of his wife is a well trodden theme in western literature and culture of the last century, in which female prominence in society—political, economic, sexual—has been given a rich voice. The movie *Mr. Mom* (1983) and the novel *The World According to Garp* (John Irving, 1975) characterize a couple of facets of the new dethronement of the male household boss. Any number of major fictions probe the existential-social dilemmas of the guy caught between his traditional control job and dependence on what is outside him: *Under the Volcano* (1947) is Malcolm Lowry's exploration of a disintegrating but passionate alcoholic consul, for whom life becomes too painful; *The Heart of the Matter*—Graham Greene, 1948—for whom marital indecision and lust lead a long downward path into suicide; *The Death of a Salesman*—Arthur Miller, 1949—excavates the broken and hollow life of the male reduced to huckstering.

Discussion questions

Is Macbeth confident and strong at the beginning of the play. Has he in him the power to kill and replace the king? Or is he from the start an emotional pawn of his wife?

Does the 'witch element' in the play represent the suppressed terror and passion of Macbeth and his wife?

Is Macbeth simply a coward, or is he conscientious enough to tremble at the fearful act of regicide which his wife is driving him to?