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# Macbeth's Mental Deterioration

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ABSTRACT

Macbeth's mental deterioration is evident from the beginning of the play. He is a victim of his own ambition because he aspires to be king but lacks the strength of character to manage the ambition. In other words, he can do anything to be king but cannot handle the consequences of his actions. His mental deterioration begins at the first act when he emerges from the battlefield triumphantly. The reader gathers that he is a courageous and brave man. He has a combination of conflicting attributes that cause him intense internal turmoil. To begin with, he is a brave young man who has just emerged victorious after a tough battle. He has ambition to become king and this augurs well with his courage. However, he has self-doubt. He lacks the belief in his ability. The three attributes play out in the play to cause an emotional turmoil that contributes to his mental deterioration (Curran 4).

The encounter with witches at the first act marks Macbeth's plunge into moral and intellectual corruption. The era of the writing of this play coincides with a time when witches held sway over people's lives in Scotland. Their prophecy was law and whenever they spoke, people listened and believed. In Macbeth's case, they spoke to his ambition and hence his plunge into moral corruption is predictable (Clark 7). As a loyalist, he is at the heartbeat of power, just a distance from the throne. He has ambition to succeed Duncan and the witches' prophecy played to this trait. Inevitably, therefore, the prophecy marked Macbeth's mental deterioration.

After successfully defending his country, Macbeth encounters the witches. They pronounce the following: "All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth that shalt be king hereafter" (Shakespeare 29-30). This prophecy stirs his ambition. He becomes exceedingly curious as to why the witches would call him the Thane of Glamis and Cawdor while those seats were not vacant. Moreover, he knew his abilities and if he so desired, he could kill the king and take over the thrown. He becomes greedy, providing another ingredient that would ease him into proper mental deterioration. Though he ignores the prophecy at the beginning, his ambition, courage, and greed conspire to drive him into the unthinkable act of killing his king.

Ironically, even good tidings contribute to Macbeth's corruption. His exploits in war wins him accolades from the highest office. He has the ear and eye of the king and people adore him. When the position of the Thane of Cawdor falls vacant, Macbeth is the natural successor. However, this does not tame his ambition. Rather than satisfaction, the position breeds paranoia. He has tasted power and it has gotten into his head (Brown 10). He serves the king faithfully but the witches' prophecy disturbs him. He felt that he could be the overall king by killing Duncan. This reveals unbridled ambition that ultimately led to tragic destruction. Macbeth mental turmoil escalates after the murders of Duncan. His ambition and paranoia led him to believe that Duncan being alive posed danger to his prospect of assuming and retaining power. Macbeth murders Duncan, setting another front from where his mental degradation would ensue. Despite all his flaws, Macbeth was a conscientious man. He believed in the sanctity of live and in various soliloquies in the play, he comes across as a man that lacked the character strong enough to match his ambition. The guilt that followed tore into him like a raging fire and destroyed his inner self (Borlik 4). From a psychological perspective, guilt is one of the most destructive feelings. The moment Macbeth started feeling guilt over the death of the king, his guilt multiplied tenfold and his mental deterioration escalated.

The guilt and power combine again to torture Macbeth into new levels of mental turmoil. After killing Duncan, he feels the other threat to the throne stems from Banquo, despite his disinterest with power and inability to seize it. Macbeth's guilt drives him to think that Banquo saw him murder Duncan though it was not the case. His inferiority complex especially in Banquo's presence had no basis apart from guilt. He sets out to kill him despite their longtime friendship. Macbeth's state of paranoia, obsession with power, and ambition has alienated him from erstwhile friends (MacbMacbeth And Political Corruption 5). In the most unimaginable act in the book, he murders Banquo, a close friend and confidante, setting the ground for further mental deterioration.

After killing Banquo, Macbeth's mental turmoil escalates to madness. Guilt combines with regret to render him hapless and at the mercies of his own debauched conscience. Banquo was a close friend and he killed him for no apparent reason. He suffers unimaginable mental consequences as he visualizes his friend's ghost visiting him. In one of his many soliloquies, he opines, "If I stand here, I saw him" (Shakespeare 74). He oscillates between a fictional personal world and the real one. In the fictional one, he encounters Banquo's spirits. The spirit haunts him and transforms him into a victim of his own self. He is king and it behooves him to lead his people as he has always hoped to do. He puts up a

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tough face to show people that he is in charge but in real sense, his spirit is vanquished and defeated. The wife puts a compelling subterfuge that manages to fool people but the torment Macbeth is experiencing sometimes pushes him into occasional outbursts that cast aspersions on his sanity. At one point, he opines, "I am a man again" (Shakespeare 105). The change from real to spirit world marks the crossing of the thin line between mental turmoil and madness.

The mental deterioration hits new heights when he sinks deeper into witches. He confesses to the audience/reader that witches are evil but because they were right in prophesying his ascent to high office, he has no option but to believe in them. In one soliloquy, we encounter him invoking their powers. Whenever things get harder, he turns to the witches for help. Having obtained power through them, he feels indebted. He consults them, as a king would do with his team of advisers. He beseeches them in one of the scenes, "Answer me, to what I ask you" (Shakespeare 51). He venerates and showers them with praise and every time the real world gets tough as it did most of the times, he turns to them for help. He converses with them as if they are real people. In a way, the audience feels than Macbeth is no longer a human being. His speech lacks the rationality that one would expect of a normal human being. He sees things that ordinarily people do not see and does not see things that people see.

As Macbeth sinks deeper into the witches' world, his guilt and paranoia increases just as he deteriorates mentally. He degenerates further when he starts killing innocent people just to assuage his insecurities. His ambition heightens as manifest in his invasion of Macduff's castle. Macduff was leaving Scotland for England, an act that inexplicably angered Macbeth. Out of revenge, he launched a vicious attack on the castle killing many innocent people in its wake. To him, killing people brings joy. He arrogantly pronounces, "I will seize upon Fife, give to them the edge of the sword, his wife, babes, and all unfortunate souls" (Shakespeare 151). It is clear that all sense of decency and humanity has deserted him. This is a manifestation of deterioration of mental faculties. He has lost feelings for human life.

He is suffering from excessive paranoia. He views Macduff's departure as traitorous because he may go to England, regroup and mount attacks to claim Scotland. The clearest indication that he has lost control of his high mental faculties is his pronouncement, "Firstlings of my heart shall be the firstlings of my hand" (Shakespeare 148). He relies on instinct rather than clear though process. He is extremely greedy for power and he cannot trust even his closest confidantes. In fact, he lacks any because he does not want any one near power. He sinks deeper in corruption as he tries to protect an illegitimate leadership. He wants to consolidate powers using all means. Those that do not worship him face death without sentencing. He unleashes terror on defenseless citizens that he ought to protect. The glee with which he massacres perceived enemies is a pointer to moral corruption and mental degradation. He neither feels nor thinks. The highest manifestation of mental degradation is plunging his kingdom into despondency, hopelessness, and destruction and remaining oblivious to real threats. He has lost the citizens and he cannot listen to wise counsel from even the people he has entrusted with his health. His doctor advises him that he is losing the kingdom but he laughs off the warning. Further, he ignores his servant warnings that an army is advancing towards his castle and he faces imminent capture. He does not heed. His paranoia overtook senses and even in the face of real threats, he cannot act rationally. Even the worst of leadership has a coterie of acolytes that it listens to regardless of the levels of disdain from its citizens (Cox 3). Macbeth's paranoia cannot allow for such a coterie. He terrorizes those people that he should keep closer to him. He isolates himself from the wise and objective counsel that an adversary would give. He has irredeemable lost his mind.

Macbeth's mental deterioration escalates when he makes irrational decisions and loses his sense of feeling. When his wife dies, all doubts that he is mad disappear. It does not bother or affect him. His perpetual state of paranoia had made him accustomed to fear. Upon his wife's death, he does not show any feelings. He proclaims that he never fears and his nerves no longer squirm at the sight of danger or fear. Worst still, he can afford to trash his wife's death as inconsequential. He opines, "The time has been, my senses would have cooled to hear a night shriek, and my fell of hair would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir" (Shakespeare 14). He cannot make rational decision even over a matter as serious as his wife's death. His feelings are numb and his mental faculties are non-functional.

Another evidence of irrationality is his actions as the English army surrounded his castle. The rational thing in such a situation is to surrender or flee. Macbeth takes none. He sees this as an opportunity to re-live his days at the battlefield. In the ensuing moment of reckless bravado, he gives himself away to his adversaries. This shows a man incapable of making of rational thought. Ordinarily, Shakespeare made his protagonist commit suicide under such situations. He does not do the same with Macbeth (Bazerman 4). Wilson argues that this is a deliberate attempt to show the folly of ambition without character (12). Macbeth acted on confidence from witches' prophecies because they augured well with his ambition. However, his life went a full circle. He started in combat and died under the same circumstances.

Macbeth's mental deterioration happened partly because of his wife's influence. Lady Macbeth is cold, calculative, and manipulative. She plots the death of Duncan to aid her husband rise to power. She is very strong and a good judge of character. She sees her husband for the weak character that he is and manipulates him. She operates with ruthless efficiency. These qualities provide Macbeth with an easy path to self-destruction (Fawkner 7). Her death highlights the heights of mental deterioration that the husband had undergone. At the end, the audience/reader feels that Macbeth's destruction would not have happened if he had a different kind of wife. The playwright seems to make a point that the king's degradation only happens when his wife is part of the plot to destroy it.

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At the end, one can trace Macbeth's mental deterioration from a combination of fate and weakness in character. One recognizes his tenacity and loyalty from the beginning. He is a combat officer ready to die for Scotland (coursen 3). He reigns supreme in battlefield and has nothing in his mind save for loyally serving the king. Though his ambition is no secret, one feels that in the absence of the witches' advice, things would have turned out differently. By proclaiming him king even when the position was not vacant, the witches planted seeds of greed in his mind. With his courage and ambition, the results are predictable right from the beginning of the play. The witches were evil and Macbeth knew it but he could not resist their advice.

In conclusion, Macbeth's mental deterioration started with the witches' advice. His ambition got a shot in the arm and from that point going forward, the witches embodied his loss of sense. He would take advice and converse with them like a mad man does with invisible persons. The guilt from murdering Duncan escalated his mental turmoil. When he murders Banquo, the guilt torments him more. He developed paranoia and with time, he had no confidante other than the witches. The perpetual fear led him to massacre and kill innocent citizens. He feels like someone will dethrone him even when there are no signs to that effect (MowatMowat and Paul Westine 6). In the final analysis, Macbeth's mental deterioration escalated because of his character traits. As Walker observes, the protagonist had contradicting traits that conspired to drive him out of his mind (19). He was brave and ambitious but with no character. Having led a successful battle against Scotland's adversaries, he was poised for greatness as his appointment as a Thane manifests. However, he did not have the patience to bid his time and take over from Duncan. Moreover, he knows that the witches are evil but lacks the moral fortitude to shun their prophecy and advice (Nostbakken, Faith, and William 56). When his wife dies, he displays irrationality by dismissing the death as unimportant. Finally, his leadership breeds despair and as the English army captures his castle; he shows reckless bravado and hands himself over.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Entidhar Al Rashid and Ahmed Al Mayyahi wrote the first draft. All contributed to analyze and prepare the final paper.

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