Macbeth Essay, Research Paper

Macbeth

Innocence is a quality that few people take to their grave, although all are born with it. At some point in one’s life, an event or circumstance removes that shield from both moral and legal guilt, whether in one’s own eyes or in the eyes of another. In such a case, innocence is cast off, or innocence can be stolen. Both are true of Macbeth in William Shakespeare’s tragic work Macbeth. The hero’s innocence and na?vet? make him vulnerable prey for those who feel completely at home in a subhuman realm of malice and disintegration, namely the witches, and even, his own wife. Inevitably, Macbeth is eventually worn down enough to be pushed into this dark and evil abyss by his wife, Lady Macbeth, who leaps frantically in after him to join the witches where they are most at home. The robbery of Macbeth’s innocence begins with allowing the witches to brainwash him with their predictions forcing him to step closer and closer to the edge of their dismal abyss. They take advantage of the surplus of ambition that had served him so well in his desire for victory over Macdonwald and use it to instill in him the need to be King. Still, desire is not enough for Macbeth and he is thus driven “to seek certainty as his one objective. He wants certainty from the witches . . . at whatever cost” (Campbell 228). Macbeth, however, is not completely lost yet; honour and justice remain in him, and although it takes him some time to fully consider the consequences of the witches’ words on him, he rejects his horrible thoughts of murder and postpones all action: “If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me, / Without my stir” (I. iii.143-144). For the time being, Macbeth’s true essence is in control, that of loyalty and honour. However, Macbeth again undergoes a change of heart in scene four, at the announcement of Malcolm as the Prince of Cumberland and as successor to the throne of Scotland, the same throne upon which Macbeth had his eyes set upon. The effect of the King’s proclamation on him can be seen through his reaction: The Prince of Cumberland! that is a step, On which I must fall down, or else o’er-leap, For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires! Let not light see my black and deep desires; The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be, Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see . (I. iv. 48-53) Macbeth is torn between two thoughts: he does acknowledge the fact that the announcement of succession stands in his way of the ‘promised’ throne, but his fear of what “black and deep desires” he has to become king still shines through; at this point, there is still hope for Macbeth. Again, his na?vet? towards the witches’ predictions makes him believe that the throne is truly meant for him, and therefore these “horrible imaginings” of what he must do can all be attributed to the witches’ influence, and not from the true nature of the innocent Macbeth. Enter Lady Macbeth, whose evil ambition contorts that of her husband forcing him to join her in the malicious and sadistic world she has created for herself. However, in the beginning, through Macbeth’s openness to his wife in his letter concerning the witches’ predictions, it is apparent that they once had a friendly relationship. He trusts her, yet another quality of innocence, and this trust contributes to his downfall. It is Lady Macbeth who, in this scene, makes the first concrete threat upon Duncan’s life: “O never / Shall sun that morrow see!” (I.v. 59-60). In this scene, the contrast between Macbeth’s attitude towards his becoming King and Lady Macbeth’s enthusiasm towards the complete fulfillment of the prophesies is apparent. Not only does she display the expected joy in regards to the announcement, she begins planning the murder of the King, a concept that Macbeth had already conjured up, and rejected out of fear: “My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical, / ! Shakes so my single state of man” (I.iii.139-140). Lady Macbeth’s intentions are clear: she intends to play a part, a major part, in the murder of Duncan. However, since she acknowledges the good nature of Macbeth, and fears that such a personality will interfere in his ascension, she pleads to the evil spirits to “fill [her] from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty” (I.v.39-40). Lady Macbeth’s efforts are “bent toward making herself into a creature who trades lightly, even whimsically in evil” (Felperin 164). She even begs the spirits to “dehumanize her into [a] ‘fiend-like’ creature” and practically “depersonalize her into yet a fourth weird sister” (Felperin 164). Later, Macbeth returns to his castle to find this woman advising him how to cover up his intentions, to play the role of the loyal servant before he commits the act “Which shall to all our nights and days to come / Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom” (I.v. 68-69). One must take into account t! hat these are Lady Macbeth’s chilling words; Macbeth responds only with an innocent “We will speak further” (I.v. 70). The true good in Macbeth is making one last attempt to keep him from the evil needed to complete the deed. Good instills in Macbeth the fact that as his kinsman, subject and host, he is bound by duty to keep Duncan from attack, and not be the attacker himself. Obviously, Macbeth has rid himself of all intention to end Duncan’s life; he makes it clear to Lady Macbeth four lines later: “We will proceed no further in this business” (I.vii.31). Nonetheless, Lady Macbeth is persistent, and she, her lips lined with evil, strikes down Macbeth and all the good that remained in him. Her total lack of restraint would suggest that “she is not merely a woman of strong will: she is a woman possessed – possessed of evil passion so tremendous, irresistible and ultimate that she is an embodiment of absolute and extreme evil” (Knight 152). Evidence of this occurs when she bran! ds Macbeth a coward and in one final, crushing blow to Macbeth’s resolution, she delivers the ultimatum: “I would . . . dash’d the brains out, had I so sworn / As you have done to this” (I.vii.56-59), a sickening sign of how much she ‘loves’ him, and if he ‘loved’ her with equal passion, he would carry out the deed. If by the end of act one all the good in Macbeth is dead, its ghost haunts him before and after the deed. Hallucinations of the weapon, the bloody knife, murder silently striding towards its target, they all seem real to Macbeth, proof of his lack of control over his senses and proof that the true Macbeth, the worthy fighter, loyal servant, is no longer in control. In essence, Lady Macbeth has taken control: he is performing her will and he is feeling the feelings that she should shudder at as a murderer: “Thy very stones prate of my whereabout . . . Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives” (II.i.58-61). Even after the murder, Macbeth is not the hardened criminal who may be suspected, certainly not like his wife, who remains chillingly indifferent about the deed: “A little water clears us of this deed” (II.ii.67), she says, and it is her who must actually clean up after the act. However, Macbeth is torn up over the matter: “Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep” (I! I.ii.35-36). As strange as it may seem, the fact that he is broken up after the murder shows that he still has morals, morals that should have, and would have, if it was not for the actions of his wife, stopped him from carrying out the deed. Macbeth is an example of a man from whom innocence was stolen. He was a courageous warrior, a trusted friend, a respected leader, and, in general, a good man. External forces, the witches and their uninvited supernatural soliciting, his wife and her uncontrollable passion and controlling enthusiasm over the case at hand, and evil itself, pushed Macbeth over the edge where he fell spiraling downward into the abyss. Brainwashed and dominated by evil, he responded in the only way he could: with evil.

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