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Madness and writing style of Shakespeare in his tragedies: Macbeth and King Lear

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Abstract

The current study is an interpretation of two great tragedies, Macbeth and King Lear, written by the greatest writer of tragedies William Shakespeare. In this study, an attempt has been made to explore the two most intense tragedies, King Lear and its immediate successor, Macbeth from a different point of view. The study aims to throw some light on different aspects related with these two tragedies such as their sources, language, themes, madness and in their reference –the writing style of Shakespeare. This study also takes a deep dive in exploring the chief characters of these two plays along with their comparisons, which attributed to them being contemporary, look similar to a great extent.

Keywords: Macbeth, King Lear, William Shakespeare, madness, tragic flaw, inner conflicts

1. Introduction

Shakespeare's plays have always been the center of attraction and read almost constantly, in English as well as other languages, His plays can be broadly divided into four time periods. The first period (pre-1594) has its root in Roman, Greek and medieval English drama. It is a period of early experimentation and it is said that his early dramatic work is immature. The second period (1594-1600) shows a clearly maturing speaker. It is a period of rapid growth. During this period, he wrote some of his great comedies and historical plays. The third period (1600-1608) was the period of great tragedies like *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Othello*. The last period is one of the cynical plays followed by plays of deep symbolism. Shakespeare's great tragedies and the "problem plays" date from 1600 with *Hamlet*. Other plays are '*The Merry wives of Windsor*', '*Troilus and Cressida*', '*all's well that ends well*', '*measure for measure*', '*Othello*', '*King Lear*', '*Macbeth*', '*Antony Cleopatra*'. *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* chiefly concern with the conflict of chaos and order, evil and virtue, hedonism and spirituality There are some prominent elements of a Shakespearean tragedy like a well-defined tragic hero, some kind of tragic waste, role of fate and character, the supernatural elements, role of chance, no poetic justice, inner and outer conflict and catharsis etc. Shakespearean tragedy is principally the story of one person. And this main hero should be a person of high degree, often kings or princes with some tragic flaw in their character.

In many of the plays by William Shakespeare, the central character goes through internal and external changes that ultimately tremor their foundations to the core. Numerous theories have been put forth to explain the sequence of tragedies Shakespeare wrote during this period by linking it to some experience of melancholy, anger, despair, and the antagonist's ultimate fall from grace in their lust for power. But such theories overlook the fact that it is in this very same period and in the same tragic works that portray the heights to which human nature can rise and fall in its purest and noblest, if not happiest terms. Surely the creation of so much light alongside the darkness and the perfection of the artistic medium through which Shakespeare gives them expression argues against the idea that the greedy side of human nature is his chief concern. His efforts to portray human life in its rarest form and not only the dark depths, but also the treasure rooms of our being. He tries to pierce beneath the superficial motives and forces of surface behavior, social, and cultural expressions and to the deeper levels of individual character and human nature. Shakespeare then places these aspects of human existence in their true relation to the wider field of universal life. In relation to the tragic hero, there are many similarities between the tragic heroes in *Macbeth* and *King Lear*.

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However, the differences between the two outline the re-occurring themes in both plays. In Shakespeare's plays the central characters' own weaknesses and lust for power lead to corruption. The unchecked power in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *King Lear* ultimately leads to corruption, tragedy, and the hero's fall from grace.

2. Macbeth

In *Macbeth*, the hero is shown as a brave warrior as well as one of the leaders of Duncan's army. But his one flaw is that he chooses to walk the bloody path of ambition in order to attain the glory and power. The supernatural agency also affects hero's mind subsequently affecting his deeds.

In *Macbeth*, we are introduced to witches in the very beginning of the play in act I sc.1, "When shall we three meet again".

3. Madness in Macbeth

In *Macbeth*, both the main characters Macbeth and Lady Macbeth begin to show clear signs of madness through alterations in their physical senses (smell, sight etc.). This is evident when Lady Macbeth hallucinates that her hands are still covered in king Duncan's blood despite having washed them several times.

"Here's the smell of blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand." (Act 5, scene 1)

Shakespeare uses imagery to give a better understanding of what is going on within the character's mind. Here madness is altering Lady Macbeth's sense of smell and sight, this tricks her into believing that King Duncan's blood will never dissipate from her hands even though they are perfectly clean. Another example of the theme of madness that is characterized by Macbeth is found in *act three, scene four, the climax of the play*.

Immediately guilt ridden from ordering the murder of Banquo, Macbeth reaches his pinnacle of madness; exemplified by his delusion of Banquo's ghost. Showing that he can no longer differentiate between reality and his imagination Macbeth shouts,

"Avaunt! And quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee!
Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold;
Thou hast no speculation in those eyes
Which thou dost glare with" (III. IV).

Ross responds to him,

"What sights, my lord" (III. iii.).

The insanity of Macbeth is shown in these quotes.

Shakespeare's description of Macbeth's thoughts visibly reveals the theme of madness. Shakespeare portrays madness among many of his characters, and he returns to the theme again and again.

4. Shakespeare's style of writing in Macbeth

Macbeth is considered Shakespeare's bloodiest tragedy. *Macbeth* is often considered as an example of what happens when ambition goes unchecked by moral constraints. This tragedy shows us the disintegration of a very powerful and ambitious man who in his pursuit of more power will stoop to anything, even murder, to get it. Macbeth, the hero of the play, chooses to walk the bloody path of ambition in order to attain the glory and power which is promised to him by

the witches. Macbeth is a brave soldier who is tempted by the witches for attaining more power. And this mad pursuit of Macbeth and his wife, Lady Macbeth pushes them into arrogance, madness, and death. Unlike her husband, who is tempted by witches into pursuing his ambition, Lady Macbeth's lust for power leads her naturally into the nightmare realm of madness.

On the other hand, the play has great power as a work of poetry and imagination. The language is rich in sound and meaning with full of pictures. For example, when Macbeth comes from the murder of Duncan, his hands are covered in the king's blood. In Act II Scene II, when he looks at his hands, he feels that all the waters in the ocean cannot wash away the blood, but

"This my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas
incarnadine,
Making the green one red."

The word 'multitudinous' gives a sense of vastness, and 'incarnadine' is another impressive word; its length and sound give strength to the meaning.

5. King Lear

In *King Lear*, Lear is shown as the aging king of Britain who decides to split his kingdom among his three daughters: Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia; and his tragic flaw is his love for flattery. That's why only he banishes his daughter Cordelia from his kingdom. As he says to her in Act I Sc I, "*nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.*"

Destiny and character also play a significant role in hero's life.

6. Madness in king Lear

Indirect characterization in the form of Lear's mad speeches allows Shakespeare to convey the theme of madness. For example one of Lear's first speeches after things started to go bad for him,

"Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your house-hold heads
and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness,
defend you..." (III. iv. 35-38).

Lear again using his words to express the reason for his insanity. The cause is the realization that his daughters Goneril and Regan do not love him. What finally pushed him over the edge was the cruel actions afflicted on him by the people that supposedly loved him. To such a lowness but his unkind daughters. ...

"Twas this flesh begot
Those pelican daughters
describes
Lear of the cruelty of his daughters (III. iii.).

The character of Lear produces the theme of madness by expressing his own increasing insanity and reasons the reason for it in raving tangents.

7. Shakespeare's style of writing in King Lear

In this play, he makes a distinct use of puns and figurative language as compared to his other plays. He has used puns rarely in this play but when they are used, they carry interesting ambiguities. For example, in the opening lines of the play in Gloucester responds to Kent's question, "*is not this your son, my lord?*" with the statement "*His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge.*"

In this sentence Shakespeare plays on two meanings of "Breeding" and two meanings of "at my charge." Not only

are puns used rarely and complexly in *King Lear* but same is the case with the use of figurative language. Use of metaphors is also shifted away from Shakespeare's customary use of metaphors. More often, the metaphors are either displaced or are placed slightly beneath the surface of language. In this play most of the Fool's speeches can be taken as examples of displaced metaphor. In Act I scene for Lear's daughter Goneril calls her father as if he were her dependent and threatens him with "censure" and "redresses". In response to this, the Fool replies in Act I Scene IV:

"The Hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long, That it's had it had bit off by it young. So out went the candle, and we were left darkling."

If we go to this comment metaphorically, Lear is a hedge-sparrow and his daughter Goneril is the cuckoo whom sparrow "Lear" has fed. And like the sparrow Lear is now being attacked by his young (Goneril). Not only metaphors, puns are used in this play but personification, a kind of figurative is also used with unusual frequency and power in this play. In personification, natural objects or abstract qualities are given human characteristics. Kent uses personification in Act I Scene I, when he says to Lear:

"Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak When power to flattery bows? To plainness honor's bound When majesty falls to folly.

8. Comparative Remark: Macbeth & King Lear

Similarities: We can deem King Lear and its immediate successor, Macbeth, as Shakespeare's most profound tragedies. Both focus on studies of high ambition and self-consuming evil; both bring us to wonder if human disorder is mirrored in the natural world; both deal with the nature of kingship and authority. Both coming out in almost same year 1606, post Queen Elizabeth's death and her successor – King James of Scotland -coming to England, looks like there was a lot happening around that time. To list a few which seem very relevant to this: the proposed union of Scotland and England under King James; the continued attacks on English

Catholics; and the aftermath of the infamous Gunpowder Plot that nearly wiped out the Royal Court and Parliament in a single blow. Reflecting on these real incidents, King Lear centers upon he dismemberment of a kingdom and the nature of royal justice; while acted in the aftermath of he Gunpowder Plot, Macbeth revolves around the murder of a king, and includes among its cast, the then king, James's ancestors.

8.1 Inner conflict: As in his great tragedy *King Lear* we see this inner conflict as Lear also says,

"Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!"

In *Macbeth* Lady Macbeth's inner conflict can be seen in her madness and hallucinations in Act II Sc.II as she says:

"A little water clears us of this deed. How easy is it then! Your constancy

Hath left you unattended."

9. Conclusion

In conclusion it is clear that madness was a very re occurring theme in both plays King Lear and Macbeth.

However, the style in which the madness was depicted in each play is very different, in Macbeth madness within the main characters is shown through basic hallucinations through sight and smell, whereas in King Lear Shakespeare wanted the main characters to display madness through the dialogue. Both techniques used by Shakespeare were made to ultimately give more of an understanding of what is going on within the play. Both uses of madness are equally effective depending on which kind of play is written

Shakespeare draws tragic parallels between Macbeth and King Lear's eventual tale spins into madness. In both plays female deception is present. In King Lear we have the king's daughter Regan and Gonoril who deceptively lie to their father confessing their love to strip him of his wealth, causing him to leave society and become one with nature. Lady Macbeth seems fair but reveals her manipulation when she pushes her husband to murder the king. Lady Macbeth questions his masculinity until she convinces him to go along with her plan. Lady Macbeth uses her tongue to make Macbeth feel less manly stating he is,

"too full of the milk of human kindness".

Another similarity is in the form of characters. I found a striking correlation between the Fool in King Lear and the witches in Macbeth. These characters demonstrate intuition and wisdom to influential characters. Unfortunately their insights are ignored in both plays. In Macbeth the witches call Banquo

"lesser than Macbeth, and greater," and "not so happy, yet much happier";

Then they tell him that he will never be king but that his children will sit upon the throne. If the witches were presented differently do you think the characters would have listened to them? In King Lear the Fool tries to warn the king about banishing Cordelia, which the king eventually learns was his biggest mistake. Both the witches and the Fool change their speech throughout the play demonstrating rhyme or lyrical passages.

"And the very ports they blow, All the quarters that they know. I'll drain him dry as hay. Sleep shall neither night nor day."

Having studied the two plays with their depth and contrast, now a comparison can be drawn between the core traits of the two principal characters. We find a lot in common with some differences. We find both the characters non-sympathetic because they ruled in an intimidating way along with their own selfish interests. Both look greedy -Macbeth for power and Lear for pride and everyone's love; selfish and to a good extent, obsessed. None possesses good king qualities. King Lear clearly seems to have huge hunger to be loved by everyone and possess this obsession of knowing what everyone thought about him, even if it was a lie. On the other hand, Macbeth's main flaw was that he was too power hungry. He was too worried about his throne taken away by someone rather than worrying about the people he was ruling. This made him paranoid as well as a murderer. Though both are themselves the reason for their downfall, there is a difference in how they caused it. King Lear caused it by taking pride in dividing kingdom between his daughters – Goneril and Albany – both evil. Macbeth caused it by being paranoid and by murder. Committing murders and dividing a kingdom are too different things, but led to a similar outcome.

The style and depiction of the theme of madness are very different in both plays. Macbeth shows madness in the main

characters with lots of imagery, giving a very physical sense of feeling towards the audience making them have a better understanding of what the characters are feeling. In King Lear madness is depicted through the main characters dialogue. This is meant to show the psychological turmoil going through the character's mind which helps the audience understand why and what the character is doing within the play.

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