

# Extended Essay

**English B HL**

How does Shakespeare present the psychological effects of tyranny on  
Macbeth's sense of identity in Macbeth?

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## I. Overview

With unrestricted ambition and the corruption of power, morality deteriorates. As morality deteriorates, psychological changes begin to appear. One of the most obvious and common is the loss of identity either within the individual or the community. These changes may lead to the destabilization of societal order, which corrupts the view of those in power, thus tyranny is born. Tyranny is a term explored within William Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth*, with the portrayals of the distortion of morality and the insatiable nature of tyranny. The tragedy focuses on a Scottish nobleman, Macbeth, and the rise and fall of his pursuit of power and ambition. His hunger further is corrupted into moral disintegration and psychological decline. The play demonstrates how tyranny fundamentally alters both the enforcer and those subjected to it, the rest of Scotland. Macbeth's desires to reach and keep kingship after the prophecy given to him by three supernatural beings distorts his sense of identity from a loyal soldier to a tyrannical ruler. This change in his perception of self distorts further into insatiable hunger, leading to the pivotal murders that contribute further to this pattern of decline. Both Macbeth and the second given corrupted tyrannical figure, his wife, Lady Macbeth, are shown within a rise and fall. Their authoritarian reign and the psychological toll of violence and the loss of emotional detachment and their fall occurs within the external and internal conflicts presented in the play which demonstrates the tragedy tyranny eventually descends into.

This essay will make use of textual analysis, mostly focusing on the language, symbolism and the dramatic structure of *Macbeth* to illustrate how Shakespeare presents tyranny and its psychological consequences and influences on identity. Through a literary analytical approach which will be combining textual reading and critical interpretations examining the evolution of Macbeth's character, this analysis will convey how tyranny is shown as a political condition that leads to a psychological transformation that erodes identity and severs human connection. Ultimately, this essay aims to demonstrate how this condition further destroys both the ruler's sense of self and the moral fabric of the society Macbeth governs.

## II. Macbeth's Tyranny

### A. *Macbeth's Rise to Power*

During the start of the play, Macbeth is described to be a loyal nobleman, in which a captain defines Macbeth as “unseam’d Macdonwald from the nave to the chaps” (Act 1 Scene 2), which makes use of the violent imagery to illustrate Macbeth to be praised for his bravery and effectiveness as a soldier, which foreshadows how his soldier past will be used for violent displays of authority rather than valiant battle, and his physical capabilities in violence. King Duncan, another pivotal part of Macbeth’s identity at the start of the play is described to see Macbeth to be a worthy gentleman. These positive portrayals of Macbeth during the first act show Shakespeare illustrating Macbeth’s identity before power to be honourable, drawing a stark contrast between Macbeth’s past and the tyrannical figure he will become further into the play.

Macbeth’s rise begins with the prophecy of the Three Witches, in which Macbeth is addressed as “Thane of Glamis,” “Thane of Cawdor,” and “King hereafter” (1.3). These titles insinuate the concept of predetermined authority and power, the start of his psychological descent and ultimate tyrannical reign. This introduction of possible kingship plants the first ideas of Macbeth straying from his loyalty and giving himself to the distortion of power. The Witches do not instruct Macbeth to commit murder or any specific action, yet the prophecy gives Macbeth the ambition to fulfill the prophecy and distort his morals, showing the first signs of the desire for tyranny. With the disintegration of morality and societal values, Macbeth’s intentions are given clearer through his thoughts, in which his mental state is described to be fit to kill Duncan and ache to do so with the driving force of his hunger for power “doth unfix my hair / And make my seated heart knock at my ribs.” The description introduces all the needed steps for Macbeth to transform into a tyrannical figure. The physical capabilities of an effective soldier, the hope of possibility and ambition given by the prophecy, and the corruption of morality allowing for action without the restrictions of ethics, all set the stage for Macbeth’s identity to reach its breaking point and transform into tyranny.

Lady Macbeth then persuades Macbeth to make the corrupt choice of committing murder, driving him further into tyranny. This act is pivotal not only because it marks Macbeth's first step into tyranny, but also because it severs his moral connection to his former self. This severation of morality comes at the price of his psychological downfall, with lines insinuating Macbeth's feeling of guilt with the lines, "I am afraid to think what I have done; / Look on't again I dare not." (2.2)

These first acts show how Macbeth's tyranny is built upon hesitation and fear. His claim to the throne, lacking legitimacy, being driven by a prophecy and cruel acts, creates a fear of losing power, causing further desire for control, which drives more murders to occur.

### B. *Macbeth's Tyrannical Reign*

Macbeth's governance after the crown was assumed by him is defined by distinct paranoia and cruelty. His anxiety of losing authority causes the next murders, in which Banquo and Banquo's descendants, whom the Witches prophesied would be kings, threaten Macbeth's tyranny. Under the pressures of this threat, Macbeth arranges the murder of Banquo and Fleance, Banquo's son. With these murders, Macbeth does not consult Lady Macbeth, further developing his identity as he distances himself from the restraints of his inner conflicts regarding hesitation and past loyalty. With this, Shakespeare shows the tyrannical reign corrupting Macbeth even further with each cruelty and moral violation. As F.I. Chowdhury and G.A. Baqui's analyses show Macbeth's ambition "mutates into a compulsive violence that feeds upon itself", demonstrating how tyranny becomes both a means of control and the cause of his psychological decay. (Chowdhury and Baqui). These could be given as examples regarding the development of Macbeth's tyrannical behavior, given as a process rather than a direct switch in personality. Macbeth is affected by several occurrences and figures in his life that ultimately influence his future decisions.

Macbeth's anxiety remains unresolved as Fleance escapes his plan. At Fleance's escape, Macbeth's anxiety heightens, causing his tyranny to escalate to indiscriminate violence. In the light of the news that Macduff had fled to England, Macbeth's tyranny reaches its high, in which Macbeth abandons

murder done with political justification, and resorts to murder as an act of revenge and terror, as Macbeth orders the murder of Macduff's entire household—his wife, children, and servants. This event, highlighted to be horrific by other nobles, shows the point Macbeth's fearful tyranny has reached, where it has distorted into carnage done for spite. Macduff talks about the state of the country to Malcolm, stating that "each new morn / New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows / Strike heaven on the face." (4.3) Through this, Shakespeare emphasises the widespread suffering caused by Macbeth's tyranny, affecting the political elite along with the rest of the population. His regime is one filled with fear, violence and loss rather than stability or order.

His tyranny ends in Act 5, after he becomes isolated, his emotional connections severed, and Lady Macbeth's death. Furthermore, Macbeth expresses nihilism and futility, indicating that his tyrannical rule has not satisfied him but brought him despair, "Life's but a walking shadow" (5.5.)

### **III. Macbeth's Identity**

#### *A. The Internal Conflict of Macbeth*

At the beginning of the play, Macbeth is presented as a loyal and respected warrior who is praised for his bravery along with his service to the king. However, this sense of identity begins to fracture after the witches' prophecy. The suggestion that he may become king introduces the first deep inner conflict in the play. Macbeth is immediately drawn to the idea of murder as a means to gaining power which contradicts his previous sense of self. Before Duncan's death, Macbeth struggles with the temptation of murder. In Act 1, Scene 7, he reflects on Duncan's virtues, his own loyalty as a warrior, and the moral consequences of the act. This shows another instance of his ambition clashing with his former values. Macbeth understands the corruption of the act however his desire for power eventually overrides his previous perception of self. After becoming king, Macbeth's identity becomes increasingly shaped by fear and paranoia. He relies on violence to maintain control, lacking confidence and trust in anybody around him, which further detaches him from guilt with each murder.

However, this detachment is not yet fully integrated into his identity as his guilt resurfaces through visions such as Banquo's ghost. These moments show his deteriorating psychological state and show that his identity is becoming fragmented. His identity is torn between authority and inner torment. His growing dependence on the supernatural further demonstrates his need to reassure himself of his power within his unraveling sense of self.

By the end of the play, Macbeth's identity has fully deteriorated leaving him isolated and emotionally numb which renders him disconnected from any meaningful sense of purpose.

His transformation from a loyal nobleman to a tyrant who believes he is invincible and detached from human emotion or consequence is thus shown here. His nihilistic reflection in the lines "Life's but a walking shadow" (5.5) demonstrates a complete loss of meaning, identity, and purpose. Other analyses usually interpret this line as the verbalisation of Macbeth's existential collapse. Macbeth's theatrical bravado within rhetoric illustrates the emptiness caused by his isolation along with his crimes. (Battagliarin). Similar analyses argue that Macbeth's language registers psychological exhaustion, which is an awareness that the power he sought has rendered his life hollow, stripped of coherent selfhood. (Chowdhury). With these perspectives, it can be concluded that Macbeth's final soliloquy is the culmination of the process in which tyranny has destroyed identity, producing nihilism and desolation of emotional strength.

#### *B. Lady Macbeth's Impact on Identity Formation*

Macbeth's first changes in identity are influenced by external conflicts, along with the internal ones. Lady Macbeth, upon the news of the prophecy, pursues the throne by any means necessary. Her emotional restraint and rejection of gender roles in which women are expected to be docile are described within her soliloquy (1.5), in which she wishes upon supernatural forces to fill her with the "direst cruelty,". These lines show that her ambition is driven without restriction, driving her to cruelty. Hesitation She views Macbeth to be unfit to resort to any means necessary, with Shakespeare's use of "too full o' the milk of human kindness", shows that Lady Macbeth can see the

hesitation and the restraints of years worth of loyalty that defined Macbeth's identity up until that time has, and how they are a hindrance to her unforgiving resolve. She resolves these hesitations resident in Macbeth by pointing out sensitive parts of Macbeth's identity, driving him to act by questioning his courage and manhood: "When you durst do it, then you were a man." (1.7) This ridicule to pivotal parts of Macbeth, and the framing of murder to be a mere test of strength and determination, driving Macbeth to abandon remaining frames of loyalty and morality.

Lady Macbeth initially appears as a figure of control and ambition, but her own identity begins to deteriorate after Duncan's murder. Unlike Macbeth, who becomes increasingly hardened and descends into his tyranny, Lady Macbeth becomes overwhelmed by guilt and gradually loses her sense of self and understanding of reality. Her identity, constructed around dominance and ambition, begins to distort when faced with the moral consequences of their actions.

However, other critics argue that her breakdown may be caused by her fragile mental stability rather than a genuine moral dilemma, thus her inability to reconcile the strain between conscience and ambition. (Bradley) According to A.C. Bradley, Lady Macbeth's collapse shows "not conscience in the moral sense, but the recoil of a woman's nature crushed under the strain of unnatural evil" (Bradley), along with Carol Thomas Neely who suggests the mental collapse of Lady Macbeth was her attempt to suppress her humanity and blend into a masculine identity that is ultimately not possible to sustain. (Neely)

The contrast between Macbeth's continued brutality and Lady Macbeth's internal collapse presents the two outcomes of the search for power on identity. Macbeth represents the embracing of tyranny and cruelty, moving to further societal collapse. However, Lady Macbeth presents a figure that collapses under the weight of guilt and ends up unable to pursue tyranny. As Macbeth isolates himself and acts independently, Lady Macbeth becomes a more background figure, excluded from his plans. This exclusion contributes to her declining influence and growing instability within her collapsing sense of self.

## **IV. Tyranny and Identity**

### **A. Tyranny's Psychological Toll**

Tyranny in Macbeth does not emerge instantly but develops over time as Macbeth's actions change. In order to keep his power, he increasingly turns to violence which begins to shape the way he thinks and behaves. As a result, Macbeth gradually loses his sense of right and wrong, his moral compass becomes corrupt and he becomes isolated from those around him.

Early on in the play, Macbeth's psychological state is shown with the lines "full of scorpions" (3.2.), suggesting that his mental state is already full of internal dilemmas and torment, a mind poisoned with fear and unrest. With the beginning of Act 4, Macbeth's dependence on bloodshed shows his complete downward spiral into detachment from society and morality. His decision to slaughter Macduff's wife and children, who had no political influence, shows that his psychological capacity has grown into cruelty altogether. This act reflects his desensitization to violence and human emotion. His reflections on life, such as "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" (5.5), further reflect that Macbeth's state has driven him to nihilism, the pursuit of tyranny leading him to fulfillment and only into a state of moral and psychological void, along with existential emptiness.

### **B. Tyranny's Effect on Social Identity and Relationships**

Tyranny, within a society, disrupts not only individuals but the moral system of society. Throughout the acts, the shift of camaraderie of battlefields to the paranoia of authority and kingship highlights the loss of a communal identity as Macbeth becomes alienated from the social world that once gave him meaning by turning away from them to feed into his desperate search for a tyrannical reign.

Later, in Act 4, Scene 3, descriptions such as "where sighs and groans and shrieks that rent the air" portray a nation desensitized to suffering within the tyrannical reign, thus showing us that Collective empathy and relationships as a whole have eroded. This breakdown of social relationships is also shown through Macbeth's political governance. Nobles such as Lennox and Angus question Macbeth's legitimacy, which leads to the Thanes's eventual desertion to Malcolm's army. This

illustrates a collective rejection of tyranny and further political division. Thus, tyranny erodes the social and political integrity of Scotland itself, disrupting social order.

### C. Lady Macbeth's Decline and Loss of Identity

The psychological consequences of tyranny show in Lady Macbeth through the acts, with her constant restlessness (5.1), sleep walking, and obsessive repetitive tasks such as her hand-washing, with fragmented speech such as "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!" her subconscious has been affected by the bloodshed she helped commit, with the imagery of blood becoming a constant symbol of a stain on her conscience that cannot be washed away. Her earlier confidence was replaced by loss of self-awareness and psychological torment.

Lady Macbeth's death completes her psychological detachment, as her suicide signifies the total collapse of her mental state and her struggle to define herself with dominance and control to helplessness and despair. Her decline parallels Macbeth's, further showing that tyranny destroys those who enforce and enable it, along with those who are ruled under it.

## V. Conclusion

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the moral and psychological consequences of ambition and tyranny are portrayed through the figures of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and their mental states and overall decline in morality and social relationships. The pursuit of power without moral restraints leads to self-destruction and the disintegration of identity itself. Macbeth's progression from a loyal soldier to a paranoid tyrant further shows the isolation from humanity throughout the acts, which ends with his ultimate realization of life's futility and emptiness of existence and purpose within his current mindset. Lady Macbeth's loss of control and eventual demise also present this theme, destructive effects of the lack of moral boundaries, disregard of human life into eventually giving her own life as a result of the collapse, throughout the acts.

Furthermore, tyranny is illustrated as a both moral and natural disturbance within the environment of paranoia Shakespeare as presented throughout *Macbeth*. As Macbeth's inner turmoil grows stronger, Scotland begins to reflect through disorder with illegitimate power replaces rightful authority. The

suffering shown throughout the play demonstrates that tyranny cannot sustain itself. Order is only restored at the end through Macbeth's defeat and Malcolm's crowning. This further reinforces the idea without moral integrity, a stable rule is not possible.

Overall, Shakespeare shows the change in Macbeth's identity within the connection between power and morality. Unchecked ambition has many consequences within the tragedy, Macbeth's psychological decline, Lady Macbeth's breakdown, along with the widespread suffering in Scotland. Shakespeare, thus suggests that tyranny deprives individuals of their identity along with their sense of having purpose in their lives. This deprivation causes the destruction of moral integrity and the creation of societal isolation. Thus, the tragedy of Macbeth shows the fall of a ruler, with in the total annihilation of the self within the distortion of authority with the loss of the sense of self.

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