

How do the portrayals of madness in Commodus from Gladiator and Macbeth from Macbeth reflect their descent in tyranny and moral corruption?

## English B Extended Essay

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## Introduction:

There have been many archetypes for narratives that have been utilized by storytellers and writers. These archetypes are a reflection of our reality and ways to empower the message that the writer tries to convey. When the message is about politics and authoritative figures, a certain characteristic and story is frequently used throughout the centuries. That archetype is a tyrant's or a powerful figure's mental collapse caused by their struggle to reinforce their power and control and its consequences towards themselves and subjects under their responsibility. In this extended essay, I will analyse how psychological instability shaped the regime of two iconic figures from fiction: Commodus in Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* and Macbeth in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Although these characters come from different eras and mediums and are created by writers that have lived in different ages, both characters are similarly created to demonstrate a level of insecurity, ambition, and paranoia that gradually twist their minds. Not only does their madness cause a personal destruction, but it also becomes a source for widespread suffering and chaos around their subjects, and the eventual collapse of their power. By examining the development of their mental deterioration, the methods of their rule, and the consequences of their tyranny, this essay will argue that both Commodus and Macbeth exemplify how unchecked ambition, and psychological instability can

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transform leaders from all eras into tyrants, ultimately leading to their destruction.

This brings up the research question of this essay could be translated into: How do the portrayals of madness in Commodus from *Gladiator* and Macbeth from *Macbeth* reflect their descent in tyranny and moral corruption?

### Methodology:

To analyse and compare Macbeth and Commodus, it is important to have a great understanding of both characters' actions, their place in the story and environments. To achieve this understanding, both 2001 film *Gladiator* from Ridley Scott and play *Macbeth* from Shakespeare should be investigated under certain structural thematics. These thematics can be focused on three different areas, these are: motivations, signs of tyranny, signs of maddening and end of their tyranny. These themes are supported by close readings and scene analysis. Attention is given to how each medium, film and play, uses different techniques to portray madness and its consequences in certain scenes.

### Summary:

*Gladiator*, released in 2000, directed by Ridley Scott, follows Maximus Decimus Meridius, a Roman general who was betrayed by the son of the Roman emperor he was serving, named Commodus who murdered his father and became the

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emperor. After his entire family was executed by Commodus, Maximus had lost his meaning in his life, stripped from his rank and developed a grudge and a desire for revenge against Commodus. After being sold into slavery, Maximus becomes a gladiator. He rises through the ranks of the Roman arena to confront Commodus. In the end, Maximus kills Commodus but dies from his wounds, securing his revenge.

*Macbeth* is a tragedy written by William Shakespeare in 1623 about a Scottish general, Macbeth, who is led by prophecy and ambition to murder King Duncan and seize the throne. Consumed by guilt and paranoia, he becomes a tyrannical ruler, committing more murders to protect his power. Eventually, Macbeth is overthrown and killed by Macduff, restoring order to Scotland.

## Motivations:

Analysing Commodus' and Macbeth's initial psychics, it is revealed that both characters come from different paths to being a ruler. Macbeth initially had no intentions of being a king, he got manipulated by those around him and clung onto a prophecy. However, this does not imply that his own greed and ambition for becoming a king was not lurking deep in his psychology. Commodus on the other hand always had an ambition for being an emperor even going against his own family members for his case. Comparing both approaches shows that the

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nature and genesis of their ambition reveal different pathways to similar destructive ends.

### Motivations of Macbeth:

*“A prosperous gentleman, and to be king*

*Stands not within the prospect of belief,*

*No more than to be Cawdor. Say from whence*

*You owe this strange intelligence or why*

*Upon this blasted heath you stop our way*

*With such prophetic greeting. Speak, I charge you.”*

(Macbeth to Witches, Act1, Scene3)

*“All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!”*

(Macbeth to Witches, Act1, Scene3)

Macbeth’s motivation and ambition for becoming king of Scotland first stems from the three witches’ prophecy. Instead of disregarding the prophecy and contributing the loyalty, Macbeth's ambition is depicted as an inherent, fatal flaw, significantly catalysed by external forces.

*“Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be*

*What thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature;*

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*It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness*

*To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,*

*Art not without ambition, but without*

*The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst*

*highly,"*

(Lady Macbeth to Macbeth, Act1, Scene5 Pg31)

*"Shall sun that morrow see!*

*Your face, my thane, is as a book where men*

*May read strange matters. To beguile the time,*

*Look like the time. Bear welcome in your eye,*

*Your hand, your tongue. Look like th' innocent*

*flower,*

*But be the serpent under 't. He that's coming*

*Must be provided for; and you shall put*

*This night's great business into my dispatch,*

*Which shall to all our nights and days to come*

*Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom."*

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(Lady Macbeth to Macbeth, Act1, Scene5 Pg35)

A crucial external influence is Lady Macbeth. The role of Macbeth's wife is to be the driving force and orchestrator of Macbeth's rise to kingship. Because of her, being Macbeth's wife, she is aware of his greed and ambition for becoming king and utilizes it for her own benefit. As a result, she ultimately led Macbeth to madness through manipulating and pressure him psychologically, causing him to commit acts otherwise he would despise. This situation also tells the reader about Macbeth's insecure personality. Macbeth has been in a dilemma in the first few chapters for the assassination of the king which gave a point to Lady Macbeth to have dominance over. This statement can further be supported by Lady Macbeth challenging Macbeth's masculinity in order to build up courage in him. Macbeth's naive and insecure personality against those around him, mainly causes him to descent in madness. William Shakespeare emphasizes that insecure characteristics which can be manipulated are unfit for the ideal ruler or leader.

### Motivations of Commodus:

*"Exactly. A vision. I will give the people a vision and they will love me for it. They will soon forget the tedious sermonizing of a few dry old men. I will give them the greatest vision of their lives."* (*"Gladiator Script - Transcript from the Screenplay And/or Russell Crowe Movie"*)

(Commodus to his sister about ruling Rome, time: 01:07:40)

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Commodus thinks that the virtues initially thought to be a necessity for leadership by his ancestors are less important than his own virtues. Therefore, he thinks that he is more suited for ruling and reforming Rome. This thought creates a perspective for the argument of traditions clashing with modern values. However, in certain situations just like this one, the traditions challenged are the fundamentals of not just an ideal ruler, but an ideal characteristic of a human being. Opposing such crucial traditions and virtues ultimately caused a tyrannical and unsustainable regime. This emphasizes the importance of the succession of past values.

*“COMMODUS: What did you feel when you saw him?”*

*LUCILLA: I felt nothing.*

*COMMODUS: He wounded you deeply, didn't he?*

*LUCILLA: No more than I wounded him.*

*COMMODUS: They lied to me in Germania. They told me he was dead. If they lie to me they don't respect me. If they don't respect me then how can they ever love me?” (“Gladiator Script - Transcript from the Screenplay And/or Russell Crowe Movie”)*

*(Commodus to his sister about Maximus, time: 01:45:00)*

With this dialogue we find out an important concept that laid the foundations of the character of Commodus: Love. It is repeated throughout the film that what Commodus yearns for is love and acknowledgement from his surroundings,

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mainly from his people. This search for affection can be traced back to his childhood and his circumstances when growing up particularly from the demeanour of his father towards him. At the start of the film, Commodus's first search of acknowledgement is from his father, and when his father favoured Maximus, it was the tipping point for Commodus and the first sign of frenzy that his anger and jealousy made him kill his father. Later, his search for "love" is directed not only to an individual, but the people under his regime and his desire for affection becomes the core motivation for his actions.

## Signs of Tyranny

To emphasize the tyranny of the characters, both writers created scenes that would show off the consequences and irresponsible attitudes against their environments with their destructive nature. Most of the actions these characters take can be correlated with them trying to seize power and control. Both Macbeth and Commodus, once in power, adopted escalating patterns of violence and ignorance to further reinforce and maintain their illegitimate authority.

### Macbeth's Signs of Tyranny:

*"Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell*

*That summons thee to heaven or to hell."*

*(Macbeth, Act2 Scene 2 Pg51)*

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Macbeth's reign of terror, as with the other tyrants in both history and fiction, begins with the foundational act of gathering control and power on his hand, whereas in this case, it is the murder of King Duncan in order to ascend to the throne and seize power.

*“Both of you*

*Know Banquo was your enemy.”*

*(Macbeth to three murderers, Act 3 Scene1 Pg81)*

*“The castle of Macduff I will surprise,*

*Seize upon Fife, give to th’ edge o’ th’ sword*

*His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls*

*That trace him in his line. No boasting like a fool;*

*This deed I’ll do before this purpose cool.*

*But no more sights!—Where are these gentlemen?*

*Come bring me where they are”*

*(Macbeth, Act4 Scene2 Pg121)*

Subsequently, Macbeth’s rule becomes increasingly ruthless, as he systematically kills whoever might get in his way or threaten his position as king. He orders the murder of Banquo. This act is the start of a perpetuating cycle of death for

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Macbeth's ambition to kill to stay in power. His cruelty escalates further with the indiscriminate killing of everyone in Macduff's family, an act that demonstrates his complete corruptness and lack of remorse. His rule is characterized by absolute dictatorship, where he massacres people he sees as a threat like objects. With these acts, Macbeth's paranoid and insecure personality is also emphasized, however, throughout the story a powerful feeling that is guilt has also been building up in Macbeth that ultimately causes him to go frenzy.

### Commodus' Signs of Tyranny

*"GRACCHUS*

*We have plague in the Hebrew*

*Quarter and it is spreading... we*

*have looting at the granaries... we*

*have so much filth in the Tiber*

*that the water is undrinkable... we*

*have Praetorian Guard units that*

*are demanding protection payments*

*from the merchants at the exchange -*

-

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MARCELLUS

*My City Guard units have tried to*

*curtail these excesses but no*

*constabulary can police the entire*

*city. And the Praetorians*

*outnumber us two to one.*

GRACCHUS

*Rome dies as the Emperor plays at*

*beneficence. At least Nero gave us*

*music!*

GAIUS

*Do you think he'll listen to us?"*

*(The Gladiator Script p.49 ln.20)*

*"LUCILLA: Commodus, the senate has its uses.*

*COMMODUS: What uses? All they do is talk. Talk. ...It should have been only*

*me, and you, and Rome."* ("Gladiator Script - Transcript from the Screenplay

*And/or Russell Crowe Movie")*

*(Commodus to Lucilla, time: 01:06:27)*

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Commodus' reign was represented by his ignorance of his people's needs and his clash with the senate, figures that had a saying in the management of Roman Empire. This ignorance is an aspect of the character that is given by the writer of the film to show the viewer that Commodus is unfit for being a leader and rules his people with a totalitarian regime.

### Similarities in Both Characters Tyranny

The forceful removal and weakening of the threats as a mean of control is a striking commonality between the two rulers. Both begin their reigns with a foundational act of violence to seize power. This is a foreshadowing of violence that will happen during their regime and the framework of their violent personalities. These violent acts also reflects the unjustified nature of tyrannical figures inspired from reality.

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## Signs of Maddening

The mental decay of both Macbeth and Commodus is profound and shown to the viewer in a steady and believable pace, yet the specific scenes and signs of their psychological deterioration differ, which offers different perspectives and reactions towards paranoia and unchecked power.

### Macbeth's Signs of Maddening:

*"Is this a dagger which I see before me,*

*The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch*

*thee.*

*I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.*

*Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible*

*To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but*

*He draws his dagger.*

*A bell rings.*

*He exits.*

*A dagger of the mind, a false creation*

*Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?."*

*(Macbeth, Act2 Scene1)*

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This scene acts moments before Macbeth assassinates his king Duncan to achieve authority. The ragged mind of Macbeth about to commit the act of betrayal shows itself in this scene as a metaphorical hallucination supported with the commonly used technique in theatre that is monologue.

*“Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake*

*Thy gory locks at me”*

*(Macbeth to Banquo’s ghost hallucination, Act3 Scene4 Pg93)*

Macbeth's internal torment is characterized by overwhelming guilt. As he commits increasingly heinous acts to secure and maintain his power, he becomes plagued by guilt and remorse. To emphasize his internal struggle, Shakespeare creates scenes which Macbeth faces with hallucinations, particularly the bloody dagger and the ghost of Banquo. This allows the audience to see Macbeth’s change and mental deterioration through concrete visuals.

*“She should have died hereafter.*

*There would have been a time for such a word.*

*Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow*

*Creeps in this petty pace from day to day*

*To the last syllable of recorded time,*

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*And all our yesterdays have lighted fools*

*The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!"*

*(Macbeth to the news of his wife's death, Act5 Scene5 pg159)*

At the last chapter of *Macbeth*, we see Macbeth completely lost in reality and morals as he shows little to no remorse for the death of his wife.

### Commodus's Signs of Maddening

After Commodus' biggest threat, Maximus, reveals himself (*time: 01:40:00*) Commodus is shown to be in a constant state of stress which regularly makes him violently outburst throughout the film. The sudden declaration of Maximus' vengeance forced Commodus to realise his situation for being an emperor under constant threat from his environment and people. Up until this point, Because Commodus' life and actions has been going according to his plans, he has been living in a delusion he created for his life. After this realisation, his insecurity that comes from his childhood rose up causing indecisiveness for managing Rome and constant pressure upon him. These situations eventually lead him to go frenzy and more aggressive towards his environment whether it would be his sister (*time: 02:28:00*) or against the statue of his father he blamed his situation to (*time: 01:42:45*).

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## The End of The Tyranny

*“But, bear-like, I must fight the course. What’s he*

*That was not born of woman? Such a one*

*Am I to fear, or none”*

*(Macbeth, Act5 Scene7 Pg165)*

*And let the angel whom thou still hast served*

*Tell thee Macduff was from his mother’s womb*

*Untimely ripped”*

*(Macduff, Act5 Scene8)*

Macbeth's tragic end is the culmination of his destructive and bloody path. His unchecked ambition and terror lead him down a path of treachery, guilt, and self-destruction, ultimately resulting in his own downfall. His demise is presented as a direct consequence of his sins and the choices he made as king, having acted solely for himself instead of others. His sin of pride and overconfidence coming from the prophecy that led him to his rise in power also led him to his downfall. The play frames his death not merely as a political defeat but as a form of divine judgement, giving the message of the dangers of pride to the audience.

*“COMMODOUS: Maximus. Maximus. Maximus. They call for you. The general who became a slave. The slave who became a gladiator. The gladiator who defied an emperor. A striking story. Now the people want to know how the story ends. Only a famous death will do. What could be more glorious than to challenge the emperor himself in the great arena.*

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*MAXIMUS: You would fight me?*

*COMMODUS: Why not? Do you think I am afraid?*

*MAXIMUS: I think you have been afraid all your life.*

*COMMODUS: Unlike Maximus the invincible, who knows no fear?*

*MAXIMUS [laughing]: I knew a man once who said, death smiles at us all. All that man can do is smile back.*

*COMMODUS: I wonder. Did your friend smile at his own death?*

*MAXIMUS: You must know. He was your father.*

*COMMODUS: You loved my father, I know. But so did I. That makes us brothers, doesn't it?*

*Smile for me now brother. Commodus embraces Maximus and with one fierce thrust, stabs him with his knife, kissing him on the neck.*

*COMMODUS [to Quintus]: Strap on his armour. Conceal the wound.*” (“*Gladiator Script - Transcript from the Screenplay And/or Russell Crowe Movie*”)

*(time: 02:33:00)*

Commodus's rule similarly ended in violence in an unfair duel against Maximus, his biggest threat. Even though his mental state was decaying from the stress, just like Macbeth, he had a hope of winning back his life and comfort. The duel resulted in both characters death. The death of Commodus marked the return of honour and glory to Rome as the audience applauded. The fight can be considered the clash between two contrasting figures in the narrative, the people which Maximus represents and tyranny which Commodus represents. This clash and the end result in both narratives is the core message and warning against tyranny of both writers.

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## Conclusion

Analysing Macbeth and Commodus reveals striking parallels in their character and the impact of their reigns, focuses on universal themes under the study of power and leadership. Both figures, despite written in their distinct contexts serve as powerful archetypes of a corrupted ruler.

Both characters are created to have a desire for power and control; however, these desires stem from different psychological causes. Macbeth's desire came from his hollow ambition that was generated by manipulation from his surroundings and external prophecies. On the other hand, Commodus's drive for holding power comes from his psychological wounds and his circumstances growing up. Throughout the film it is apparent that his desire is to be appreciated and acknowledged by his surroundings, whether it would be from his family or his people. When both of these characters achieve power, resorted to secure and maintain their positions through any means, whether it would be to try to eliminate every perceived threat or weaken them to the point of absolute totalitarianism.

Internally, both experienced a psychological decay, even though its appearance to the viewer differed significantly. Macbeth was tormented by overwhelming guilt and remorse, leading to vivid hallucinations. Commodus, similarly, also showed delusion alongside extreme narcissism, believing that he was a divine and

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untouchable figure. Even if their psychological decay differ, their personal immorality became a source of widespread chaos and restlessness within their own people and themselves. Ultimately, both met violent ends as a direct consequence of their tyrannical reigns through duels against their enemies that bear opposite ideologies and characteristics.

The parallels observed in both narratives which are created nearly 4 centuries apart demonstrate the eventual collapse of tyrannical figures in political scenes. They also point out the virtues of an ideal leader, whether it would be honesty, or responsibility against its people. Both writers emphasize similar virtues in their narratives even if they are written in different ages. With this, we can say that the messages emphasized in *Macbeth* and *Commodus* are not only relevant to their own eras but offer universal insights into political psychology and stand out as timeless warnings against tyranny and unfit leaders.

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