

Question - In Shakespeare's tragedy "Character is destiny."
Do you agree. Discuss it with special reference
to Macbeth.

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Answer - Critics often classify Greek tragedy as "metaphysical"
and Shakespearean tragedy as "psychological." The tragic
hero of Greek drama is seen struggling against
insuperable supernatural powers carving out his tragic
destiny. The tragic protagonist of Shakespearean tragedy,
on the contrary, is undone by a tragic flaw embedded in
his own character. His character, in other words, is
his destiny. But when critics bring their armoury of over
simplified classifications to the task of interpreting and
analysing of Shakespeare's Macbeth, they often despair
at the problems posed by the play.

To begin with, there is the supernatural
element embodied by the three weird sisters. And it
can hardly be doubted that the weird sisters have
quite a hand in the unfolding of Macbeth's tragic
destiny. They goad Macbeth to his doom with their
equivocal prophecies, and they confuse and confound
Macbeth from the very beginning as to the real intention
behind their apparently well-meaning predictions -

"This supernatural soliciting
cannot be ill, cannot be good; it ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success,
commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor.
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair

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And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
 Against the use of nature, present fears,
 Are less than horrible imaginings:
 My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
 Shakes so my single state of man that function
 Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is
 But what is not."

It is indeed doubtful whether Macbeth would have succumbed to his destiny, if the Weird sisters had not spurred him on. Some critics, in consequence, insist that Macbeth is more in tune with the metaphysical tragedies of the Greeks, as opposed to his own predominantly psychological tragedies. Sir Edmund Chambers for instance insists that, "In Macbeth the central idea or theme seems to be this: a noble character, noble alike in potentiality and fruition may yet be completely overmastered by mysterious inexplicable temptation." And, A.C. Bradley attempts to absolve Macbeth of the responsibility for his own criminal activities by arguing that Macbeth is "in the power of secret forces lurking below and independent of his conscious will." And yet to classify "Macbeth" as a play in which an essentially noble protagonist is overmastered by the inscutable forces of destiny is to ignore the fact that Macbeth's own vaulting ambition is at the root of his tragic downfall.

And yet to argue that Macbeth is undone by his own ambitious nature is not free of critical pitfalls. The sheer extent and nature of the evil acts perpetrated by Macbeth presents the chief obstacles to an exclusively psychological interpretation of the play. Macbeth's crimes are premeditated, cold-blooded and enormously evil as opposed to be acts of misjudgement committed by Lear, Othello and Brutus. It is practically impossible for even the most sympathetic audiences to accept Macbeth as a tragic hero, if Macbeth himself is held solely responsible for his catalogue of crimes. Macbeth murders his King, his

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benefactor and his guest and he murders him when he is ⁽³⁾ unarmed, defenceless and asleep. He then proceeds to murder the innocent guard, the noble Banquo and the pathetically unprotected Lady Macduff and her child. And it is practically impossible for readers and audiences to sympathize with Macbeth and accept his sufferings as tragic unless they feel that much besides Macbeth's own character is responsible for his criminal career.

Shakespearean critics thus find it difficult to reconcile 'Macbeth' with their cut and dried notion of Shakespearean tragedy. For they can neither assign the responsibility of Macbeth's titanic crimes exclusively to Macbeth or to the forces of evil symbolized by the three weird sisters. What they find difficult to accept is the fact that neither Macbeth's character nor the supernatural is the exclusive agent of Macbeth's tragic destiny. It is only a handful of critics like Duthie, who are willing to discard their notions and to accept that:

"The tragedy is caused by two forces working in conjunction; it is caused by an external force of deliberately bringing itself to bear on a seed of evil. The external evil force fertilizes the seed - which would have not germinated without it." Macbeth would not have fallen as rapidly and readily without the supernatural at his elbows. And the supernatural evil would not have been so overwhelming in its success if Macbeth was not prone to their temptation. We have thus in "Macbeth" both a character and a supernatural circumstance collaborating in the unfolding of the protagonist's tragic destiny.
