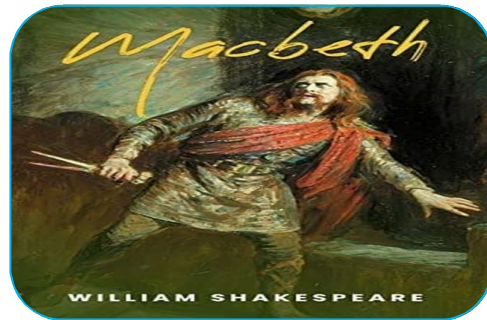




“AMBITION AND MORAL CONFLICT IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S MACBETH”**Smt. Thakur Sharmishtha R.****Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Vivekanand Arts, Sardar Dalipsingh Commerce and Science College,
Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar, Maharashtra, India.****ABSTRACT**

William Shakespeare’s Macbeth is one of the most widely read tragedies in English literature. The play is easy to follow in terms of action, yet it raises serious questions about ambition, choice, guilt, fear, and moral responsibility. This research article studies ambition and moral conflict as the central forces in Macbeth’s rise and fall. The study follows a qualitative, descriptive, and theoretical method based on close reading of the play. It examines how Macbeth’s desire for power grows after the witches’ prophecy, how Lady Macbeth encourages his decision, and how the murder of King Duncan creates continuing fear and guilt. The article argues that ambition itself is not shown as automatically evil; the tragedy begins when ambition is separated from moral control. Macbeth knows the difference between right and wrong, but he repeatedly chooses actions that violate his own judgment. As a result, he loses peace, friendship, trust, and, finally, his life. Lady Macbeth also experiences a conflict between desire and conscience, and her mental collapse shows the destructive effect of suppressed guilt. The play therefore presents moral conflict as an inner struggle that accompanies political violence. In simple terms, Macbeth remains relevant because it shows how uncontrolled desire can damage both the individual and society.

**KEYWORDS:** *E Shakespeare, Macbeth, Ambition, Moral Conflict, Guilt, Tragedy, Power, Conscience.***INTRODUCTION**

William Shakespeare’s Macbeth is a tragedy about power and the consequences of wrong choices. The plot is based on the rise and fall of a Scottish nobleman who hears a prophecy that he will become king. At first, Macbeth is a respected warrior. He is brave, loyal, and honoured by King Duncan. After meeting the three witches, however, he begins to imagine becoming king. This thought gradually grows into a dangerous ambition.

The play is not only a story of murder and political struggle. Its real strength lies in the inner conflict of its characters. Macbeth knows that killing Duncan is morally wrong. He understands that Duncan is his king, his relative, and his guest. He also knows that violent action will bring consequences. In spite of this knowledge, he chooses murder. This gap between moral understanding and actual action creates the central tragedy.

The present article studies ambition and moral conflict in Macbeth in simple theoretical terms. It explains how ambition develops, how persuasion affects Macbeth’s choice, how guilt enters the mind after the crime, and how fear leads to further violence. The article also considers Lady Macbeth, whose character illustrates another form of conflict between desire and conscience.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To study ambition as a major theme in Macbeth.
2. To examine Macbeth's moral conflict before and after the murder of Duncan.
3. To understand the influence of Lady Macbeth and the witches on Macbeth's decisions.
4. To analyse the role of guilt, fear, and conscience in the tragedy.
5. To explain the relevance of the play's moral message for modern readers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research article uses a qualitative and theoretical approach. The main method is close reading of Shakespeare's Macbeth, with special attention to important scenes involving prophecy, decision, murder, guilt, fear, and punishment. The study is descriptive rather than experimental. It does not use surveys or statistics. Critical works on Shakespearean tragedy are consulted for general background.

AMBITION AS THE BEGINNING OF THE TRAGEDY

Ambition is present in Macbeth before the murder, but the witches give it a clear direction. When they greet Macbeth with future titles, they awaken a desire that already has some place in his mind. The prophecy does not command him to kill Duncan. It simply tells him that he will be king. This is important because Macbeth remains responsible for his response.

At first, he considers the possibility that fate may make him king without action. Soon, however, he begins to think about murder. Shakespeare therefore shows ambition as a process. A thought becomes a wish, the wish becomes a plan, and the plan becomes an act. The tragedy develops step by step.

Ambition can be positive when it encourages achievement through lawful and honourable means. Macbeth's ambition becomes destructive because he wants the crown immediately and is willing to break moral, social, and political bonds to obtain it. The problem is not simply that he wants success. The problem is that he chooses power over conscience.

THE WITCHES AND THE QUESTION OF CHOICE

The witches create an atmosphere of uncertainty and temptation. Their words are brief, mysterious, and powerful. They predict Macbeth's rise, but they do not explain how it will happen. Later, their statements are also crafted to give Macbeth false confidence.

It is easy to blame the witches for the tragedy, but the play does not remove Macbeth's freedom. Banquo also hears a prophecy, yet he does not murder anyone to force its fulfilment. The difference between Banquo and Macbeth helps us understand the role of choice. Both men receive strange information, but they respond differently.

The witches therefore represent temptation and the attraction of imagined success. They give Macbeth a possible future, but he makes the moral decision. This makes the tragedy stronger. If Macbeth were only a victim of supernatural control, the theme of responsibility would be weaker. Shakespeare instead presents a man who is tempted, aware, and still free enough to choose.

LADY MACBETH AND THE PRESSURE TO ACT

Lady Macbeth is one of the strongest influences on Macbeth before Duncan's murder. When she learns about the prophecy, she immediately thinks of the crown and fears that Macbeth may be too kind to take the quickest path to power. She questions his courage and manhood when he hesitates.

Her pressure is effective because Macbeth is already divided within himself. She does not create his ambition, but she strengthens it and attacks the part of him that wants to stop. The scene before the murder is important because Macbeth lists clear reasons not to kill Duncan. He understands loyalty, hospitality, justice, and the danger of consequences. His moral judgment is active. Lady Macbeth turns this conflict into a test of courage. Instead of allowing Macbeth to define courage as doing what is right,

she pushes him to define courage as carrying out the violent plan. Shakespeare thus shows how language and emotional pressure can influence moral decision-making.

Lady Macbeth's later condition proves that she is not free from conscience. The person who initially appears stronger than Macbeth becomes deeply affected by guilt. Her sleepwalking scene shows that the mind can carry what the conscious will tries to hide.

THE MURDER OF DUNCAN AND THE LOSS OF INNER PEACE

The murder of Duncan is the turning point of the play. Before the act, Macbeth is anxious and uncertain. After the act, his fear intensifies. He has gained the first step toward the crown, but he immediately loses inner peace.

This is one of Shakespeare's clearest moral ideas. A crime may achieve an external goal, but it can create an internal punishment. Macbeth becomes unable to feel secure. Sounds, imagined voices, blood, darkness, and sleeplessness become signs of his disturbed mind. His conscience does not disappear after the murder; it becomes stronger in the form of fear. The idea of sleep is especially important. Sleep normally represents rest, innocence, and natural order. Macbeth's violence breaks that order. He cannot simply return to ordinary life after killing Duncan. The psychological result of the act follows him.

This part of the play also shows the difference between success and satisfaction. Macbeth becomes king, but kingship does not make him happy. The crown is achieved through fear, so it must be protected through more fear.

FROM ONE CRIME TO MANY CRIMES

After Duncan's murder, Macbeth begins to use violence as a method of security. He fears Banquo because of the prophecy about Banquo's descendants. He also attacks Macduff's family. Each new crime is connected with the first one.

This pattern shows how moral decline can become habitual. Once Macbeth crosses an important moral boundary, later acts become easier to imagine. Yet they do not give him peace. Instead, every act creates new enemies and new fears. His political position appears stronger but is weaker in reality. The banquet scene, where Macbeth reacts to the ghost of Banquo, reveals the difference between public power and private fear. To his guests he is king; within his mind he is a frightened man. The image of kingship cannot protect him from memory and guilt.

Shakespeare therefore presents tyranny as a form of isolation. Macbeth loses trusted relationships. He cannot speak openly, cannot rest, and cannot depend on genuine loyalty. Power gained through violence separates him from other people.

LADY MACBETH, GUILT AND MENTAL SUFFERING

Lady Macbeth first believes that practical action can remove the evidence of crime. She tries to control the situation through calm behaviour. Yet later the memory of blood returns in her sleepwalking. Her mind repeats the past because the past has not been morally resolved.

Her condition shows that guilt can work beneath conscious control. She once asked for hardness and emotional strength, but she cannot permanently remove human feeling. The contrast between her early confidence and later weakness is one of the most tragic parts of the play.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth respond to guilt differently. Macbeth becomes harder, more violent, and more emotionally empty. Lady Macbeth turns inward and collapses psychologically. Both responses are destructive. Shakespeare does not offer crime as a path to stable power. The mind and the moral order continue to resist it.

KINGSHIP, ORDER AND CONSEQUENCES

Macbeth also presents kingship as a moral responsibility. Duncan is portrayed as a ruler whose authority is linked to loyalty, hospitality, and social order. Macbeth obtains the crown by destroying these bonds, so his kingship begins with insecurity. He holds the title of king, but he lacks the trust that

gives political authority stability. This difference between possessing power and deserving power is important to the tragedy.

The disorder created by Duncan's murder spreads beyond Macbeth's private mind. Scotland suffers under fear, suspicion, and violence. Good characters begin to speak of the country as wounded and unhappy. Shakespeare therefore connects personal wrongdoing with public consequence. A ruler's moral failure does not remain a private matter because political decisions affect many lives.

The restoration at the end of the play is therefore more than Macbeth's military defeat. It represents a return to legitimate order. The tragedy suggests that leadership requires courage, but courage must be joined with justice, loyalty, and responsibility. Macbeth keeps physical bravery almost to the end, yet bravery without moral purpose cannot save him. This section strengthens the article's central argument: ambition becomes tragic when the desire to rule is separated from the duties that make rule meaningful.

MORAL CONFLICT AND THE TRAGIC HERO

Macbeth is tragic because he is not presented as purely evil from the beginning. He has admirable qualities, including courage and imagination. He understands moral arguments clearly. His fall is therefore connected with choice, not ignorance.

A tragic hero often has both greatness and weakness. Macbeth's imagination allows him to see the horror of his actions before he performs them. Ironically, this moral awareness does not save him. He allows ambition to defeat judgment.

The audience can therefore feel both fear and pity. We fear what uncontrolled ambition can do, and we pity a man who destroys qualities that once made him honourable. His final state is not true greatness. He has power without friendship, courage without moral purpose, and determination without hope.

RELEVANCE OF THE THEME TODAY

The central conflict in Macbeth remains relevant because ambition remains part of modern life. People seek success in education, employment, politics, business, and public life. Ambition can encourage discipline and progress, but it becomes dangerous when success is placed above honesty, fairness, and responsibility.

The play also shows the importance of a moral pause. Macbeth has several moments in which he can stop. He thinks about consequences and knows the act is wrong. His failure is not a lack of information; it is a failure to follow his better judgment.

For students, Macbeth offers a clear lesson in cause and effect. One wrong decision creates fear, and fear creates further wrong decisions. The play therefore remains a powerful study of character and conscience.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The analysis shows five clear findings. First, ambition becomes destructive only when Macbeth allows it to overcome moral judgment. Second, the witches create temptation, but they do not remove Macbeth's responsibility for his actions. Third, Lady Macbeth increases the pressure to act, yet both she and Macbeth later suffer because their consciences remain active. Fourth, Duncan's murder does not solve Macbeth's problem; it creates a cycle in which fear produces further violence. Fifth, political power without moral legitimacy leaves Macbeth isolated and insecure. These findings support the view that the tragedy is built as much on inner conflict as on external action. Macbeth is therefore useful for simple theoretical study because the sequence is easy to trace: desire leads to choice, choice leads to guilt, guilt leads to fear, and fear leads to further destruction.

CONCLUSION

Macbeth is a tragedy of ambition because the desire for power controls a man who already knows the moral limits of his action. The witches awaken possibility, Lady Macbeth increases pressure,

but Macbeth finally chooses the path of murder. His moral conflict before Duncan's death proves that he understands the difference between right and wrong. After the crime, guilt and fear become constant parts of his life.

The tragedy also shows that immoral power is unstable. Macbeth gains the crown but loses peace, trust, friendship, and security. Lady Macbeth's suffering further demonstrates that conscience cannot easily be silenced. Shakespeare's message is simple but deep: ambition needs moral control. Success achieved through injustice can destroy the person who seeks it.

For modern readers, the play remains meaningful because it connects public action with private conscience. It asks not only what a person wants but also what he or she is willing to become to obtain it.

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