

# Example by StudyDriver

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## Evil in Shakespeare's Plays Example

The purpose of my essay is to develop my analysis and research of Shakespeare's Hamlet. While I was reading both I have found a great connection between them. I have come to compare the themes, characters, and the conclusion of each play, and to focus in particular upon the concept of evil as it is treated by Shakespeare in each play. The Protestant Reformation and Counter-Reformation considerably deepened the moral and philosophical understanding of the concept of evil. . The shakespeare Each play primarily concerns the downfall of a man who has the potential for greatness, but finds himself caught in a web of evil made by others. In the case of Macbeth, there's a man led by greed, an appetite for power, and the urging of an insane wife, who in the course of the play, turns from a noble man into a monster. Hamlet, in comparison, is led to his end by a desire for revenge which he allows to go out of control, and by the continued contact with his mother, whose part in his father's death haunts him.

In Macbeth, the theme of evil is introduced and sustained by the witches, and by Lady Macbeth. Macbeth himself becomes a victim of the impulses within him which lead him to consult the witches, and persuade them to believe in the power of evil rather than the power of good. The tragedy here is that Macbeth possesses a potential for

doing good, he is an imaginative man, with a mind which could have been turned to creative governing, but which is instead filled with dreams of ghosts, and of his victims. Macbeth "is a doomed man before he even commits his crime. It is what gives to this tragedy its deep and appalling quality. Macbeth does not go to hell; he starts there."

The evil in Hamlet develops in the course of the play, for in the very beginning Hamlet himself is not a man capable of the murder of Polonius or of his mother and the king. Thus the evil here is not yet a reality for the audience of this play when it begins; the witches in Macbeth do not function in the same way as does the elder Hamlet's ghost. The ghost tempts Hamlet to revenge him the revenge itself need not be the source of evil, for according to the beliefs of the day, the murder of a rightful ruler could justly be revenged by his son. While the two plays have similar surrounding the evil events which transpire they stem in conception from two very different approaches to the problem of evil. Perhaps the difference is best pointed out by the fact that Hamlet is at first inclined to believe that the ghost is an agent of the devil; he is not prepared to act until he is certain the ghost has told the truth. Macbeth, on the other hand, knows that only the evil way of the witches will lead him to fulfill his ambitions, and he consciously chooses that evil over the good qualities, such as loyalty, towards which he is drawn.

Although the fate of Hamlet and Macbeth is resolved in much the same way at the end of each play, the two characters could not be more different in conception. Hamlet is, and remains throughout the play, a noble and essentially well-intentioned man; he is an idealist a man not afraid to follow his emotions. Macbeth, a much stronger and more decisive man than Hamlet, has a streak of selfishness and stoicism which Hamlet lacks. Shakespeare thus approaches a similar theme the murder of a king from the viewpoint of two very different men, and yet finally arrives at a single philosophical position which is based upon a single human principle: violence engenders violence, and murder ultimately brings about the death of the murderer as well as innocent victims. An interesting contrast between the two plays is the importance of Lady Macbeth to Macbeth and of Gertrude to Hamlet. In both cases devotion to the woman wife or mother and a concomitant fear and repulsion towards her, acts as a prime factor in the decision making process of the man. But Macbeth envisions a throne which he will share with his Queen, while Hamlet can feel nothing but rage against his mother's betrayal of his father. Macbeth

is joined in his choice of evil by his wife, while Hamlet falls into evil alone. There is no equivalent to Ophelia, with her influence towards salvation for Hamlet, in Macbeth.

While avoiding the question of a Freudian interpretation of Hamlet's character, it is interesting to note that the genesis of his drift into evil is more understandable and more forgivable than Macbeth's. It has been said of Hamlet that "Blocked by the double obstruction (the death of his father and the marriage of his mother to his murderer), his life energy flows backward and floods his mind with images of disintegration and death." Hamlet was not made for revenge, was not meant to bear the burden of his own mother's evil, and yet both fell upon him. Macbeth, on the other hand, was a brave man and a strong leader. He was not a victim of his parents, nor even of his king, for the king in this case was a good man. There is ample indication in the text that Macbeth possesses the strength of character to resist his wife's ambitions for him. Yet he falls more easily than Hamlet. "The murder of Duncan inherits Hamlet's sensibility, his nervous irritability, his hysterical passion, his extraordinary gifts of visualization and imaginative expression; and under the instigating influence of his wife the 'rashness' and 'indiscretion' of the later Hamlet are progressively translated into a succession of mad acts."

If Macbeth is Hamlet taken to the limits of his violent potential, the more accurate comparison between characters in these plays would involve Claudius and Macbeth. The murder of a good king by a usurper invariably brings about an uncontrollable chain of events which will eventually ruin that usurper in Shakespeare's world. Yet as horrible as Claudius' deed was, we do not feel the repulsion for him that we feel towards Macbeth. Claudius stands outside the circle of violence until Hamlet draws him in, at the last moment. Macbeth is in the center of his play, his hands bloody after every murder.

Despite the murders in which Hamlet is involved the deaths of Polonius, Claudius and Gertrude, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the madness of the innocent Ophelia, many critics have found it difficult to see in Hamlet an embodiment of evil. Rather, "Hamlet is the quintessence of European man, who holds that man is 'ordained to govern the world according to equity and righteousness with an upright heart', and not to renounce the world and leave it to its corruption. By that conception of man's duty end destiny he is involved in those tragic dilemmas

with which our own age is so terribly familiar." Thus the evil deeds which occur are at least partially neutralized by Hamlet's intention to eradicate far worse evils, according to this interpretation. Is it possible that Macbeth too can be seen in this light. It has been argued that despite his crimes, "Macbeth is the protagonist, the hero, with whom as such, for the right tragic effect, there must, naturally, be some large measure of sympathy." He gains our sympathy through Shakespeare's "power of poetry . . . by the exhibition of the hero's bravery and virtue at the beginning, by emphasizing the influence of the supernatural . . . and of his wife's inordinate ambition distinctly mentioned. . . ." Thus while the dramatist must make his audience aware of the fall into evil of both men, he must also make provision for the tragic element, which presupposes a capacity for goodness and even greatness on the part of the hero.

The answer to the problem of evil in each play is that "Shakespeare has again enclosed his evil within a universe of good, his storm center within wide areas of peace." This world of good includes Malcolm and Macduff, Ophelia, and all the others who survive to carry on the job of building peace on the ruins of war, and of healing violence through their gentleness. The tragedy of both Hamlet and Macbeth, "imaginative brothers" is that they are both capable of reflecting back to their innocence, which has been irretrievably lost:

The time has been, my senses would have cooled  
To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair  
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir  
As life were in 't, I have supped full with horrors;  
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,  
Cannot once start me.  
(Macbeth, V, v, 10-15)

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