



THE MACBETH COUPLE IN THE GRIP OF NIHILISM AND DESPAIR

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Abstract: *Macbeth* is one of the great tragedies of Shakespeare. Its two central characters Macbeth and Lady Macbeth at last turn out to be nihilists in the play. Because of the execution of their evil design, their commission of crime, morbid psychology, frailties, sheer oscillation, losing convictions, breaking order and natural human instinct and above all the condition of their being childless, they succumb to political, ethical and existential nihilism and despair. With regard to this, various crises and problems arise out of their evil ingenuity, wrong motivation, 'vaulting ambition' and unnatural imagination. In fact, a lot of valuable criticism on *Macbeth* from different angles has already been poured in, but the treatment of the present theme of the play appears to be slim. Therefore, relevant criticism has been consulted for exploring this present area properly and presenting the new vistas convincingly. As the topic has a new dimension with great critical interest, the efforts have been made to deal with it in the article elaborately and penetratingly. Ultimately this study tries to prove that the Macbeth couple cannot withstand the universal order of existence and at last, bereft of all values and beliefs, become the victim of profound despair and nihilism and are destined to invite their final unfortunate doom, as tragic as harrowing, as an isolated couple, in their autonomous world of meaninglessness.

Key words: Macbeth couple, nihilism, Shakespeare

Introduction

Shakespeare, the greatest English playwright and poet, wrote *Macbeth* which is deemed one of his five great tragedies; others are *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, the main characters of this play, who during their tragic and bitter life-span, fall prey to an immeasurable degree of nihilism[†] and despair.

Nihilism is the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. About nihilism, 'Every belief, every considering something true' Nietzsche writes, 'is necessarily false because there is simply no true world' (Pratt, 2005). Nihilism, in fact, can be understood in

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[†] Nihilism is often associated with extreme pessimism and a radical skepticism that condemns existence. A true nihilist believes in nothing, has no loyalties, and no purpose other than, perhaps, an impulse to destroy. While few philosophers would claim to be nihilists, it is Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher (1844-1900) and an exponent of this belief, who argues that the corrosive effects of nihilism would eventually destroy all moral, religious, and metaphysical convictions and precipitate the greatest crisis in human history. For Nietzsche, there is no objective order or structure in the world except what we give it. For strengthening his own conviction, the nihilist discovers that all values are baseless and that reason is impotent.

several different ways. *Political Nihilism*, as noted, is associated with the belief that the destruction of all existing political, social, and religious order is a prerequisite for any future improvement. *Ethical nihilism* or moral nihilism rejects the possibility of absolute moral or ethical values. Instead, good and evil are indefinable, and values addressing such are the product of nothing more than social and emotive pressures. *Existential nihilism* is the notion that life has no intrinsic meaning or value, and it is, no doubt, the most commonly used and understood sense of the word today (French, 1992). And the Macbeth couple is the victim of political, ethical and existential nihilism. They succeeded in every individual object but miserably failed in a total view of life. At the fag end, when they did not find any new openings of life, they had to pass away in utter blankness of life. Knights (1966) writes, 'the main theme of the reversal of values is given out simply and clearly in the first scene – 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair'. The above line from the play signifies that the reversal of values, both social and moral, occurs in the beginning and as a result the ensuing conflicts, disorder, lust for power, illusions, evil strategies and brutal killing have ultimately thrown the Macbeth couple into the den of despair and nihilism.

Macbeth has adequately been discussed and reviewed from various angles by many outstanding literary critics. But, there is a special reason why Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have become the victim of nihilism and despair that precipitates their death which is, though tragic, undoubtedly despicable. The main interest of this article centres round these two characters' magnitude of torment, utter pessimism and nihilistic approaches to life and their ultimate causes. Thus, the aim of this study is to find out how the Macbeth couple has invited their fall as they are overwhelmed by the corroding power of despair and nihilism, political, moral and existential. In addition, this particular study tries to find out that the couple is childless and therefore they gradually develop a complex psyche. However, the article covers how the couple's ambitious life, their meaningless existence and the intrigues forged by them, come to an ignominious end. All these, along with the thematic discussions have been presented through some diagrams, comparative study, appropriate quotations, relevant opinions of the critics and the related information.

Analyses

At the beginning of the play, Macbeth, the Thane of Cawdor, is a very successful and highly respectable personality of a social group, deserving anticipation of his further professional progress. Macbeth has a loving wife and a secure home in his castle. As the play opens, we learn of his heroic actions in defense of the kingdom. We see him interact with other nobles, and their friendship and esteem are apparent. But something destroys this gay and joyful setting. However, it is a great irony that at the end of the play Macbeth is totally alone. He has meanwhile lost all his friends. His wife is dead, and all his shadowy hopes have evaporated and thus he grows disappointed. He is a man without a place in the social community. He has become totally isolated because his life has been ineffective. Nothing of what Macbeth has done in the play is forced upon him, and he is never deceived by some human agent (someone manipulating him). In that sense, he alone is the architect of his own destruction, and the more he tries to cope with what he senses is closing in on him, the more he aggravates his deteriorating condition. His death is thus the inevitable consequence of what he has chosen to do for his own reasons. Whatever be the constitution of his challenge to life, he destroys himself.

As regards Lady Macbeth, we see in the beginning, how she reacts to the news of her husband's success and King Duncan's visit. Her lust for power grows from this point. Lady Macbeth is portrayed by Shakespeare as a complex and rounded character that is continuously changing (though slowly) throughout the play, e.g., in the following lines, she appears to be a very implacable lady, who frequently plays the role of a woman of multifarious psychological frailties:

...unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe topful
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood...
... ..
Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it
Makes,... (Act. i, Sc v)

In spite of being a very bold woman, Lady Macbeth possesses signs of psychological feebleness when we hear her say,

‘Had he not resembled
My father as he slept, I had done it’ (Act. ii, Sc. ii).

She is giving a pretext for not being associated with the killing of Duncan. The culminating mental derangement in Lady Macbeth is seen when she learns of her husband’s slaying of Macduff’s family. Thus, it is proved that she is of quite poorer imagination. Moreover, she turns to be a nihilist who is ethically and morally inferior.

So, we may begin with the obvious question: Why does Macbeth decide to launch his bloody mission by murdering Duncan? Why is he not sufficiently happy with the high social position he occupies and the honoured status he has acquired among his peers? The simple answer to these problems is that he is too ambitious to restrain himself from materializing his nefarious design by killing the king of the country and thus destroying the rights of the people. Macbeth burns with his strong desire- his ‘vaulting ambition’- for which he has been punished in the long run. Now, there is evidence that he finally fulfils this ambition and occupies the throne. Macbeth does want to become the king, and he refers to that desire as ambition:

I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition which o’erleaps itself
And falls on th’other. (Act. i, Sc. vii)

But we need to be careful here not to automatically take a character's own estimate of his motivation for the truth; we need to unwrap just what that concept of ambition contains, in the characters to whom we apply it. For, a tantalizing aspect of Macbeth’s motivation is that he is in the grip of something which he does not fully understand. Here we may assume that both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are constantly struggling to make their existence meaningful in the world they are living in. But they prove themselves absolutely failure to exist and to find the meaning of their existence. Macbeth’s positive moral evil impairs his capacity to sustain the strain and stress of life. This flaw is nothing but his inner deformity that makes him reject all the values and invite his downfall.

While nihilism is often discussed in terms of extreme pessimism and skepticism, it has been associated with the fundamental belief that life is meaningless. Nihilism begins with the notion that the world is without meaning or purpose, engendering the concept of existence itself as senseless and empty. As despair outweighs happiness in general, satisfaction in life is impossible and then suicide is most welcome. The existential, ethical and political nihilist’s perspective is summed up in the following passage towards the end of the play.

Out, out, brief candle!
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (Act. v, Sc. v)

Macbeth, as the story goes on, explicitly conforms to the three kinds of nihilism, i.e. ethical, political and existential. First of all, Ethical nihilism or moral nihilism in Macbeth or even in Lady Macbeth makes them reject the possibility of absolute moral or ethical values. To them, good and evil are puzzling and this indeed makes them treat others erroneously. Nowhere in the play we notice that Macbeth or Lady Macbeth is bothered about the question of God, religion, humanity, morality and they are exorbitantly satisfied to see the materialization of the prophecies of witches. Even Macbeth cannot pronounce 'Amen' and Doctor of Lady Macbeth says, 'More needs she the divine (the blessings of a priest) than the physician' (Act. v, Sc. i). At the end of the play, Macbeth considers life to be a story, incoherently narrated by a witless soul, in which there is profuse noise and passion but it is without any real significance and meaning. Despite this speech coated with the element of pure nihilism, Macbeth oscillates between desperation and fruitless complacency, making his own resolution rougher and more complex than that of his wife. Enticed by a mistaken sense of security by the final prophecies of the three witches, he welcomes a kind of self-destructive arrogance and dies an inglorious death.

Macbeth's political nihilism makes him destroy the social and political order by killing the noble innocent king Duncan. In doing so, he 'rejects the possibility of absolute moral or ethical values' which is generated from 'social and emotive pressure' of ambition (ambition generated from multiplied forms of self-inspiration and Lady Macbeth's relentless instigation). True, the Macbeth couple has played the role of hypocrites in welcoming the king at their castle. After murdering the king, Macbeth turns to be a despotic ruler. Then he creates a cloud of uncertainty that settles on Scotland during his despotism and the inhabitants of the country 'float upon a wild and violent sea' of terror. This clearly points to his political failure and this failure plunges him into political nihilism. Macbeth violates political loyalty and trust that are inseparable from the state policies, integration and social values. Under such weight of negative action, nihilism erupts into an wide insecurity for the Macbeth couple who is in fact responsible for the invocation of chaos and disorder in the state of Scotland.

Existential nihilism, which is the source of all other nihilistic approaches and beliefs in this couple, is illustrated at the end of the play, noticeably in Macbeth's reaction to Lady Macbeth's death, in the following lines:

She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word;
To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time:
And all our yesterdays, have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. (Act. v, Sc. v)

What happens to Macbeth, before the final battle, is that he loses all logic for continuing his life. He has cut himself off from everything that makes life worth living.

As we understand, the idea of killing Duncan is at first generated in Macbeth when he listens to the witches' prophecies that he would become the king hereafter. Macbeth does not want to wait any longer. He, later on, tells this to his wife and she enthusiastically provides him with some solutions. She is thrilled at the idea of becoming the queen. At this point, Lady Macbeth just supplies the missing ounce of strength that Macbeth's flimsy nature lacks. After they have planned this, they do not spare time in their advancement and the murder of Duncan is committed. After this murder, the second murder i.e. the killing of Banquo is more potent than the first. But Macbeth is not an ordinary murderer and Lady Macbeth's persuasion is not an ordinary act. After the commission of such unpardonable crimes, Macbeth has indeed murdered his own sleep in utter despair. Verily, a murderer-nihilist cannot sleep comfortably.

Macbeth does murder Sleep, the innocent Sleep,

....

Still it cri'd, Sleep no more to all the House;

Glamis hath murder'd Sleep and therefore Cawdor

Shall sleep no more: Macbeth shall sleep no more. (Act. ii, Sc. ii)

'Fear' in *Macbeth* plays a cardinal role as one of the symbols. Macbeth's nerves are never proof against 'fear'.

Present fears

Are less dangerous than horrible imaginings. (Act. i, Sc. iii)

The imaginative fears transform Macbeth and Bellona's bridegroom has been turned to an object not human, who has already lost all the virtues and values. As for Lady Macbeth, 'she is a slighter person than Macbeth, has a poorer imagination, and holds in her mind less of that power which enables it to stand up under torture.' (Doren, 1939)

Here's the smell of blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia

will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh'. (Act. v, Sc. i)

The world of the sinners has already hurled them into the dark bottomless abyss of despair and nihilism and the couple grows maniac.

In Act i, Sc. vii, Lady Macbeth utters, 'How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:', but she continued that yet she would tear off her breast from the sucking baby, so worthy of love in its helplessness and dash out its brains if she had so promised before. This does not mean that the Macbeth couple has children. In fact, Lady Macbeth mentions this to emphasize her point—her nature of cruelty and hardheartedness. So, whether Macbeth couple has children is not explicitly dealt in the play. Now we should remember that this couple is childless; there is no clear evidence of existence of sons or daughters at Macbeth's home. There is no reference to or naming of any children in Macbeth's family, not even in the list of characters of the play. This can be one of the root causes for the frustration of Macbeth couple that leads to their psychological restlessness. Therefore we have scope to assert that they are childless. Here the couple's feeling of frustration arising from childlessness has taken a monstrous shape which they (consciously or unconsciously) try to replace by 'ambition'. With reference to this, Freud (1992) says, 'I believe Lady Macbeth's illness, the transformation of her callousness into penitence, could be explained directly as a reaction to her childlessness, by which she is convinced of her impotence against the decrees of nature...'

From the observation of Bradley (1992) we come to know the following things:

Macduff: He has no children. All my pretty ones?

Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?

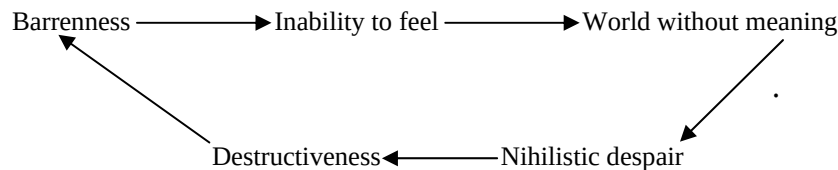
What all my pretty chickens and their dam/ At one fell swoop?(Act. iv, Sc. iii)

... ... Three interpretations have been offered of the words 'He has no children':

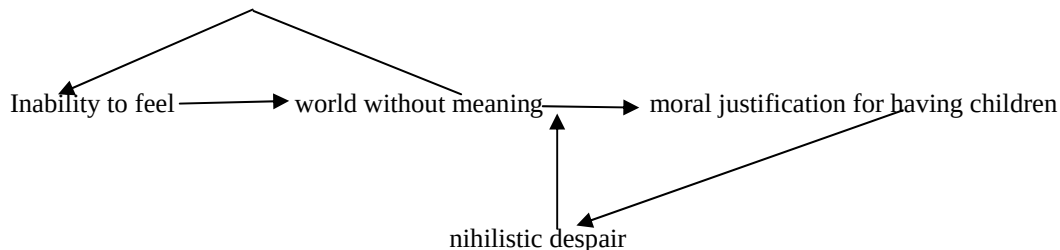
- a) They refer to Malcolm, who, if he had children of his own, would not at such a moment suggest revenge, or talk of curing such a grief... ...
- b) They refer to Macbeth, who has no children, and on whom therefore Macduff cannot take an adequate revenge.
- c) They refer to Macbeth, who, if he himself had children, could never have ordered the slaughter of children...'

Apparently the witches' prophecy and Lady Macbeth's skyhigh ambition contribute much to all his motivation. But why should Macbeth exploit a devastating way? Is it because he wants to eclipse his and his wife's tremendous amount of frustration due to their childlessness? Or is he struggling to find out the truth of their meaningless existence in this monotonous world? Added to their anguish because of childlessness, Lady Macbeth's identity crises in a purely patriarchal society contribute much to her psychological discontentment. Throughout the play, Lady Macbeth

bears no individual name; she is all the time described, mentioned, and referred to as 'Lady Macbeth'. This indicates that her recognition is attainable only through her husband's name and gender. She is fully aware of the fact that as long as Macbeth holds some power, she will be known as 'Lady Macbeth'. This identity crisis, though not expressed by her overtly, might have caused a great deal of despair in her. Maybe, she wants to see her husband as the 'King' and in her case, too, her extreme despair begets the fatal scheme of killing Duncan. Moreover, she is no 'mother'. All these problems and crises give birth to a fatal despondency that grips Lady Macbeth and thus ultimately she turns to be a nihilist. As a result, the tedious life-cycle of the Macbeth couple appears thus:



Such a life in a monotonous but mundane earth cannot go on; it must end somewhere. In the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* written by Virginia Woolf, we see Septimus commit suicide, losing all his hope for continuing his life. Septimus is a soldier who fought in the World War 1 and he has been shocked tremendously by observing inhuman massacre, especially the spot death of Ivan, his close mate, by a bomb attack. Since then he has begun to lose his sanity; even his loving wife Lucrezia fails to soothe him with all her efforts. He believes that one cannot bring children into this world which is full of eternal sufferings. Septimus, in fact, finds nothing to live for in this meaningless world and consequently he kills himself. It is obviously a destructive act, though inflicted on his ownself. Critic Poole (2001) analyzes Septimus' case in this way. The following diagram represents this:



Like Septimus, the Macbeth couple at last succumbs to nihilistic despair. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, perhaps, getting more despairing day by day, want to reshape their meaningless life and here their unchecked ambition takes a monstrous appearance and then their human existence is bedimmed. Lady Macbeth, like Septimus, loses her sanity, being pinched by her prick of conscience and she dies: 'To bed, To bed! there's knocking at the gate: come, come, come, come, give me your hand. What's done cannot be undone. To bed, To bed, To bed!'(Act. v, Sc. i). Macbeth, being alone now, becomes all the more desperate, crazy, as the last consolation of his meaningless life evaporates. He fights with Macduff and is finally slain. This couple is dead now and so they are free from the haunting presence of nihilism, political, ethical and existential, that has obliquely led them to choose a damned way with which they want to remain oblivious of what they could not attain during their lifetime.

Conclusion

Knickerbocker's (2003) invaluable views on the relation of nihilism and existentialism will help us understand Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's ultimate action which is quoted below:

'The minute the word 'nihilism' is introduced into the topic of discussion, visions of the tearing down of creeds and the intentional destruction of all moral, philosophical and religious values present themselves to the mind. Nihilism to many suggests chaos, anarchy, and mutiny against any and all powers that represent order. When, However, nihilism is wed with the philosophical viewpoint of the existentialist, it does not necessarily indicate any active form of destructive behaviour, but rather adds to the existential position the notion that life is senseless and absurd, devoid of all meaning save that which we might supply it with our personal narratives, or little stories that help us abstract 'truth' from the chaos... '

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth want to find out the truth of life even though they know that they have to cope with the eternal emotional anguish arising from their confrontation with futility and nothingness and they spend ounces of energy responding to the question of whether surviving is possible. Their answer may be 'Yes', but advocating a formula of passionate commitment—the commitment to excessive ambition and highly imaginative temperament. On the way to fulfill their dream and ambition, they realize that in this absurd world there are absolutely no guidelines. The sense of nihilism, though existed in them from the beginning now becomes more powerful and obvious, as they have clearly failed to find out any meaning of life. Moreover, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are confirmed sinners and generally such a sinner's heart does not respond to the truth and realize the meaning of life.

Macbeth's perception of the worldly affairs is too low. So he could not understand the after-effect of bloody execution in civilian life and in military life. Macbeth, first as a soldier General and then as a king, wades through the pool of innocent blood in civilian life and thus enters the world of penitence and despair. Besides, Destiny also plays a role in precipitating their death after the commission of their crime. Lady Macbeth has to die because of her mental derangement that corrodes her human essence whereas Macbeth has to succumb to the mortal wound caused by the sword of Macduff. Like nihilists, they themselves are responsible for proving their life meaningless. One by one the murders are committed and the punishment follows accordingly. In the words of Harrison (1963), 'One by one the prophecies fail Macbeth and we watch him wither before us:

I have liv'd long enough: my way of life
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf,' (Act. v, Sc. iii)

He also adds, 'So everything is futile, the murder of Duncan and all the sea of blood, for life itself is futile. It is the same appalling pessimism as in *Lear*.' (Harrison, 1963) Indeed, this futility in the life of the Macbeth couple is the sheer outcome of nihilistic despair, precipitated by ennui and disillusionment.

The greatest irony is that the Macbeth couple has experienced the truth and its reality. Lady Macbeth dies knowing and experiencing the truth, that is, life is meaningless and full of despair, pessimism and failure and the same vicissitudes of life are also applicable to Macbeth though he dies after his wife's death. Once they abstract this truth from their chaotic world, they cease to live. Like Albert Camus' Mersault in *The Outsider*, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth realize that they are as if outsiders and outsiders ultimately cannot exist. Existential nihilism in the Macbeth couple is the reason for their being such outsiders that cannot accept the sane reality and thus the world cannot accept them in return. They must quit the world that has lost all values, they have to suffer spiritually as they think themselves an isolated couple whose committing of crime does not give the repose for a moment as long as they have lived.

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(Note: All quotations in this article have been taken from the text *Macbeth*, edited by A. R. Braunmuller, Cambridge University Press, Foundation Books, 2004. England).