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A study on moral values as reflected by two main characters in William Shakespeare's Macbeth

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ABSTRACT

This study is concerned to find out the Elizabethan moral values which are described by Shakespeare in his play Macbeth. A deep analysis on the two main characters, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, is done to explore their moral values seen from Christianity and the perspective of moral experts. This study applies approach which take account of three disciplines literature, religion and morality. The literary analysis helps to clarify the good and bad qualities of the two characters. The religious point is applied to explore the influence of Christian moral values, in relation to Elizabethan moral values, from which the Elizabethan people are Christians. Further, morality is used to reveal whether the balance of the two characters id, ego, and super ego also give influence to their downfalls.

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1. Introduction

As a complex creature, humans need moral guidance. They are in the personal processing development with dynamic personality. Their basic behavior, basically, is similar to another and they live side by side in society. Being a social creature, they cannot live alone, so they need others to make their living easier and meaningful. To be social means to live with others and consequently to live with others needs compromise each other since every human being has personal needs that may be different from others. However, for the sake of their own reason, they are more dominant than the other. That case can indicate what kind of behavior

they have. Not all personal behaviors are permissible otherwise they are prohibited. As a matter of fact, the kinds of regulations are needed to reconcile this traffic of personal need in society.

Human beings then civilize themselves by making rules and restrictions that bind an individual within a society. Hopefully, every human being has some sort of goodwill to understand and adhere to the codes of ethics observed by the social group to which s/he belongs. Naturally, man lives in his dualistic nature i.e. to do the right things and the wrong ones. He is in dilemma whether to follow his personal 'wrong' behavior or to obey the 'right' social rules, which ¹³ in the realm of ethics.

In humans, the set of values supplied at birth are extended by experience and upbringing. Scoresby (1998) states that when parents want their children learn the moral lives, then parents should make the ready in many situation and also should act appropriately to children. Teaching moral value might help anyone learn how to adapt the moral behavior in other situations. There are various Medias to teach moral value such as books, TV, internet, films.

By the rapid social progress nowadays and the easiness information to see the whole world, teaching moral value can be obtained through those sophisticated electronic technology. However, books, especially, literary works can still be one of Medias to teach valuable moral lessons through explicit presentation: the genre that has ⁶ as its aim is didactic literature. Thus, the reader can learn from the valuable moral lessons without himself having to undergo in his personal life the same moral conflicts or make the same moral decisions.

The increasing spirit of materialism that tends to decrease the moral values in people's life becomes another consideration of this study. People may disregard the standards of morality – the basis for peaceful coexistence and positive cooperation among members of societies and nations – in achieving luxurious life in society. It seems that to be rich and earn money easily become the only obsession and objective of many people.

In relation to the moral values, one may ask question such as, "how should a man live in society?" or "what kind of actions that refer to the right or wrong?" In addition, referring to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* those questions may be raised towards the behavior of both two main characters, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

Macbeth is an interesting work that portrays moral values. Firstly, we can ³ excerpts from *Macbeth* as case studies for moral dilemma discussions. For instance, what moral decisions would we have to make for or against our own life. Secondly, we can use character studies of the two main characters to help understand moral motivation, for example, to explore Macbeth's moral motivations, to find his ³ reason in choosing the right or the wrong, to analyze his background in making decision. Thirdly, contrast different characters for the moral decisions they made. Also we can compare and contrast characters that choose the right versus characters that choose the wrong. Why do they make the choices? What are their motivations? At last, we can place ourselves in the role of the character and ask in what way it is applicable to us. By having such questions, we can explore the way we would make to decide the most suitable choice.

¹⁰ Pugh (2000) stated that historically, *Macbeth* was written in 1606 and for the first time it was performed at Hampton ⁵ Court for King James I and his brother-in-law, King Christian of Denmark. It seemed that the aspects of the play were intended to please King James I, who was the patron of Shakespeare's theater group at that time. For example, the character of general Banquo, the legendary root of the Stuart family tree, is depicted favorably, perhaps to please the king (a Stuart) and to validate the Stuart family line.

The reason why the researcher has chosen William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as the object of his study is, first, the tragic life of the main characters is outstandingly interwoven into the story because of the impact of their blind ambitions. For example, the character of Macbeth,

created by William Shakespeare, is a very diverse character that changes over the course of the play. At the beginning of the play, Macbeth is a very moral, optimistic, and humane person. He has a good relationship with his wife and a bright outlook on life. As the play progresses, however, Macbeth changed into a very dark and vile individual. Firstly, would be the change in his morality. When the play begins, he wants to do what is right for his country. As the play progressed, the evil inside him destroys his morality and leads him to be the leading force behind a number of murders. His quest for power makes his conscience begin to disappear.

Second, the attitudes of the two main characters, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, in pursuing the ambition to reach their goals presents some questions of self-righteousness attitudes. They also interest the writer's attention for a further investigation. Each of the main character that is involved in the play has their personal character traits that arouse my curiosity as regards their standard of moral values. It seems that the aim of the writer is to give an illustration of combinatory example of "bad" and "good", by which an education of morality can be attained. Apparently in the present day conditions and practices show that people's morality standards tend to become very loose, because of the indifference of the society towards them. Because of this loose adherence to standards, and the application of mild judgment towards aspects of morality, I am interested in searching the moral values in the play.

The last reason for this choice is that William Shakespeare was one of the greatest dramatists of all time in English literature (Cook, et al. 1950) and *Macbeth* is a pure tragedy which ranks with the greatest tragedy of the world, both of ancient and modern times. It has common characteristics, on the basis of which we can form an idea of the dramatist's tragic vision, and of his view of the human predicament. In addition, the conflict of good and evil that becomes the central theme of Shakespearean tragedy appeals curiosity and challenges his capacity as a researcher.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

The design of the research is descriptive and qualitative in nature as the basis of collecting and analyzing data. The object of the study is William Shakespeare's play entitle *Macbeth*. The play is rich with descriptions of the moral values in the characters' behaviors, actions, and dialogues. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) state the characteristics of qualitative research are descriptive in nature, concerned with the process rather than merely with the outcomes or product, and inductive nature of data analysis. In this research, meaningfulness is essential, but natural setting and events are not ignored in the analysis process.

2.2 Research Approach

This study employs the psychological approach of a descriptive nature with the purpose of obtaining a clearer picture of the attitudes and personalities of the characters while they are interacting, facing and solving their problems. Through this approach the researcher is able to describe how the personalities of each character are. The psychoanalytical theories are used in this approach and additional scenes, events and evidence are sought for convincing judgment. Besides, the researcher also uses the normative approach, because it can be applied to find the moral values in *Macbeth* for it is known that the characteristics of values are normative, binding and contain the aspect of oughtness.

In addition, the humanistic approach is also applied to this study. The reason is that by applying this approach, the researcher can understand the expansion of the characters' consciousness within their environment and their subjective experience. This approach is based on how individuals in general, and the characters in particular can make sense of the world and

themselves.

Finally, the researcher applies the religious approach. It cannot be avoided that in studying the moral values of the characters, the religious aspects must be involved in the analysis in order to get the clues in overcoming their problems.

3. Results and discussion

The researcher tries to get the standards of moral values during the Elizabethan era from the two main characters of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, namely, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. By analyzing both characters' behavioral patterns in facing and solving their problems, how they behave in relation to the witches' prophecies as well as how they manage their ambitions in the case of achieving the throne, the researcher hopes that he can draw an appropriate portrayal of both their moral values.

The analysis on Macbeth and lady Macbeth's Elizabethan moral values

1) Natural Order

The setting of this play is during a period when people held these beliefs and where they were afraid of interfering with the natural balance of life according to the Christian values of the time. Scientific theories developed during this time began to erode these beliefs. Theories such as those of Copernicus revealed to the Christian world that the earth was not the center of the universe. Many discoveries and scientific theories had begun to turn the values of the western world upside down. Despite the changes, these long held views existed during Elizabethan times are important to the events of *Macbeth*.

The medieval and renaissance view of the world saw a relationship between order on earth, the so-called microcosm, and order on the larger scale of the universe, or macrocosm. *Macbeth* is set in a society in which the notion of honor to one's word and loyalty to one's superiors is absolute. At the top of this hierarchy is the king, God's representative on earth. Other relationships also depend on loyalty: comradeship in warfare, hospitality of host towards guest, and the loyalty between husband and wife. In this play, all these basic societal relationships are perverted or broken. Lady Macbeth's domination over her husband, Macbeth's treacherous act of regicide, and his destruction of comradeship and family bonds, all go against the natural order of things.

2) Lady Macbeth's domination

The other main character of the play, Lady Macbeth, showed the first time at Act 1, Scene 5. At first impressions, audience might see her as a positive character, but then slowly turn become increasingly negative as the play develops. In great contrast, the very first impressions we gain of Lady Macbeth are of an evil, scheming and ambitious character. She has conducted bad moral values, such as her act in asking for supernatural help, which links her to the witches at the beginning of the play. This is because as a wife, she has to do something good for her husband, her idea is going to influence Macbeth into making sure he becomes King. She wishes to lose her femininity and become more masculine, and to exonerate her conscience of any evils she may commit.

Further, from the Elizabethan moral point of view, Lady Macbeth is very dramatic and violent. Her appeal to the spirits is of great compassion and sincerity; she immediately

appears very cold, hard and malicious. Moral values is inseparable from the ethical problems. As a matter of fact, there are two main aspects related to the ethical problems, namely, the ultimate values and character education. Thus, from the ultimate value, someone will be able to determine which action is right otherwise which is wrong (Denver: 1984). Lady macbeth is fully covered with her ambition and domination. She does no care about her bad action.

3) Macbeth's Treacherous

Macbeth was originally an innocent character. He would not even think of becoming king if the Weird Sisters did not come to him. It was hard for him to believe that he was Thane of Cawdor, and they said he is going to become king. Macbeth was an innocent character, but he was deceived by the Weird Sisters whom made him a murderer.

4) Macbeth's Destruction of Friend and Family Bonds

During the William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* work, many characters evolve and many disappear into the background. Macbeth, the main character, travels through a great chaos when he declares himself as a king. Then, he meets the witches of the supernatural, they tell him the future. One of the themes enlarged throughout the play is the circle of life, from the beginning to the end. The visions provided by the three witches begin Macbeth's quest to dominate. The three main effects of this theme are: the death of Macbeth's friends and family, the deaths of his nemesis, and the death of Macbeth himself.

5) The Death of Macbeth's Friends and Family

Macbeth's moral values are shown in the use of the supernatural which leads him to murder his friends and family, even the death of his wife. This is strengthens the cycle of life or the beginning of the end. Throughout every encounter which Macbeth has with a supernatural prediction, he continue one more step towards madness, and eventually his own death. The death of Lady Macbeth, Macbeth's closest companion, also brings him one more step closer to his own death. In *Macbeth*, a pattern resides, where one death after another caused by the supernatural brings him closer to madness and to his own death. In some spots, it looks like *Macbeth* needs to be told to put one foot in front of another. This tragic tale of one man's cycle of life lead by the supernatural, also paints a vision of the beginning of his plunge into insanity. Macbeth's first encounter with the three witches is truly the beginning of the end.

4. Conclusion and suggestions

Having conducting a thorough study the researcher is able to come at the following conclusions that the witches in *Macbeth* seem to be the antithesis of God's divine order which reflects the breakage of the natural order. The basic societal relationships, such as, hospitality of host towards guest, and the loyalty between husband and wife are perverted or broken. The domination of a wife over her husband, the treacherous act of regicide, and the destruction of relationship show the acts against the natural order.

In comparison to the fall of Adam, the fall of Macbeth lies on his idolatry of another god, his greed, and murder. He has two sides of temptation, from the witches and his wife. Before his fall, Macbeth is a tabularized creation just like Adam. But after the two side-temptations both come to their falls.

Adam was persuaded by Eve, whereas Eve was persuaded by the serpent. Shakespeare develops this idea by changing a little. However, it has the same objective, that is the fall of Macbeth. The serpent is represented by the witches who directly give temptation to Macbeth; while Eve is represented by his wife.

Lady Macbeth, a parallel of Eve, tempts her husband which leads to his fall. She chastises him for behaving like a coward and being less than a man to seize the crown to get the king's power. Eve, on the other hand, persuades Adam to seek knowledge and be wise to obtain God's power. It tells us that the devil which controls a wife like Eve or Lady Macbeth is more dangerous because she is the rib, the closest creator to her husband. When the devil controls her, her ego will be more dominant than her id and superego which can destroy her husband's ego that means destroy her husband's power spiritually and physically. The result in *Macbeth* is not the same as Adam. Although God expels him from Paradise, God gives him a chance to get his forgiveness. While Macbeth and Lady Macbeth commit suicide that means they do not have the chance to get God's forgiveness. Committing suicide is another form of trespassing the 6th Ten Commandment.

Some suggestions are presented here to be considered for further investigations of the play since it is very good as a source for a critical study. First, the play is very subtle in language used so that it can offer a deep linguistic analysis for those keen on the study of language. Second, the aspect of morality is richly employed by the author in the several cases represented by the characters' ambition and devotion to the witches. Third, the function of religion is very essential in human life, so that the religious teaching should be taken in a serious consideration. The last, people should take various factors in passing on the judgments in order to achieve fairness to everyone.

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