

How is Macbeth Established as a Tragic Hero in Act 1

A tragic hero is most often defined as a character (usually the protagonist) who has a fatal flaw or hamartia that leads to their downfall. This typically follows a dramatic portrayal of peripeteia, while the character exhibits many redeeming qualities thus eliciting the audience's sympathy.

When in act i.ii Macbeth is introduced, he is arguably portrayed in a majorly positive light demonstrating those absolving traits found in tragic heroes. He is depicted as 'valour's minion' via a semantic field of his exceptional bravery with epithets such as 'valiant', 'noble' and 'brave'. A Shakespearean audience in particular would have admired Macbeth's prowess on the battlefield as members of a martial society, violence in the context of battle was simply reflective of his masculinity and patriotism – quintessential characteristics revered at the time.

Moreover, Macbeth in his first soliloquy deliberates fairly extensively on the morass that is the murder of his king, his state of mind appears fractured as the text is littered with punctuation and indecisiveness and this culminates in a decision not to act at all, 'if chance will have [him] king' it will happen 'without [his] stir'. Macbeth is described myriad times as being 'rapt' with the idea of the witches and their prophecies, this may signify less that he is enraptured and more the he is literally spell-bound and in a state of impuissant hypnosis. This adjective is also reminiscent of its homophonous twin, wrapped, reinforcing the idea of his powerlessness in being bound by the witches' words. In act i.vii, Macbeth soliloquises again, this time it is a controlled and coherent passage - shown through the frequent use of conjunctions - where he reflects on the moral higher ground, and the wrongness of 'it' – his euphemising of Duncan's murder highlights his desire to distance himself from what he understands is immoral. Stage directions then indicate Lady Macbeth's untimely entrance which seems to interrupt the finality of Macbeth's decision to call off Duncan's murder, the audience can hand over culpability to Macbeth's Machiavellian wife who manipulates the unwilling man into committing the malevolent act even after he has firmly stated using an imperative that '[they] will proceed no further in this business'. This is affirmed by the idea that Lady Macbeth has to rid herself of 'him' to compensate for her husband's innate goodness and that she wants to 'pour [her] spirits into [his] ear'. The word spirits means determination here, but may also link to alcohol, that she is dulling his senses to allow her to control him. Spirits also connotes to the supernatural which further solidifies Lady Macbeth due to her links to this realm, and finally draws parallel between the poisoning in Hamlet – Macbeth is unwittingly corrupted.

However, of course to be a truly tragic hero not only are redeeming qualities and tragic demises required but also the fatal flaw that 'spur[s]' this chaos. In Macbeth's case this is his 'vaulting ambition' which stimulates his initial curiosity in the witches' prophecies and later that he is able to murder Duncan at all. His ambition is his own self-destructive weedkiller, leaving him to grow so fast and uncontrollably that he meets his death.

This line of reasoning may become problematic for a number of reasons. To a modern audience Macbeth's battlefield behaviour exhibits his remorseless and excessive violence and this is not something considered praiseworthy in any sense. That leaves only the idea that he lost his volition in encountering the witches and that murdering Duncan was simply the result of exonerating influences to redeem him and evoke the sympathy of a contemporary audience. Either the onset of madness (and hallucinations), his wife's cajoling and coercing, or being spellbound by some supernatural force must have forced Macbeth to act evilly. This creates another issue, namely the fact Macbeth must bear responsibility for his own downfall to be a tragic hero, he must have free will. Then if he does bear culpability, he is arguably devoid of any convincing positive traits and could be only (for a modern audience) a villain whose gruesome death, which is foreshadowed in act i.ii when he beheads another on the battlefield, was fitting.