

A Psychological Interpretation of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

¹**P. K. Durgadevi**

Assistant Professor of English, Cauvery College for Women (Autonomous)
Tiruchirappalli & Part-time Ph.D Research Scholar in English, Govt. Arts College,
Tiruchirappalli – 22. (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli.)

²**Dr. N. S. Vijayalakshmi**

Associate Professor of English & Research Advisor Department of English, Govt. Arts
College, Tiruchirappalli – 22. (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli.)

Article Received: 03/12/2025

Article Accepted: 04/01/2026

Published Online: 05/01/2026

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.8.01.34

Abstract

Macbeth is one of the most famous tragedies of Shakespeare. It has a plot within the plot. On the surface, it presents itself as a story of a king and his family, but a deeper analysis reveals a rich array exploring themes of power and avarice. Shakespeare masterfully intertwines these themes of authority and psychological greed within a complex plot structure. Each re-examination of the plot unveils a veritable 'mine of information,' offering new insights and perspectives. The depth and richness found in *Macbeth*, especially when critically analyzed, emphasize its enduring relevance to contemporary issues. It also shows how its exploration of power and human psychology remains powerful and applicable even in modern times.

Keywords: Anima, Animus, Collective Unconscious, Psychology

Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a masterpiece that transcends the boundaries of its Elizabethan context, remaining relevant in its exploration of human psychology. At the outset, the play appears as a straightforward narrative chronicling the rise and fall of a Scottish King and his family. However, a more profound exploration of the text reveals a layered and intricate story, rich in thematic content. This play is not merely a tale of regal ambition and downfall; but a complex exploration of the themes of power and avarice. Shakespeare's genius lies in his ability to intertwine these themes of authority and psychological greed within a dynamic plot structure. *Macbeth* is a play within a play, in which each layer unfolds to reveal deeper meanings and insights. The intricate narrative offers endless opportunities for re-examination and discovery. Each reading unveils new aspects and interpretations, highlighting the play's richness and depth. The relevance of

Macbeth in contemporary discourse cannot be overstated. Its exploration of power dynamics and the psychological complexities of greed and ambition resonate profoundly in today's world. The play serves as a powerful mirror which reflects eternal human struggles and moral dilemmas, making it as relevant now as it was in Shakespeare's time.

Theoretical Background & Discussion

Though *Macbeth* is a play that has been categorized under major tragedy, it has been amalgamated with history of power and the power of history. Shakespeare has historicized his brainchild of thoughts with creativity but Stephen Greenblatt has historicized with his critical reading of Renaissance literature. The term 'Renaissance' itself brings a fresh dimension to this analysis, prompting a need to intertwine new historicist perspectives. This approach raises intriguing questions about the interplay of history and tragedy within *Macbeth*. If one accepts the premise that *Macbeth* is not just a tragedy but also a historical commentary, then it challenges the notion of Greenblatt's interpretations, assuming he were not contemporary.

This research adopts a rigorous methodology in critically analyzing Shakespeare, blending philosophical and moral scrutiny. These traditionally distinct angles are treated as interconnected in this study. The method employed diverges from traditional philosophical and moral critiques, which often aim to uphold cultural moral standards. Instead, it uses postmodern techniques to critique the tragic elements in *Macbeth*, viewing the play not as a simple tragedy, but as a complex, multifaceted work.

In this context, the opening scene of *Macbeth* transcends its superficial depiction of the witches and their prophecies. It is not merely about the foretelling of Macbeth's rise to power in Scotland. Rather, it serves as a gateway into the darker aspects of the narrative, particularly focusing on Lady Macbeth's character and her influential role. This perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the play, examining it not just as a story of ambition and downfall, but as a rich web interwoven with historical and psychological complexities.

Lady Macbeth exhibits qualities typically associated with masculinity. On the other hand, Macbeth, though a warrior, displays traits often linked to femininity. This interchange aligns with Carl Gustav Jung's concepts of 'anima' and 'animus', which suggest that both men and women possess both masculine and feminine psychological qualities. Shakespeare's portrayal goes beyond mere character study. It explores into the deeper psychology of human beings. It is true that both men and women experience significant hormonal changes as they age, particularly around the age of 40. Women, in particular, may face challenges like sleeplessness and fatigue due to these changes. These aspects of human physiology are delicately reflected in Lady Macbeth's character. Her intense ambition and subsequent psychological struggles, including sleep disturbances, mirror the turmoil that can accompany such hormonal shifts. The dynamic between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth captures these

psychological complexities. Lady Macbeth, driven by her own ambition and strength, urges Macbeth to assassinate King Duncan, despite his apparent reluctance.

It is a misconception to view Macbeth solely as the real plot constructor and murderer. A significant influence in his actions is Lady Macbeth, who persistently spurs him into murdering King Duncan, despite his initial reluctance. This view suggests that factors like 'anima' and 'animus' and hormonal changes are the major cause for the tragedy. Traditional interpretations have often attributed Macbeth's downfall to his excessive ambition, viewing it as the central tragic flaw. However, this perspective only considers certain key aspects of the play, overlooking other potentially influential elements. This research proposes a reevaluation of what constitutes a 'tragic flaw' in the play. The downfall of a character like Macbeth cannot be attributed to a single cause; instead, it is the result of a complex interplay of various factors. Often, what are perceived as minor causes might, in reality, be the major driving forces behind the actions of the characters.

Macbeth is the play fully based on power-reaping and fear. In this play, phobia leads to another phobia in unconscious mind of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Rather than fear, phobia is a technical term in psychology because it leads to many more phobic-generation in a person's mind. Likewise, in this play Lady Macbeth develops more phobic condition to have this play as a tragedy.

In the *Bible*, the chapter Revelation reveals that the lighting and thunder are the symbolic reference on the Day of Judgement. *Macbeth* begins with thunder and lightning as the three witches enter. Shakespeare wants to disseminate the biblical reference in the play at the beginning of the play. This particular line says clearly that Christianity is propagated through play. Shakespeare remembers Christianity in the beginning as a god's blessing and the scenario in the day of the judgement. Thunder and lightning are the powerful symbol of destruction along with three witches. From this point of view the researcher has taken a clue from the line 'Thunder and lightning'. Enter three witches, 'the destruction and the judgement from the perspective of Christianity. Therefore, this line is not applicable to all nations' dogmas. This line tends to make interpretation-generation.

Macbeth's tragedy is based on the flaw of "Over ambition". But "Over ambition" is also triggered from 'phobia' cum 'Anxiety'. Bertrand Russell, a philosopher, generally has divided 'fear' into two: (a) Rational fear (b) Irrational fear. The former deals with the fear that is full of conscious commitment. The rational fear develops the mind if a person to think of the cause of the fear constantly. In terms with the constancy thinking of the cause of the fear in mind, develops psychological disturbances, which might lead to 'anxiety'.

This type of 'rational fear' is a dangerous one among all human beings. The later explains that the life span of irrational fear is very short. The mind does not think the cause

of the fear constantly. It is a changeable and it is not a dangerous one. Fear is common to all. Some people far even to petty things. Fear is a controlled emotion. Lack of emotional intelligence tends to take immediate decision or act of unforeseen consequences. The rational fear might evidence much of emotion.

In Shakespearean tragedies, words have certain power to impose upon reader. Words are uttered by mind pattern, which is influenced by environment. These elements are found in the narratology. This paper aims at culling out the ‘phobia’ which dominates the mind of Macbeth to travel on to the destination destruction in terms with psychology. In order to explain the phobic – state of Macbeth, this paper details out and incorporates with words, emotion, and environment through narrative fixation.

As Ben Jonson says “Shakespeare is not of an age but man for all ages”. Literally applying the same in Macbeth, Macbeth’s phobic – psyche is not of him, but of all in twenty first century. In *Macbeth* there are major selective characters like Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Duncan Three Witches, Macduff. Among these major characters Lady Macbeth is instrumental in steering out the entire play into a great tragedy. In common, the triggering point for the tragedy is ‘Over Ambition’: burning with desire to become a king.

One should comprehend that Macbeth has never got the desire of becoming a King, before the announcement of The Thane of Cowder by the second witch. From this point of view one can argue that Macbeth is an innocent and has no burning desire to become a king. The three Witches have induced an instigated the ambition of Macbeth in becoming a king. Lady Macbeth, Wife of Macbeth, is also burning with a desire for her husband to become a king. On being instigated and led to the prey of then plotting of three witches and the desire of the Lady Macbeth, Macbeth kills Duncan, King of Scotland.

In this play fear or phobia is invariably accepted. Fear can be divided into two in common – rational and irrational fear. Bertrand Russell in his *Unpopular Essays* says “Fear is the main source of superstition, and one of the main sources of cruelty. To conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom”. Russell differentiates fear as rational fear and irrational fear.

a) Rational Fear means that there is a logical connection prevalent. The person might know the sequence of the cause of fear.

b) Irrational fear: Irrational fear means that it is a just fear no more consequences physically prevalent. In *Macbeth* rational fear is dominating both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Therefore, it leads to destruction. Shakespeare purposefully has used the allusion of a serpent in in Macbeth especially in the act 1. Through Macbeth, Shakespeare wants to disseminate Christianity across the globe. The underlying meaning of using serpent as an allusion restores Christianity.

Lady Macbeth says:

O! never

Shall sun that marrow see!

Your face, my Thane, is as a book, where men

May read strange matters. *To beguile the time*

Look like the time!

Bear welcome in your eye,

Your hand, your tongue; look like th'innocent flower,

But be the serpent under't. He that's coming

Must be *provided for*, and you shall put

This night's great business into your *dispatch*;

Which shall to all our nights and days to come

Give *solely sovereign sway and masterdom* (I, v, 60- 69)

In the *Bible*, serpent deceives Adam and Eve, likewise, in Macbeth allusion of serpent is also critically employed by Shakespeare. In Bible serpent speaks through Eve. It is a female gender. In the Bible, female is portrayed as a bad - instigator. In *Macbeth* also Lady Macbeth speaks of serpent. Again, it shows that androcentrism is also executed in Macbeth. The creature's name "serpent" is pronounced by Lady Macbeth not by Macbeth. It shows that androcentrism is also prevalent in the play *Macbeth*. In this way Lady Macbeth instigates Macbeth to kill Duncan, who is really innocent.

Macbeth is entangled with full of fear and optical illusionary. This particular concept is clearly shown in *Macbeth* as follows:

Mine eyes are made the fools o' th' other senses,

Or else worth all the rest: I see thee still;

And on the blade, and *dudgeon*, *gouts* of blood,

Which was not so before. - there's no such thing.

It is the bloody business which *informs*

Thus to mine eyes. -now o'er one *half- world*

Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse

The curtain'd , *sleep*: witchcraft celebrates

Pale *Hecate's off rings*; and wither'd Murther,

(II, i, 44- 52)

The above quoted lines show that Macbeth's mind is fully occupied with murdering Duncan, the king of Scotland. This is the psyche of Macbeth. Before his eyes a dagger appears vehemently. He wants to hold the dagger but he could not. He wants to touch it but he could not. In this passage, the head of witches, Hecate is celebrating the act which is going to be done by Macbeth. Psychological referring to this is Macbeth between reality and illusionary.

Totally he is completed with illusionary because of the fear which he has before he kills Duncan, the king of Scotland. Macbeth feels that he has a dagger in his hand but he has not. He is in dilemma. He is going to do the act because of the urgency by his wife Lady Macbeth. Shakespeare has adapted the technique called ambivalence. In psychology, ambivalence is a term which refers to a man who has positive and negative qualities. Macbeth has got between illusionary act and reality before he kills. It shows that his mind is totally disturbed. The rational fear is a found in the speech of Macbeth.

Macbeth is suffering from the rational fear because he knows the consequences of a killing. The above passage shows that he is in the state of anxiety. Macbeth is in a state of total and complete fear. Moreover, he is in a state of hallucination. Hallucination is a psychic illness.

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare wants to maintain the major concept of horror, fear and anxiety by using thunder image. In this drama from the beginning itself one can understand the image of a thunder is used as an image of anxiety and fear.

Macbeth himself feels why should he be afraid of a Macduff? Moreover, he thinks that if he kills Macduff there is no more thought of being afraid of Macduff. It also shows that Macbeth is completely afraid of human being. In this sense Duncan, the king of Scotland, has the inborn courage to kill others. Macbeth also says that if he plays Macduff on his own, he can get rid of the fear within him. On his own courage he can act as a murderer. Apparition is for creating bad omen or destruction, whereas tree is meant for life and creation. Tree and apparition are compared together in a paradoxical manner by Shakespeare. In this particular analysis one can understand that anthropocentric language is widely used by Shakespeare. Macbeth wants to sleep peacefully but it never takes place both to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Before the play ends, Macbeth suffers of sleep disorder so that he says he wants to sleep peacefully. The sleeplessness is because of the rational fear.

Conclusion

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare has critically used the psychic of both male and female through the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. And, their psychic is analyzed. Some symbols are also used as a psychological reference in the drama. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are the victims of power psychology. Duncan, the King of Scotland enjoys the ruling power. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are also interested in the stream of enjoying power. The prophecy of three witches – Macbeth being a ruler in the future – stirs up the desire of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth later. Therefore, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have the unconscious mind. That sort of psychology is also referred to in *Macbeth*.

Carl Gustav Jung is a disciple of Sigmund Freud. He has founded a school of analytical psychology. He has given two influential and archetypal referential concepts: Anima and Animus. The two psychological concepts are found in the unconscious mind of

a person. *Anima* is defined as the unconscious feminine character or quality in a male. *Animus* is defined as the unconscious masculine character or quality in a female.

Macbeth has the feminine quality before he murders Duncan, the king of Scotland. He was nervous about the act. According to Jung, Macbeth has the unconscious mind of *Anima*. The same way Lady Macbeth has the unconscious mind of *Animus*. She thrived Macbeth to kill Duncan. Moreover, she said 'unsex me' to do the act of committing murder. And, she was also willing to murder, if Macbeth fails to do so.

References

- Greenblatt, Stephen. Shakespeare's Freedom. London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Jung, C.G. The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Russell, Bertrand. Unpopular Essays. London: Routledge, 1950.
- Shakespeare, William. Macbeth. London: Penguin Classics, 1972.