



The Trajectory of Transitions: Analysis of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

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Abstract

William Shakespeare has developed the plot of his play *Macbeth* through the effective use of transitions to the major characters. Among them, the character that is most prone to regular transitions in life is the central character of Macbeth. This research paper explores the trajectory of transitions through which Shakespeare develops the plot of his play through the character of Macbeth concerning his changing situations and positions. While analysing the play with the help of Schlossberg's Transition theory, specifically through the concept of 4S's, the perspicacity of Macbeth's trajectory of different transitions in the pattern of one after the other is visible throughout the play. With the help of textual and interpretative analysis of the play, the situation, psychological aspects, support and strategies to cope with the transition in Macbeth are explored in the research. Through the perspective of transition, the readers can understand how Macbeth gets shifted from one state of mind to the other in which he tried to situate himself to his best. The insights of this research open scope to further analysis of Shakespeare's other plays that deal with the same.

Keywords

Elizabethan literature, Macbeth, Shakespeare, Schlossberg, transition theory

Introduction

William Shakespeare's greatness and excellence as a dramatist has been discussed for centuries with debates over ambiguous and unambiguous identity behind certain plays by him. The greatness of the Elizabethan playwright can be identified from two perspectives provided by critics as "all came from within" and "all came from without". Even though there are ongoing debates over his educational qualifications and literacy, there would be no objection to the viewpoint that he studied the crowds, reflected their thoughts and feelings in his plays and provided what they wanted from him. He depicted characters both from historical and imaginary perspectives that opened scope for a progressive life in all his characters. Though differed in the aspects of gender, age, quality of life, virtues and vices, and exuberance, his character was alive to capture the interest and excitement of the Elizabethan audience and continues to inspire even after four hundred years of a great legacy. There have been several translations and adaptations of Shakespeare's works to various languages all around the world which alone depicts the legacy of the author. If there is even more research that is being continuously conducted in the twenty-first century – a period where there exist many other writers – on the works of Shakespeare, also about his personal, social and literary sketch, the influence of the contributions that the author had provided to the world has to be considered enormous. The critical appreciations, reviews, essays, research articles and even the adaption into newer forms of works by different authors, poets and playwrights throw light onto how different perspectives are flexible to include the four-century-old thoughts of Shakespeare. When there are unfortunate situations where the immediate writers are backlogged after the celebration of their works for a maximum of a year, the unending legacy of Shakespeare in every culture and language has a contribution of the magical power of writing that he possessed with him. "The discrepancies between the conventional view that William from Stratford wrote the works ascribed to Shakespeare and extant documentary evidence has led to the Shakespeare authorship debate" (Leigh et. al. 2). Though there are many other controversial discussions on the authenticity of many works of Shakespeare, the majority among his readers from different generations wish to believe it as his own.

Like most of the texts that influence the reader while reading and continue to maintain the same effect after the process of reading, the plays and poems written by Shakespeare have a definite influence on readers as the reading would lead to transitions and transformations. This particular aspect of creative works is most appreciated by critics as it conducts the primary role of a text in the reader. If a text makes one laugh, happy, sad, or even cry – sometimes positive or negative results – it is also the effect of the influence that the text has on its readers. From analysing Shakespearian works through such a perspective, every word has been revisited due to its brilliance and also is still being repeatedly interpreted connecting to various contexts which even are completely distinct from what Shakespeare had intended while writing the pieces of work.

This research paper would discuss the trajectory of transitions in the character of Macbeth that takes him from one state of mind or position to the other. "Transitions are embedded in trajectories, giving shape and meaning to the trajectory as a whole" (Taylor

733). The research argues that the character of Macbeth in the play helps the plot to progress with the help of transitions that occur to him and his situations in the pattern of one after the other. To analyse the play's significance of transition, along with textual and interpretative analysis as methodologies, the insights from Schlossberg's transition theory is also utilised. It helps in identifying the nature of the transition that happens to Macbeth during specific situations in the play that makes a progressive shift in both the character as well as the plot of the entire play. Schlossberg's four S's are considered to breakdown the situations of transition to identify the triggering factor of the situation, timing, the nature of role change, duration of the transition, stress involved, the character's behaviour, psychological resources, social support and coping strategies to the modified situation.

Literature Review: A Background Study

Having been originally performed in 1606, the play has been continuously discussed by critics and scholars of many generations for its different aspects and perspectives. Adaptations and interpretations of the play have been conducted in various parts of the world in different languages and cultures providing less scope for a new interpretation of the same. Ribner (1959) writes about the pattern of idea and action used by Shakespeare in his *Macbeth*. He explains the operation of evil in defining its nature, in the seduction of man and planes of the creation concerning man's sinful moral choice. He points to the use of Macbeth's character as a representation of the perspective of Shakespeare's view of evil operation in the world. The pattern is described as accepting of the evil in the first act, committing the deed in the second and rising higher in power and into the depths of the evil in the final three acts. French (1985) highlights each step of Macbeth's deterioration and descent through the process of temptation to tyranny to meaninglessness (192). Through the process of explaining the steps of change, the researcher explains the image of Macbeth and the structure of the play. Stirling (1953) discusses the art of unifying poetics of setting and mood that is linked with dramatic motivation and structure in *Macbeth*. He points out four themes in the play that unites to define the character of Macbeth i.e. darkness, sleep, raptness, and contradiction. The essay combines the aspects of these four themes to express how they are amplified, varied at the different parts of the play to get unified to an end (385). Cusimano (2015) explores the play from the point of view of religious overtones. The involvement of Macbeth with sin and his offering to the situations that ruled him is described by the researcher to comment that Shakespeare used it to warn his audience about the dangers of temptation and sin. Battye (2019) focuses on the philosophical idea of existential nihilism in the character of Macbeth leading to the thought that life is without objective meaning, purpose or intrinsic value. She finds that ignorance and narcissism in the character inevitably lead to nihilism in the play. Booth (1951) states the tragic error in the character of Macbeth in three phases. The first one is that he does not understand the forces working upon him to make him that make him commit his actions, the second one that he is unambiguous of the bloody execution in civilian life and his past military life and the third one that he does not have a clear idea of his character that is controlled by the evil thoughts around him (25). Through these explanations, the essayist plots the mistakes of

Macbeth that he continuously did throughout the play. The above are a few among the vast number of researches attempted on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. From the analysis of the literature review, it is evident that there has been no previous research conducted on the transitional trajectory of Shakespeare's protagonist character in *Macbeth*. Therefore, this research opens a new perspective on the analysis of *Macbeth*.

Discovering Macbeth's Transition Phases

The process of transition has to be understood through its definition to find the transition points in the character of Macbeth that influenced the play to progress in its plot and structure. It is defined as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Schlossberg et. al. 27) where the character in transition integrates changes into its changed situations. In the simplest sense, it is defined as the process or a period of changing from one form or type to another or the process by which the same happens ("Transition", *Cambridge Dictionary*). In the play *Macbeth*, the protagonist character undergoes several transitions in its state of mind. The first major transition in Macbeth is the change in his role from the Thane of Glamis to the title of the Thane of Cawdor for his prestigious victory in the battle against the Irish invaders. The information is received from the three witches before he comes to know from the right sources. The war, his victory over the Irish and the meeting with the witches can be regarded as the triggering factor in the first transition that is temporary for Macbeth. The analysis of the situation with the help of the four S's introduced by Schlossberg informs about the change in his behaviour as he was excited and interested in hearing further explanations. He was more anxious about the prophecy when he heard that he would kill the King one day. In his state of mind, he was uncertain and anxious about the unusual changes around him, especially about the meeting with the three witches. Banquo was the only person who was near him who witnessed these events. The meeting with the three witches and the change in the role was unexpected and thus can be identified as an unanticipated event. According to Schlossberg, anticipated transitions are expected or happen according to pre-planning such as marriage, the birth of a child, retiring etc. But, unanticipated events are non-scheduled events that are non-predictable (Goodman et. al 34).

Counter to the two types of transitions, there is the third one which is known as a non-event. It refers to the events that did not happen even though they were expected to happen (35). In *Macbeth*, there are only chances for the first two types of events to occur. Further, the support for Macbeth was provided by Lady Macbeth who forced him to make the prophecy true by killing King Duncan. This act by Lady Macbeth leads Macbeth to the second transition in the play. Macbeth had tried to cope with the sudden changes that happened to his position which was a reward from King Duncan. But, he was forced by the external pressure from Lady Macbeth who overrides her husband's objections and persuades him to commit the action that leads to a change in the role of Macbeth from the title of Thane of Cawdor to the King of Scotland. More than that of Macbeth, it was Lady Macbeth who wanted him to be the king which would also bring her a change in her current status. The uncertainty and anxiety that is expressed by Macbeth while he goes to kill King Duncan describe the less desire for Macbeth to change from his current role and

position, unlike Lady Macbeth. The struggle of Macbeth in killing King Duncan and to move further into the second major transition in his life is expressed by Shakespeare through the soliloquy below,

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly. If th' assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. (Shakespeare et. al., *Macbeth* 1.7. 475-480)

The 'Moving Through' Instability

It is during and after this transition phase of Macbeth that he faces continuous hallucinations. The killing of King Duncan and the chamberlains drives him to the fulfillment of the prophecy of the three witches. There is a role change from Thane of Cawdor to the King of Scotland and a drastic shift in the attitude of Macbeth who was drenched in the evils of killing whoever comes against his way. Though he was cruel in his deeds at this state of transition, he had "a clear indication of the conflict between good and evil that wages war in his soul" (Cusimano 4). The transition of Macbeth from a loyal military person to a cunning and crooked murderer of King Duncan, Banquo and the family of Macduff was quick and unexpected from Macbeth. Though he had done the killings, the inspiration was provided by the three witches through their prophecy and also by Lady Macbeth who forced him to achieve his goal. In the second phase of transition, the absurd behaviour of Macbeth when he sees the ghost of Banquo is often interpreted as the disturbance of his state of mind out of his guilt for doing evil actions to sustain his position and power. "Transitions often involve significant life events that require coping with what is perceived to be a crisis situation" (Goodman et.al 23). Through the perspective of Schlossberg's transition, the unhealthy behaviour of Macbeth can be identified as his coping strategy with the sudden changes in the situations. He who had been noble in his deeds was forced by external participants to transit into a new character that was not familiar to him. The guilt and unusual behaviour of Macbeth is a reflection of his fear about losing the position that he achieved through many sinful deeds. He was doubtful about the duration of his Kingship due to his fear about the return of Fleance and Macduff. Macbeth realises that he will have to suffer for the deeds that he had done for the transition that he has attained. The psychological state of mind of Macbeth is revealed when he says,

It will have blood, they say. Blood will have blood.
Stones have been known to move, and trees to speak.
Augurs and understood relations have
By maggot pies and choughs and rooks brought forth
The secret'st man of blood. (Shakespeare et. al., *Macbeth* 3.4. 1425-1429)

Coping Strategies: The Cruel Deeds of Macbeth

According to Schlossberg, “everyone uses coping strategies, everyone has some kind of support system, everyone has a personal way of being in the world, and everyone has a unique situation” (Goodman et. al. 60). In the case of the character of Macbeth, he uses evil deeds, violence and murder as his coping strategy to maintain the power and position that he attained through a cunning act of transition. The third major transition attempt in the play happens in the form of an anticipated event. Macbeth, when he was at the peak of his uncertainty and anxiousness, meets the three witches again where they informed him about his death. He is given exceptions through which he can escape the movement of Macduff and Malcolm. They say that he cannot be defeated until Birnam Wood moves and he cannot be killed except by a man not born of a woman. Though this makes him confident about his victory, the unexpected meanings of the prophecy didn’t help him to maintain his transition. Macbeth loses his support from his wife as she becomes mad and suicides. He becomes pessimistic and feels despair in his actions and existence in his current state of transition. The soliloquy by Macbeth informs the reader about his state of mind that is prepared to face the upcoming transition in his life that would not, to his belief, change his position and status as the King of Scotland. He says,

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
 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. 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. (Shakespeare et. al., *Macbeth* 5.5. 2376-2385)

He had to fight with Macduff during the third phase of transition that defeated Macbeth by beheading him. Though there had been no transition for Macbeth in the third stage, he had to move out from the previous position. Malcolm becomes the new King of Scotland. There is a role change for Macbeth, from being the King of Scotland to nothing as he didn’t exist anymore. During the peak point of the direct fight, when Macduff informs Macbeth that he was untimely ripped from his mother’s womb, the courage that Macbeth had gathered from the belief in the prophecies were lost. This became the key to the defeat of Macbeth. He would have experienced a sense of loss, disbelief, sense of betrayal, confusion, anger and resolution during the moving out process (Goodman et. al. 169) from his previous position as the King of Scotland.

Though there had been prophecies that lead Macbeth to pursue his destiny of becoming the King of Scotland and maintaining the position at any cost, Macbeth’s life became in-between the expectations that he had during the course of time of his brutal deeds and also the reality that he had to encounter towards the last leading him to his death. The threshold state of Macbeth in being in-between the expectation and reality (Mathew and Pandya 151) takes to the conclusion that the transition that has happened to

Macbeth is an overall difference between the two points – expectation and reality. While referring to the initial phase of Macbeth’s character, a reader cannot find the gap between expectation and reality as he was not into such thoughts of transiting from the current status to the position of a King. The expectations of Macbeth were closely related to the reality that he had to experience in his daily life. The sudden changes with the background of the prophecy of the three witches and also the pressure from his own wife caused the troubles that he later suffered within and around him. From the perspective of Kierkegaard, the notion of ‘dread’ described by him is closely related to Shakespeare’s Macbeth. He defines dread as “the alarming possibility of being able” (Kierkegaard 40) – which can be understood as between possibility and reality. It is written that “dread is an alien power which lays hold of an individual, and yet one cannot tear oneself away, nor has the will to do so; for one fears, but what one fears one desires” (Lowrie xii).

Conclusion

From the above analysis of Shakespeare’s character of Macbeth, the major finding aided with Schlossberg’s transition is that Macbeth had three phases of transition in the play. His transition trajectory can be summarised as having a sudden shift from the status of the saviour of Scotland to the murderous tyrant and a sufferer of the insane horror of his deeds (Clothier “Understanding Macbeth: A Returning Soldier”). Out of the three phases of transition, the final one ended with the death of Macbeth gave him no chance to further exercise the position of the King of Scotland. The first transition was from the already existed position of the Thane of Glamis to the newly awarded position of the Thane of Cawdor. It was temporary as it did not last for long due to his wife’s greed for the position of the King of Scotland. The second transition happened when he decided to somehow kill King Duncan to become the next King of Scotland. This phase of transition in Macbeth extends for a more period as compared to the other two transitions as he went through uncertainties and anxieties that he expressed through his soliloquies and weird hallucinations. He killed many more people in fear of the loss of his Kingship. These actions of Macbeth can be seen as his coping strategy to sustain in power and position without providing a chance for others to challenge his Kingship and rule over him. The third transition is from his position as the King of Scotland to nothing anymore as he accepted his failure in the fight with Macduff and died.

Though there would be minor transitions in the play if the four S’s and events are combined to explore the changes in the state of mind, space or status of Macbeth. The limitation of this research paper would be that it does not detail the very minute transitions in the play from the perspective of the other characters. These various transitions in the play evident from the plot structural representation of acts and scenes can be summarised into one single quote by Shakespeare that he announces at the beginning of the play recited through the words of the three witches. It served as a hint to the upcoming transitions one after the other in the play, not only from the perspective of Macbeth but also from the perspective of different characters involved in the play. The three witches say the below-quoted lines together as a single voice,

Fair is foul, and foul is fair:

Hover through the fog and filthy air. (Shakespeare et. al., *Macbeth* 1.1. 13-14)

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