In *Macbeth*, ambition conspires with unholy forces to commit evil deeds which, in their turn, generate fear, guilt and still more horrible crimes. Above all, *Macbeth* is a character study in which not one, but two protagonists (the title character and Lady Macbeth) respond individually and jointly to the psychological burden of their sins. In the course of the play, Macbeth repeatedly misinterprets the guilt that he suffers as being simply a matter of fear. His characteristic way of dealing with his guilt is to face it directly by committing still more misdeeds, and this, of course, only generates further madness.

By contrast, Lady Macbeth is fully aware of the difference between fear and guilt, and she attempts to prevent pangs of guilt by first denying her own sense of conscience and then by focusing her attention upon the management of Macbeth's guilt. In the scene which occurs immediately after Duncan's death, Lady Macbeth orders her husband to get some water "*and wash this filthy witness from your hand"* (II.i.43-44). He rejects her suggestion, crying out,

*"What hands are here. Ha! they pluck out mine eyes! / Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?*" (II.i.56-58).

But she in turn insists that the tell-tale signs of his crime cannot be seen by others, that *"a little water clears us of this deed"* (II.i.64). But midway through the play, Lady Macbeth loses both her influence over her husband and the ability to repress her own conscience. Once her husband has departed to combat against Macduff's forces and Lady Macbeth is left alone, she assumes the very manifestations of guilt that have been associated with Macbeth, insomnia and hallucinations, in even more extreme form.

As for the motive behind the theme of guilt, it is ambition for power, and it does not require much for Macbeth to embrace the weird sisters' vision of him as the ruler of all Scotland. Macbeth is ambitious, but it is Lady Macbeth who is the driving force behind their blood-stained rise to the throne(s) of Scotland. Lady Macbeth is awesome in her ambition and possesses a capacity for deceit that Shakespeare often uses as a trait of his evil female characters. Thus, when she greets her prospective victim in Act I, she "humbly" tells King Duncan that she has eagerly awaited his arrival and that her preparations for it are "in every point twice done, and then double done" (l.vi.14-18). The irony here is that double-dealing and falsity are at hand, and Lady Macbeth's ability to conceal her intentions while at the same time making hidden reference to them has a startling effect upon us.

Beyond the evil that human ambition can manufacture, Macbeth has a super-natural dimension to it; indeed, the play opens with the three witches stirring the plot forward. Even before his encounter with the three witches, Macbeth finds himself in an unnatural dramatic world on the "foul and fair" day of the battle (I.iii.39). Things are not what they seem. After his first conclave with the witches, Macbeth is unable to determine whether the prophecy of the witches bodes "ill" or "good." He then begins to doubt reality itself as he states that "nothing is / But what it is not" (I.iii.141-142). The prophecy, of course, is true in the first sense but not what Macbeth takes it to be in the second. In like manner, the three predictions made to Macbeth in the first scene of Act IV seem to make him invincible; but the "woods" do march and Macbeth is slain by a man not ("naturally") born of woman.

Not only does an unnatural world overturn reality in Macbeth's experience, in Lady Macbeth's experience, this movement beyond nature is self-invoked. In an oft-cited speech, Lady Macbeth actively conjures up supernatural forces to change her into a creature without conscience or human (or "feminine") compassion.

Come, you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
And fill me, from the crown to the toe topful  
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,  
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,  
That no compunctious visitings of nature  
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
Th' effect and it!  
(I.v.40-47)

Lady Macbeth alters herself into a monster, "de-sexing" herself into an embodiment of evil akin to the demon goddess Hecate. As many scholars have pointed out, unlike Duncan, Banquo, and Macduff, Macbeth and his wife are childless; there is no succession of kings behind Macbeth as there is behind Banquo. Having shorn herself of the ability to generate an heir, Lady Macbeth undergoes an alienation from both her gender and, as discussed below, from her marriage to Macbeth.

The waking world of reality and the unnatural world of evil intermingle in the paranoid hallucinations and, most markedly, in the insomnia of Macbeth and of Lady Macbeth. After Duncan's murder, Macbeth hears that internal voice which commands him to "sleep no more" (II.ii.37). Restive to the end, Macbeth's insomnia is noted by his wife. She attempts to explain the more vivid and horrifying experiences that he undergoes, such as seeing Banquo's spectral effigy at the feast, by referring to natural causes, telling her husband that his vision stems from the fact that he lacks sleep. But then Lady Macbeth herself falls victim to a deep, somatic disorder. As the doctor who treats her insomnia is told, Lady Macbeth only begins to sleepwalk and to compulsively wash her hands when Macbeth is no longer present, the tyrant having taken to the field to stop Malcolm, Macduff, and their fellows from overturning his reign. In the end, Lady Macbeth enters into a limbo state of madness, sleepwalking between a horrible reality and a vision of the hell it portends.

The deterioration of Macbeth and of Lady Macbeth as individuals is closely paralleled by the collapse of their marital relationship. Oddly, among all of Shakespeare's married couples, the Macbeths of Act I and Act II show the highest degree of bonding and cooperative spirit. The very first time that we see Lady Macbeth, she is reading a letter from Macbeth prefaced by the fond salutation, "Dearest Partner of Greatnesse." There is in the first two acts of the play a mutual admiration between the two, a dual respect based on their shared conviction that the manly Macbeth is fit to be king, while the commanding Lady Macbeth is his natural consort. When Lady Macbeth is first told that Macbeth has executed their plan and killed the king, she cries out "My husband."

But a change occurs in the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in Act II of Shakespeare's play. Once Duncan has been dispatched, Lady Macbeth becomes increasingly unimportant to her husband. After the murder of the King, Macbeth begins to withdraw from his marriage to Lady Macbeth. It is significant that Macbeth does not convey the graphic details of the King's death to his wife and that he departs (wisely, in fact) from his instructions to leave the daggers of the king's guards behind. Moreover, he keeps his plot against Banquo and Fleance from his wife, and she has no role at all in the killing of Macduff's family. Indeed, following her ineffectual efforts to control Macbeth when he sees Banquo's ghost at the banquet, Lady Macbeth virtually disappears from the plot. Not only is Lady Macbeth no longer directing the action in the natural domain of the play, she is now excluded by her husband from partaking in either the natural or the supernatural progression ahead.

When we see her again, Lady Macbeth is virtually unrecognizable, a shaken shell of her former self. As noted above, critical opinion about Lady Macbeth has moved in the direction of seeing her as either a pathetic character or as redeemed by her own suicide, in the sense that it demonstrates her underlying humanity. What is truly pathetic, as opposed to monstrous, about Lady Macbeth of Act V is that she no longer has any role in her partnership with Macbeth. She has voluntarily relinquished her natural role as Macbeth's wife to mobilize him into action, and in the unnatural world into which she has entered, she is no match for the witches who have assumed the function that she once performed on behalf of her partnership with Macbeth. Pathetically, Lady Macbeth yearns for the natural union that she had with her husband, for the role of nurturer and comforter, and that is no longer available to her. Lady Macbeth's last words are not expressions of guilt, but tender solicitous of care from her husband: "give me your hand … to bed, to bed, to bed" (V.i.66-68).

Advanced Themes

*Macbeth* is a complex study of evil and its corrupting influence on humanity. Some critics argue that Shakespeare adapted historical accounts of Macbeth to illustrate his larger view of evil's operation in the world. The particular evil that the protagonist commits has wide-spread consequences, causing a series of further evils. As a result, the tragedy is not fully resolved through the fallen hero's death but through the forces of good that ultimately correct all the evil Macbeth has unleashed. The witches, through their ambiguous prophecies, represent a supernatural power that introduces evil into *Macbeth*. Their equivocations—the intentional stating of half-truths—conceal the sinister nature of their predictions, and Macbeth does not consider the possibility that they are trying to deceive him. In fact, the Weird Sisters' attempts at misinformation succeed not only because they favorably interpret the hero's future but also because their revelations seem to come true almost immediately. Although inherently malevolent, the witches' prophecies do not necessarily signify the actual existence of evil but suggest instead the potential for evil in the world. The Weird Sisters themselves do not have the power to enact a diabolic course of events such as that which ensues in *Macbeth*; rather, their power lies in tempting humans like Macbeth to sin. When Macbeth succumbs to the temptation to commit murder, he himself is the active catalyst that unleashes evil upon the world. The evil, which initially manifests itself in Duncan's murder, not only disintegrates Macbeth's personal world but also expands until it corrupts all levels of creation, contaminating the family, the state, and the physical universe. For example, Macduff's family is murdered, Scotland is embroiled in a civil war, and during Duncan's assassination "the earth was feverous, and did shake" (II.iii.60).

Shakespeare's depiction of time is another central concern in *Macbeth*. Macbeth dislocates the passage of time—a process fundamental to humankind's existence—when he succumbs to evil and murders Duncan. Shakespeare uses this displacement as a key symbol in dramatizing the steady disintegration of the hero's world. Macbeth's evil actions initially interrupt the normal flow of time, but order gradually regains its proper shape and overpowers the new king, as demonstrated by his increasing guilt and sleeplessness. Ironically, the Weird Sisters can be seen as an element that contributes to the restoration of order. Although Macbeth disrupts the natural course of events by acting on the witches' early prophecies, their later predictions suggest that his power will shortly end. This premonition is apparent in the Birnam wood revelation; while Macbeth believes that the prediction insures his invulnerability, it really implies that his rule will soon expire. Some critics observe that different kinds of time interact in *Macbeth*. The most apparent form of time can be described as chronological. Chronological time establishes the sense of physical passage in the play, focusing on the succession of events that can be measured by clock, calendar, and the movement of the sun, moon, and stars. Another aspect of time, identified as providential, overarches the action of the entire play. Providential time is the divine ordering of events that is initially displaced by Macbeth's evil actions but which gradually overpowers him and reestablishes harmony in the world. Macbeth conceives of another kind of time that seems to defy cause and effect when he unsuccessfully attempts to reconcile his anticipation of the future with the memory of his ignoble actions. This dilemma initiates a period of inaction in the protagonist's life that culminates in his resigned acceptance of death as the inexorable passage of time. This confused displacement of time pervades the action of *Macbeth* until Malcolm and Macduff restore a proper sense of order at the end of the play.

Another important issue in *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's ambiguous treatment of gender and sex roles. In many instances, the playwright either inverts a character's conventional gender characteristics or divests the figure of them altogether. Lady Macbeth is perhaps the most obvious example of this dispossession. In Act I, scene v, she prepares to confront her husband by resolving to "unsex" herself, to suppress any supposed weakness associated with her feminine nature so that she can give Macbeth the strength and determination to carry out Duncan's murder. After the king is killed, however, her feelings of guilt gradually erode her resolve, and she goes insane. Macbeth is perhaps the character most affected by the question of gender in the tragedy. From the beginning of the play, he is plagued by feelings of doubt and insecurity, which his wife attributes to "effeminate" weakness. Fearing that her husband does not have the resolve to murder Duncan, Lady Macbeth cruelly manipulates his lack of self-confidence by questioning his manhood. Some critics maintain that as a result of his wife's machinations, Macbeth develops a warped perspective of manliness, equating it with the less humanistic attribute of self-seeking aggression. The more the protagonist pursues his ideal understanding of manliness—first by murdering Duncan, then Banquo, and finally Macduff's family—the less humane he becomes. Commentators who subscribe to this reading of Macbeth's character argue that the ruthlessness with which he strives to obtain this perverted version of manhood ultimately separates him from the rest of humankind. Through his diminishing humaneness, the protagonist essentially forfeits all claims on humanity itself—a degeneration, he ultimately realizes, that renders meaningless his ideal of manliness.

Various image patterns support the sense of corruption and deterioration that pervades the dramatic action of *Macbeth*. Perhaps one of the most dominant groups is that of babies and breast-feeding. Infants symbolize pity throughout the play, and breast milk represents humanity, tenderness, sympathy, and natural human feelings, all of which have been debased by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's evil actions. Another set of images focuses on sickness and medicine, all of which occur, significantly, in the last three acts of the play after Macbeth has ascended the Scottish throne. These patterns are given greater depth through Shakespeare's graphic depiction of blood in the tragedy. The numerous references to blood not only provide Macbeth's ruthless actions with a visual dimension, they also underscore Scotland's degeneration after Macbeth murders Duncan and usurps the crown. Ironically, blood also symbolizes the purifying process by which Malcolm and Macduff—the restorers of goodness—purge the weakened country of Macbeth's villainy. Other major image patterns include sleep and sleeplessness, order versus disorder, and the contrast between light and darkness.