Ambition In Macbeth Essay, Research Paper

The Power of Ambition

Words are the basic elements of the English written language. With words, one can say precisely what one wants to say, a skill that Shakespeare has mastered. In Macbeth, he carefully chooses each word so as to say exactly what he wants to say, and often leaves these words open to the reader’s interpretation. One such carefully chosen word is the word “slave,” a simple word meaning “someone entirely under the dominion of a person or an influence” (Random House, 674). Although this word appears only four times within the play, it’s importance should not be underestimated. Every time that Shakespeare chooses to use the word “slave” he is using it to show a “slave of ambition,” an important symbol within the play.

The first use of slave in the play comes when a war-wounded soldier comes to deliver the message to the king of Macbeth’s defeat over Macdonwald. He refers to Macdonwald as “the slave,” which is the perfect name for him (Shakespeare, Macbeth I.ii.20). One would have to be a “slave of ambition” if he thinks that it is acceptable for him to try to overthrow his very own king and center. Furthermore, it is extremely ironic how Macbeth is the one who defeats this slave in act one, but then becomes one himself in act two. After performing a heroic deed and making what was “foul” (Macdonwald’s rebellion), “fair,” Macbeth goes and makes what is “fair” (Duncan’s Kingship), “foul;” thus making him a slave like Macdonwald(I.i.11). Also, in using this word, the reader comes to learn much about Macdonwald. We first of all learn that he cares mainly about his own personal gain, for he desires kingly power. We also learn that if he had actually succeeded in stealing the throne, he would not have made a good king, for a good king can never be selfish or stray from the center the way that he does. In using the word slave Shakespeare actually puts into the reader’s mind a concept that runs throughout the entire play; you cannot be selfish or stray from the center if you are king and still expect to be a king in the truest sense of the word.

The second time Shakespeare uses the word “slave” in Macbeth is when Banquo yells to his some Fleance, “Fly, good Fleance, fly, fly, fly! Thou mayst revenge. O slave!”(III.iii.16). In this use of the word, the reader is meant to think that Banquo is talking to Macbeth. After he tells his son to get revenge (on Macbeth no doubt), he yells “O slave!” as a way of saying, “you ‘slave of ambition’, I can’t believe I trusted you.” Banquo knows that he has made a mistake by trusting Macbeth. All of his sleepless nights and hunches were right; Macbeth has done the evil deed of killing Duncan his king. Therefore we can see Banquo as a slave as well, a slave of his own trust for an over ambitious friend.

The third use of “slave” comes to the reader in a very sarcastic speech given by Lennox to a Lord (III.vi.13). Lennox calls the two guards of Duncan’s chamber on the night of his death the “slaves of drink and the thralls of sleep”(III.vi.13). At first glance, it seems as if Lennox is condemning the two guards for supposedly killing Duncan. But when read in the context of the entire speech, Lennox is actually saying that the two guards were too drunk and asleep to have killed their king. Furthermore, he finds it odd how Macbeth killed the only two men who could say anything about what went on that night. Thus we are meant to see Macbeth as a “slave to ambition,” which makes good sense, for he killed Duncan, Banquo, and is striving to kill Malcolm, Donalbain, and Fleance. Therefore, if Macbeth is a “slave to ambition” he will not be able to be a good king, which we see in the Lord’s response to this speech. He tells the reader that the kingdom does not have mean on its table or sleep at night. This proves to the reader how Macbeth’s ambition has caused him to focus on his own personal gain instead of focusing on what he should, his kingdom. Therefore, the fall of Macbeth is foreshadowed, because a king can never be selfish and expect to hold his kingdom for very long.

The fourth and final time that Shakespeare chooses to use the word “slave” comes when Macbeth hears of Macduff coming to defeat him (V.v.37). It is different from the other uses of slave in the fact that in this one the one using the word is the slave himself. After a messenger tells him of the moving Birnam wood, Macbeth calls him a “Liar and slave!”(V.v.37). Although the word seems to be out of context in this instance, after a careful look at it, one sees that it is actually a perfect word. Ever since Macbeth killed his king, he hasn’t been able to trust anyone. Also, he has been so far from what is true for so long that he is not able to understand and accept it. Thus when the messenger tells Macbeth of the moving woods, he believes that the messenger is a “slave to ambition,” for it appears to be an ambitious move to try to lie to a king. In actuality, this messenger is not ambitious at all; he is simply delivering a message to his king. But because Macbeth is so far from the “center” by the end of the play, he is not able to see this man’s true intent. Therefore, Macbeth is the real slave; a “slave of his own ambition” and of his distorted thoughts.

Although Shakespeare uses the word “slave” only 4 times in Macbeth, it is still a pivotal word that puts into the reader’s mind a key symbol of the play, the “slave of ambition.” Through his use of this word, Shakespeare tells us that ambition causes deterioration. By the end of the play, Macbeth was obviously deteriorating both physically and mentally. As the reader knows, this downfall began once Macbeth killed King Duncan, and therefore is a product of his ambition. Also, through his use of “slave,” Shakespeare teaches that instead of letting our want for power overtake us, we must accept things the way they are and never try to change our fate the way Macbeth did. After all, no one would want to end up like Macbeth.

Bibliography

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