ENGLISH: *MACBETH*

The tragedy of Macbeth is that of a good man who gives way to his dark side. Discuss.

Underpinning William Shakespeare's play, Macbeth, is the tragedy of the protagonist Macbeth, whose downfall from greatness is brought about by an amalgamation of various contributing factors, at the core of which lies a seemingly innate tendency towards evil. Macbeth's character is initially structured with honest integrity, honour, loyalty and chivalrous ethical values by which he is essentially defined. However, Shakespeare's establishment of the play amongst battles cries of a violent Scottish rebellion infused with the witches' circular and antithetical chants of equivocation that "Fair is foul, and foul is fair," creates an image of a society that is diseased by a centrifugal and consuming force of disorder from which Macbeth is unable to extricate himself. Although Macbeth's moral conscience offers resistance to the evil temptations of the witches, the weird sisters exist passively as a catalyst for the "bubbling hell broth" which fills the protagonist's mind and, without being directly acted upon by the supernatural, Macbeth succumbs to his unbridled ambition and accepts Lady Macbeth's plan to usurp regal power. It is thus through his complicity in the perverse deed of regicide that Macbeth, like Lady Macbeth, is inundated by an ultimately fatal guilt that systematically destroys him by tragically leading him from a position of honourable greatness to a state of complete moral collapse.

Through Shakespeare's initial portrayal of Macbeth, the protagonist is depicted as a good man whose mind becomes riddled by an ethical struggle between his moral conscience and the evil allure of the witches' prophecies. Illustrating the protagonist with a quality of chivalry and loyalty towards the king, the sergeant explains that "brave Macbeth...disdaining fortune, with his brandished steel" was able to "carve out his passage" through the enemy soldiers and fearlessly lead Scotland's army to victory despite the overwhelming forces of "cannons overcharged with double cracks." Macbeth's heroic military efforts in support of the divine right of the King emphasises his venerable moral intentions and in the words of Duncan, the protagonist is portrayed as "a valiant cousin" and the "worthiest gentleman," a marked contrast with the "most disloyal traitor the Thane of Cawdor." However, after Macbeth is informed by the witches of his fate of becoming king, Shakespeare's earlier insinuation of his more dark traits lurking beneath his outward appearance begin to emerge, the implication of an underlying violent nature "which smoked with bloody execution."As Shakespeare depicts Macbeth "start and seem to fear things that do sound so fair," the playwright alludes to the possibility that his excessive ambition has caused him already to entertain treasonous thoughts, thus intimating the possibility of some nascent and intrinsic evil in Macbeth's character which the equivocal prophecies of the witches have now touched and released into action, though the witches themselves neither bewitch or enchant the tragic Macbeth. His reaction to the prophecy displays a fundamental confusion: instead of resolving to act on the witches' claims, or simply dismissing them, Macbeth talks himself into a kind of thoughtful stupor as he tries to unravel the situation for himself. Although Macbeth proclaims that "chance may crown me without my stir," Shakespeare utilizes the protagonist's fascination with the prospect of succeeding Duncan to accentuate the undermining nature of his ambition and its influence over his ostensibly troubled conscience, now struggling to maintain his moral strength. Nevertheless in deciding not to effectuate his "horrible imaginings" of murder, Macbeth displays an initial resistance to the forces of evil.

Whilst Macbeth's sense of morality and goodness offers some opposition to the sinful desires he struggles to suppress, the combination of his excessive ambition and the exhortation of Lady Macbeth thrusts Macbeth out of his world of honour and into a state of inevitable destruction. Whilst the honest Banquo understand the that "the instruments of darkness tell us truths...to betray us in deepest consequence," Macbeth considers the witches' "supernatural soliciting" as "happy prologues" which drives him towards evil thoughts. With Duncan's announcement of Malcolm being appointed his heir Macbeth is enraged as the Prince of Cumberland has become "a step on which I must fall down, or else overleap" and as Lady Macbeth derides him for his lack of determination in pursuing his desire for greatness, the tragic protagonist allows his "vaulting ambition" to dominate

his being. In assassinating Duncan, having cast himself into the role of a “withered murder”, in league with the forces of the night, Macbeth’s mind is ostensibly corrupted by his wife’s “poisoned chalice,” a reversal of the religious mystery, for his chalice contains not the wine of life but that of death. Having previously asserted “I dare do all that may become a man, who dares do more is none” by yielding to his “slaughterous thoughts” Macbeth destroys the core moral structure of his character which his conscience strove to uphold and he is thus “unmanned” of the values which defined his true greatness; he is reduced to the perverse, depraved and recklessly determined image of masculinity Lady Macbeth called upon. Inflicted by crippling resentment, Macbeth’s mind is hurled into turmoil as he claims that voices told him “he hath murdered sleep” and hence destroyed the source of tranquility in life, the “healing balm of nature.” The protagonist’s soul subsequently becomes tainted by a “restless ecstasy” and an insatiable guilt which “all great Neptune’s ocean” cannot cleanse from his spirit. Stating “to be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus,” Macbeth reveals his growing sense of insecurity and through his fear of Banquo, “that dauntless temper of his mind...a wisdom that doth guide his valour to act in safety,” Shakespeare implies that Macbeth has descended to state of anxiety and malice, far from the greatness he wished to achieve. Therefore, the tragedy of Macbeth is precipitated by his unbridled ambition, the sinister encouragement of Lady Macbeth and his lack of moral integrity in maintaining his ethical code.

Moreover, having relinquished his moral conscience, Macbeth’s tragedy lies in his continued pursuit of maintaining power and the evil this requires him to commit. After being informed about the failure of his plan to secure his crown and fate by killing Fleance, who was prophesised to become king, Macbeth begins to feel “cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in / To saucy doubts and fears,” whilst the guilt for Banquo’s death additionally begins to plague him. Asserting that he is seeing visions “which might appal the devil,” upon the appearance of Banquo’s blood-boltered ghost at his celebration feast, Macbeth sends the banquet into a fiasco, crying “Avaunt, and quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee,” his reactions frightening the nobles who henceforth become suspicious of his position as king. Manifested by the psychological influence on Macbeth of Banquo’s bloody apparition, Shakespeare suggests that a reliance on false appearance leads to isolation, a loss of true identity and ultimately destruction on the personal level, as once dependent on the “seeling night, to scarf up the tender eye of day,” Macbeth descends into the insular world of suspicion and appearances that severs him from any connection with the rest of humanity. Furthermore, following the apparition of Banquo’s line of successors, Shakespeare implies that Macbeth has become unconsciously so inflamed by the anguish of seeing Banquo’s sons steal his throne that he wants to murder impulsively in a broad swath. The impulsive and vindictive decision to destroy Macduff’s family demonstrates the depths of evil to which Macbeth’s unconscionable behaviour has fallen in his lust for power, ultimately spawning a new bloody ruthlessness and determination that are governed by impulse: “The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand.” Shakespeare poignantly depicts Macbeth struggling to maintain his composure with the imminent damnation of the English army enclosing upon him. Although the comments made by Macbeth and the doctor about mental unrest are directed at the “troubled” Lady Macbeth, they sufficiently reflect the tyrant King’s own state of mind. As depicted by his equivocation between anger, determination and melancholy in his cry for his armour to be put on and then removed, Shakespeare explicitly reveals Macbeth’s unhinged psychological state. “Mind diseased” and corrupted by “a rooted sorrow,” Macbeth’s dependence on the witches’ deceitful prophecies has evidently paralysed his capacity for rational action as he disregards the Doctor’s medical advice by stating, “Throw physic to the dogs.” Nevertheless, despite his apparent callousness and depravity which lead to his demise through the uprising of his thanes, the compassion he shows in his recognition of the life he has lost, “of honour, love and troops of friends,” accentuates the essential tragedy of his fall from greatness; he knows and relishes what is good but ultimately chooses the opposite.

Macbeth is presented both as the most valiant of warriors and the most murderous of villains. Shakespeare constructs his character with imagery of true greatness, honesty and moral integrity, with his ambition driving him to success as a defender of the king. Though he is initially tested by the evil temptations put forth by the witches, Macbeth’s ethical code and chivalrous sense of loyalty to his nation resists succumbing to the “dark and deep desires” that seep into his mind. However, the honourable and worthy thane is undone when, urged by the sinister scheming of his wife and

the subsequent arousal of excessive ambition, he abandons the values that uphold him by murdering Duncan. Unable to tolerate the enormity of the deed and the guilt of his sinful self, Macbeth descends into mental dissolution which defines him as “an untitled tyrant bloody-sceptered,” causing the destruction of his own self whilst inflicting evil on his “poor country almost afraid to know itself.” Thus, in the tragedy of Macbeth’s deterioration from greatness, the protagonist is ultimately left in a state of existential despair in recognition of all he has lost; “life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”