

Analyzing Lady Macbeth's Demise: A Freudian Exploration

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This paper explores the death of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* through a Freudian lens, focusing on the psychoanalytic interpretation of her demise. Utilizing Freud's id, ego, and superego framework, the study dissects Lady Macbeth's psychological evolution in three phases—inflated “id”, restrained “superego”, and irreconcilable “ego”. The analysis unravels the internal conflicts driven by subconscious desires, societal pressures, and moral considerations. Lady Macbeth's journey unfolds from resolute determination to vulnerability and eventual psychological breakdown, offering insights into the complexities of human nature. The study contributes a focused perspective to Shakespearean scholarship, emphasizing the impact of suppressed desires on the individual psyche and enriching the discourse on the tragic narrative of “Macbeth” by centring on Lady Macbeth's death as its interpretive focal point.

Keywords: Lady Macbeth, Freudian psychoanalysis, Shakespeare

Introduction

Shakespeare is the greatest playwright in the world, and his four major tragedies—*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*—represent the essence of all his tragic works. In these tragic masterpieces, Shakespeare, by portraying the protagonist's character flaws and the resulting conflicts with society and the environment, reveals the destructive fate of the tragic hero and shapes a series of vivid character images. The study of female characters in Shakespeare's works has gradually become a focal point in academia. Shakespeare, as a means to express his humanistic thoughts, intricately weaves themes of women's destinies and gender into his works.

The female characters in Shakespeare's works are richly layered, full of personality, and diverse, reflecting the survival status of women in a patriarchal society. For instance, in *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth carries an intense conflict within herself, and the transformations she undergoes are the results of various conflicts. While societal reasons contribute to Lady Macbeth's death, the fundamental cause lies in human nature. This paper will interpret Lady Macbeth's death through Freud's psychoanalytic theory.

The research perspectives on the word “Macbeth” encompass Marxist criticism, mythological archetype criticism, Freudian psychoanalysis, feminism, new historicism, narratology, and more. The current focus of research primarily revolves around the societal backdrop of the play, the tragic image of Macbeth, supernatural elements, and blood-related symbols within the work. However, there is relatively limited research dedicated to Lady Macbeth.

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Wu Kexin (2022) had provocatively challenged traditional interpretations of Lady Macbeth from a feminist standpoint. Lin Ying (2007) has paved the way for reevaluating Lady Macbeth's character within the feminist discourse. Tian Junwu and Tong Xindan's exploration, titled "On the Bewitching Character of Lady Macbeth" (2010), hints at psychoanalytic elements in their analysis of Lady Macbeth's "bewitching" nature. Xu Youxi's post-feminist perspective in "Lady Macbeth in the Post-Feminist Perspective" (2011) set the stage for our Freudian examination of Lady Macbeth's agency and self-identity. Huang Chi's perspective in "Lady Macbeth and the Witch: Scapegoats of Male Desires" (2014) challenges prevailing narratives surrounding Lady Macbeth. Xu Jingwen's analysis in "A Brief Analysis of Lady Macbeth's Sleepwalking and Dream Speeches Revealing Tragedy" (2017) provided a crucial entry point for our Freudian exploration conflicts that manifest in her subconscious, contributing to the tragedy's unfolding.

As we embark on a Freudian exploration, we aim to complement and extend his insights by delving into the subconscious realms that influence Lady Macbeth's actions and choices. Our psychoanalytic inquiry will further dissect the underlying motivations and desires that Freudian theory posits as fundamental drivers of human behaviour, aiming to unravel the layers of complexity within Lady Macbeth's psyche. This article attempts a psychoanalytical analysis of Lady Macbeth, elucidating the connection between her character traits and destiny, and interpreting the death of Lady Macbeth. Psychoanalysis, developed by Austrian-Jewish physician Sigmund Freud and his followers, is a comprehensive theory employed to study human psychological functioning and action.

Freud's psychoanalysis covers various topics, including the structural theory of the mind, dream interpretation, and psychoanalytic techniques. Within literature, this approach is known as psychoanalytic criticism, a significant method for analyzing literary works. Freud's lifetime contributions led to the development of diverse models of the human psyche, forming the basis of his psychoanalytic theory. The id, ego, and superego constitute the primary components of this model. The id, likened to a chaotic cauldron of seething excitations, is energized by instincts but lacks organization. Operating on the pleasure principle, the id seeks immediate satisfaction for instinctual desires without collective will.

The ego, representing the rational and logical aspect of the mind, operates according to the pleasure principle. Its role is to regulate the instinctual desires of the id and facilitate their release in a non-destructive manner. The superego acts as an internal censor, guiding moral judgments based on social pressures. In contrast to the id, the superego operates according to the morality principle, safeguarding society and individuals from the id. The ego finds itself in a delicate balance between three agencies—the external world, the id, and the superego—each urging a different course. This intricate balance occasionally results in human actions appearing vacillating or indecisive.

The persistent conflict between the superego and the id represents a fundamental psychological battle in the human mind. This theory serves as the foundation for this paper, aiming to unveil the id, the ego, and the superego in Lady Macbeth's psyche.

Lady Macbeth's Psychological Evolution

Lady Macbeth's character transforms fervently seeking power to sombre self-destruction. Her personality is not static but evolves with the progression of events. Her involvement in the murder plot reveals three distinct phases: First, the inflated "id", where she desires supreme honour and becomes the instigator of Duncan's murder by the ambitious Macbeth. The second phase involves the restraint of the "superego". After Duncan's death, Lady

Macbeth starts showing remnants of humaneness, proving she is not an entirely evil woman. The third stage is an irreconcilable “ego”. From Act V onward, it becomes evident that Lady Macbeth is on the brink of collapse, urging for candles throughout the night, sleepwalking in an attempt to cleanse herself of guilt, leading to her eventual revelation of suicide through Malcolm’s words.

Inflated “Id”

Lady Macbeth’s entrance in the play begins with reading a letter. As she reads her husband’s letter, every word seems to carry Macbeth’s hidden joy in her eyes. She understands her husband, his true thoughts, and the actions he might have to face but cannot bear. In Act 1, Scene 5, Lady Macbeth’s assessment of her husband’s character reflects her personality. She acknowledges Macbeth’s ambition, taunts him for lacking the necessary wickedness to match his ambition, and advocates for taking the “nearest way”, mocking his “milk of human kindness”. From the moment she reads the letter, a fervent belief ignites within her—destiny is about to crown Macbeth, and the key to success lies with her. She is determined to use the “valour of her tongue” to eliminate any hesitation in Macbeth’s heart and, with her cunning, place Duncan willingly at death’s door. Thus, upon Macbeth’s return to the castle, Lady Macbeth eagerly expresses strong ambition and forms a plan for murder.

Lady Macbeth lacks any internal conflicts or doubts like Macbeth. She is filled with terrifying self-confidence and self-assurance. Moreover, Lady Macbeth does not consider the danger and consequences of murder, dismissing the presence of others and potential retaliation. She does not doubt that a little scheming can deceive others’ perceptions, and once she “puts on a show of loud lament”, no one would dare disbelieve. She lacks a moral compass, believing she can do whatever she wishes. In her eyes, all standards and values are reversed, making her reason a mix of sophistry and fallacy. She provokes and challenges Macbeth, using words like “coward”, intolerable for a man, and a soldier would scorn such language. In Lady Macbeth’s view, righteous emotions are shameful “cowardice”, life’s honour is mere excess “decoration”, and unbridled ambition becomes a symbol of love. It is this dark, wicked thinking that enables her to be so ruthlessly self-satisfied and bold, seemingly indifferent yet daring and composed in the act of murdering King Duncan.

In Lady Macbeth’s eyes, honourable sentiments are synonymous with shameful weakness. Life’s honour is a superfluous embellishment, while unrestrained ambition becomes a symbol of love. It is this dark, evil thought that determines her ability to be so ruthlessly satisfied during the murder of King Duncan, cold and composed, yet daring and composed. The “id” or subconscious, is the core of the human psychological structure, housing desires that are hidden and suppressed, possessing primitive and animalistic characteristics, free from moral and rational constraints. The subconscious is constantly hidden in the depths of the human psyche; secretly active until conditions are met, awakening it, breaking through the preconscious, and entering consciousness. A letter awakens Lady Macbeth’s subconscious. In this stage, Lady Macbeth’s subconscious rapidly expands, rational inhibitions are lost, murderous thoughts surge forth, and the feeble self cannot control the subconscious. The superego seems to lose all power.

Restrained “Superego”

Lady Macbeth’s plea to the spirits to rid her of her feminine tenderness in that particular speech indeed conveys her evil and ruthlessness. However, even in this context, we can glimpse her concern that “pity” or “natural compassion” might shake her determination. If she were inherently cruel, she wouldn’t be immersed in endless remorse and tormented, let alone experience mental disturbance. In the earlier acts, Lady Macbeth’s vulnerability and emotional impulsiveness are evident.

In fact, from Act 3, Scene 2 onwards, we witness a significant change in Lady Macbeth. Although Macbeth has already seized the throne, and she has enjoyed all the earthly glory and wealth, she begins to complain that “all is but toys”. This change is primarily due to Macbeth, as his mental anguish disrupts her tranquillity. What she never anticipated is the cost of love—her husband, once so devoted, becomes distant. Thus, despite achieving the goal of being queen, the envisioned supreme happiness turns into a mere illusion.

She conceals disappointment with willpower, adopting a masculine toughness to dismiss concerns. With consistent confidence, she advises Macbeth: “What’s done is done; let’s not dwell on it”. However, during the banquet scene, she pretends to be unaffected on one hand, entertaining guests, while on the other hand, revealing the tautness of her inner strings. One can imagine that in her past manner, she would have used her “tongue’s courage” to mock Macbeth fiercely; yet now, she refrains from saying much. After the guests disperse, she displays profound weariness and a resigned reluctance to continue supporting the disillusionment she has long endured. While she still sympathizes with Macbeth, there is also disappointment in her feelings towards him. Therefore, when he proposes to visit the witches and execute some “dire deeds”, she remains unresponsive, and the initial fervour has vanished. She merely advises Macbeth to sleep well, like “innocent sleep” for everyone, stating, “Yet do I fear thy nature; It is too full o’ the milk of human kindness”. Though the words are directed at Macbeth, they reflect her state as well. Thus, Shakespeare adequately prepares for Lady Macbeth’s severe condition when she reappears in Act 5.

Irreconcilable “Ego”

From Lady Macbeth in Act 5, we observe that only one thing, one impression, remains in her entire memory—the act of murder she experienced. In her restless sleep, it becomes an indelible mental agony. Impressions she denies or scorns during the day reappear in her uneasy sleep with an intuitive sense of terror. She feels her hands are stained with blood, continuously trying to wash them, yet she believes they can never be cleansed. This is a suppressed inner cry of despair.

Macbeth referred to his wife as “my dearest” in his letters. He confided his ambitious aspirations, wholeheartedly believing in her words, and always heeding her advice when making decisions. She used various methods to stimulate him, urging him to summon the courage to undertake “deeds of consequence”. To become the true man Lady Macbeth admired and appreciated, he committed the following desperate acts. However, as Lady Macbeth gradually distances herself from her husband, the instigator of Macbeth’s crimes becomes marginalized, turning from an agitator into a mere spectator of Macbeth’s atrocities. The pleasure derived from satisfying the id diminishes, while the influence of the superego gradually strengthens. This increases her mental burden—one end being the heinous crimes committed to fulfil subconscious desires, another end covering up those crimes to maintain Macbeth’s rule, and yet another end facing a renewed and vehement moral condemnation within her consciousness.

When Lady Macbeth questions who would not believe Macbeth, she never anticipates the punishment that life and herself will bring. After committing colossal sins, she now revisits the murder scenes in her dreams. This self-assured, ruthless, and bold woman begins to feel fear. She is afraid of the night, and hell, and contemplates the fate of others. Some might think her “conscience” has awakened, yet the tone of her words about being unable to wash away the bloodstains sounds more like disgust than remorse. The mental agony in her sleep does not equate to a surrender or admission of guilt. Consequently, she cannot escape the psychological hell she finds

herself in. Nevertheless, it's noteworthy that the blood she previously dismissed without concern is now so vivid in her thoughts.

The conflict between morality and desire ensues, with the unconscious, subconscious, and conscious elements interwoven in an irreconcilable manner. The collapse of the self-regulating function ultimately leads to Lady Macbeth's psychological breakdown, culminating in her suicide.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the psychoanalytic exploration of Lady Macbeth's character, viewed through the lens of Freudian theory, unveils the intricate layers of her psyche and provides valuable insights into her psychological evolution. Lady Macbeth's journey can be dissected into distinct phases: the inflated "id" stage, where her subconscious desires propel her towards murderous actions with unbridled confidence; the restrained "superego" phase, marked by a gradual emergence of remorse and vulnerability as societal and moral pressures exert their influence; and the irreconcilable "ego" stage, portraying her descent into a psychological abyss as the conflict between suppressed desires and moral constraints intensifies.

Freud's psychoanalytic framework, encompassing the id, ego, and superego, serves as a powerful tool to comprehend the internal struggles that drive Lady Macbeth's tragic trajectory. The study delves into the subconscious motivations, desires, and conflicts within her, shedding light on the psychological turmoil that culminates in her ultimate demise.

Lady Macbeth's psychological evolution, marked by her initial unwavering determination, a gradual emergence of remorse, and a subsequent collapse into fear and despair, reflects the complexities inherent in human nature. The interplay of subconscious desires, societal pressures, and moral considerations shapes her character, leading to a tragic unravelling. In the broader context of Shakespearean scholarship, this psychoanalytic examination contributes to the nuanced understanding of Lady Macbeth's character, offering a complementary perspective to existing research paradigms. While various literary lenses have been applied to analyze "Macbeth", a focused exploration of Lady Macbeth's psyche through Freudian psychoanalysis enriches the discourse surrounding this iconic character.

As we traverse the psychological landscape of Lady Macbeth, we witness the profound impact of suppressed desires, societal expectations, and moral conflicts on an individual's psyche. The collapse of Lady Macbeth's self-regulating mechanisms serves as a poignant reminder of the intricate interplay between human instincts and societal constraints, contributing to the tragic tapestry woven by Shakespeare in "Macbeth".

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