

## Did Macbeth Suffer from PTSD?

Leo Park<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Don Bosco Prep High School, Ramsey, NJ, USA

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### Abstract

In this paper, the author explores PTSD-related symptoms as seen in the character Macbeth in Shakespeare's tragedy, *Macbeth*. It goes in-depth to explain the history and general overview of PTSD. Life-altering symptoms of PTSD are also explained through statistics and a list of common symptoms. The paper dives into the causes of PTSD in Macbeth as horrifying wartime experiences and his murder of King Duncan places a great deal of stress on him. Then the paper explores how Macbeth's PTSD might explain his later actions such as his apathy to his wife's untimely death and hallucinations.

*Keywords: Macbeth, PTSD, Literary Analysis, Shakespeare, Tragedy*

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### 1. PTSD in the Macbeth Character

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), is a condition prevalent in people who experienced or witnessed a traumatic event (Torres, 2020). Although PTSD was officially recognized in 1980, it was known as shell shock to people of the past with the first cases being reported in the 1700s (Friedman, n.d.). Originally, shell shock was known as "when a soldier was unable to function and no obvious cause could be identified." (Jones, 2012). Symptoms of shell shock were identified as "fatigue, tremor, confusion, nightmares and impaired sight and hearing" (Jones, 2012). PTSD was first brought into the spotlight following the aftermath of WWI. After fighting in the trenches with constant artillery strikes and other horrors of war, many veterans came home with changed behavior due to the trauma and stress of war. They suffered from violent flashbacks, anxiety, sleep deprivation, and aggressive behavior (Friedman, n.d.). These symptoms are identical to those described by Navy Captain Paul S. Hammer (2013) who detailed patients with PTSD as having

"increased arousal that may cause hypervigilance, irritability, difficulty sleeping or an exaggerated tendency to be easily startled." This connection between the symptoms identified by research and the symptoms of experienced veterans suggests that PTSD has been around since humans first started roaming the Earth, though the specific term, along with its impact, was yet to be named.

As the play *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare progresses, Macbeth goes from a respected thane to a violent, power-hungry, false king due to the effects of PTSD. Prior to becoming a crazed tyrant, he is surrounded with death as a soldier and the combination of this and his decision to murder Duncan, the King of Scotland, fills him with trauma and guilt, eventually triggering his PTSD. Macbeth shows many signs of PTSD such as nightmares, anxiety, paranoia, and drastic changes in behavior throughout the course of the play. Macbeth's mental health spirals out of control due to PTSD, drastically altering his behavior, leading to his downfall.

As awareness for a condition called "shell shock" increased, research also began taking place. In 1980,

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\* Corresponding Author  
leoskypark@gmail.com

Advisor: Mary Fisk  
mfisk@donboscoprep.org

after years of extensive research, the American Psychological Association included PTSD to its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* for mental health practitioners noting that PTSD was a diagnosable condition (Friedman, n.d.). They concluded that PTSD was caused by traumatic events, instead of an inherent individual weakness. Anyone who was exposed to a “catastrophic stressor that was outside the range of usual human experience” (Friedman, n.d.) was susceptible to developing symptoms of PTSD. Some of these unnatural experiences identified as potential causes of PTSD include: war, torture, rape, natural disasters, and human-made disasters (Mayo Clinic Staff, n.d.). However, stressors that are considered to be a natural problem in the way of life such as divorce, failure, rejection, illness, and financial reverses were not indicated as PTSD causes. The main difference between stressors that cause PTSD was that humans have the ability to cope with ordinary stressors, but the human brain was not made to handle unnatural traumatic events. When faced with a stressor outside the range of usual human experience, the brain was likely to be overwhelmed, causing PTSD (Mayo Clinic Staff, n.d.).

When looking at the situations Macbeth is in throughout the course of the play, he is in a position where he is more than capable of developing PTSD. To begin, in Act 1 Scene 2, Macbeth is revealed to be a soldier. Macbeth, “Disdaining fortune with his brandished steel / which smoked with bloody execution” (1.2.17-18) had just fought and defeated the forces of Thane of Cawdor. As a soldier, Macbeth is in a position where he is constantly exposed to unnatural traumatic events, as he has to kill others and see his comrades killed. Soldiers during war are the most common victims of PTSD as their life is surrounded by traumatic events and the case is no different for Macbeth. Like any soldier fighting in war, Macbeth is surrounded by unnatural death and, no matter how strong someone’s mind is, constant exposure to death will eventually lead to PTSD. However, Macbeth doesn’t show any symptoms of PTSD from his wartime experience until the murder of Duncan. Macbeth’s murder of Duncan isn’t typical murder as he is doing so to seize the throne from the King of Scotland. Before Macbeth murders Duncan,

he justifies all of his killings as following orders. But when he decides to murder the King of Scotland, the guilt and stress over freely killing an innocent person becomes a triggering event for his PTSD. Overall, all of the death that surrounds his life due to his profession and his decision to murder Duncan cause PTSD for Macbeth.

PTSD affects people in a variety of ways and its severity depends on each individual. Some of the most prominent symptoms of PTSD include: violent flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety, sleep deprivation, bipolar behavior, and depression (Mayo Clinic Staff, n.d.). These symptoms can lead to abusing alcohol and drugs as many patients of PTSD use substances to cope with their pain. This can completely alter a person’s life, as their behavior will affect their jobs, relationships, health, and enjoyment of life. Research shows that PTSD causes people to withdraw from society and constantly live inside their heads. The effects of PTSD are so overwhelming that according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2022), studies have shown that having PTSD increases the risk that you will develop a drinking problem. In fact, “59% of people with PTSD subsequently develop substance abuse problems” and “10% of people with PTSD had attempted suicide.” (Khoury, 2010). As can be seen, PTSD causes people to act in unpredictable ways and completely changes a person.

As the play progresses the effects of PTSD in Macbeth become more prevalent as evident through his sleep deprivation. The first signs of PTSD in Macbeth was shown after Macbeth says he heard a voice say “Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep no more. Macbeth shall sleep no more.” (2.2.41-42). After this, Macbeth is haunted by this knowledge and is unable to sleep comfortably. He says “Ere we will eat our meal in fear and sleep / In the affliction of these terrible dreams / That shake us nightly.” (3.2.19-21). Macbeth admits that he is having a hard time sleeping due to nightmares, which is a sign of PTSD. This lack of sleep and guilt leads to Macbeth suffering from hallucinations. During the banquet at Macbeth’s castle, Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo, after he orders his murder, and exclaims “Prithee, see there, behold, look, lo, how say you? / Why, what care I if thou canst nod, speak too.” (3.4.72-73). In the first line of this quote, Macbeth is

informing his guests and Lady Macbeth that the ghost of Banquo is with them at the table. Then when he realizes no one else can see the ghost, he turns around and speaks to the ghost. These hallucinations begin due to the lack of sleep and the guilt building inside of him, giving readers an inside look into his feelings.

Just as the lives of real people go downhill due to PTSD, Macbeth starts to become very power hungry, which leads to his crazed paranoia about losing power. When he goes back to the witches and they tell him to beware of Macduff, he proceeds to kill his entire family while Macduff is away. Throughout the course of the play, Macbeth progressively becomes more violent and eventually loses control of himself. When he decides to murder Duncan, Banquo, Fleance, and Macduff's family, it doesn't matter to him that they are innocent. It comes to the point where all he cares about is his power and nothing else matters to him. This arrogance is shown when he says "Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself / Within my sword's length set him. If he 'scape, / Heaven forgive him too." (4.3.233-235a). This statement shows that Macbeth firmly believes he owns Scotland and anyone who dares to defy him will end up dead from his sword. Macbeth's growing disregard for anyone in order to firmly hold his power is especially shown when he completely disregards the condition and death of his wife. He doesn't show a single sign of care when the doctors came to him regarding Lady Macbeth's behavior and subsequently her death. After he is told by Seyton that the queen is dead, Macbeth simply says "She should have died hereafter; / There would have been a time for such a word." (5.5.17-18). This statement shows that he doesn't care about his wife and believes that he doesn't have time to look out for his wife, as keeping his throne is more important to him. By the end of the play, Macbeth completely changes from the beginning where he is described as being noble and a man of honor. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2022), those with PTSD may feel "numb" to things they typically find joy. This symptom of PTSD could explain Macbeth's seemingly sudden shift from passion to indifference regarding his wife. Her death should have devastated him but he is numb. This shows the terrifying effects

PTSD can have on a person as it turns Macbeth from a noble person to a crazy tyrant, which leads to his downfall.

Throughout the course of the play, Macbeth's mental health declines due to PTSD until he becomes a power hungry maniac. He starts out as a man of chivalry, so well respected that Duncan names him the Thane of Cawdor. However, this all changes due to his environment of constant death and his decision to murder Duncan. These factors lead to Macbeth developing PTSD and he shows signs of this through nightmares, anxiety, hallucinations, and changes in behavior leading to the decline of his mental health. Macbeth's story is one of a tragic hero and serves as a cautionary tale of the dangers of PTSD, bringing attention to the seriousness of this disorder.

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