

"WILL THESE HANDS
NE'ER BE CLEAN?"
C.S. LEWIS AND THE
APOLOGETIC RESPONSE
TO THE THEMES OF
MACBETH

Edward Stengel on the Reality of
Human Evil

Before anyone can accept the idea of salvation through Christ, they must first realize that there is something that they need to be saved from. The emotion of disgust, especially towards the evil deeds that are witnessed on a regular basis in the modern world, arouses a person's reason to the factual conclusion that evil exists. Then the emotional response of conviction, knowing that one is capable

of such evil deeds, awakens the conclusion that not only does evil exist, but it exists within everyone and thus one cannot escape it on one's own. These two emotional reactions and the logical conclusions they bring about are two of the most vital experiences a person must have if they are to realize they are in need of a savior. With an integrated (both imaginative and philosophical) apologetic approach in mind, there is one story in particular that awakens the two emotional responses, disgust and conviction, and the conclusions they bring with great clarity: the tragic tale of *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare.

C.S. Lewis liked to think of the human soul as having two hemispheres, the southern half being the visceral zone of emotional response (the imagination) with the northern half being the cerebral area of reasoning and logical response (the philosophical).¹ He believed that both sides of the soul needed to be in balance with one another in order for a person to be mentally healthy: “[w]e were made not to be cerebral men or visceral men, but

¹ C.S. Lewis, “Preface to the Third Edition” from *The Pilgrims Regress: The Wade Annotated Edition* ed. by David C. Downing (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing October 12, 2014) 13.

Men . . . things at once rational and animal.”² Via this balanced approach it is believed that mankind would uncover the “Tao” of mankind, or the inherent truths built into every man.³ The idea that Lewis constructed his theory of the Tao on is thought to have first been discovered by Socrates, written about in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, where he realized that questions and stories “can test in every way whether the mind of the young man is bringing forth a mere image, an imposture, or a real and genuine offspring . . . [through these interactions] they have found in themselves many fair things and have brought them forth.”⁴ In accordance to the line of thought that began with Socrates and was added to by Lewis, it would seem that emotions (a common reaction to questioning and story) are necessary to provoke the intellect into action to discover common Truths. It is in this way that humankind has interacted with God throughout its existence and so must seek to engage both of these sides of the soul in their work if they are to have any sort of lasting impact.

² C.S. Lewis, Preface to *The Abolition of Man: Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools*. (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1943) 2.

³ Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 11.

⁴ Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. by Joe Sachs. First Edition (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2004) 51.

The first chief emotional response that *Macbeth* draws out is one of disgust, especially for the actions Macbeth takes part in:

Hear not my steps, which way they
walk, for fear / Thy very stones prate of
my whereabouts, / And take the present
horror from the time, / Which now suits
with it. / Whiles I threat, he lives: /
Words to the heat of deeds too cold
breath gives. / *A bell rings* / I go, and it is
done; the bell invites me. / Hear it not,
Duncan; for it is a knell / That summons
thee to heaven or to hell.⁵

Macbeth commits his first grievous murder in the first scene of the second act, murdering King Duncan, who was not only very kind to and fond of Macbeth, but was also viewed as quite a good king by the people of Scotland. The reader is taken aback by the new ease in which Macbeth lies to his friend, Banquo, and the king's servants in order to get to the king while he slept. This nighttime assassination is an uncharacteristically cowardly act coming from the great warrior thane who led Scotland's armies against the Norsemen. The reader must then continue on in horror as Macbeth has Banquo and the entire family of Macduff, babies and women as

⁵ William Shakespeare, "Macbeth" from *William Shakespeare: Complete Plays* ed. Arthur Henry Bullen (New York: Fall River Press 2012) 864.

well as the men, put to the sword to protect his throne from the threats he perceived from them.⁶ When one looks through human history, one does not need to search long before real events in this vein are found littered throughout it. The bloody ambition of the Tudors of England in the past or the cruel tyranny of the Kim Dynasty of North Korea in the present come to mind, and they are just two among many. Humanity has done far worse crimes in defense of far less than a king's throne within its relatively short story. The actions of Macbeth are a clear reminder that there is great evil in the real world, and it is just as potent as it is in the pages of this play.

The emotional reaction of disgust towards Macbeth's actions brings the reader to the classic problem of evil, or as philosopher William L. Rowe explains "[the problem of there being suffering] which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse" and yet this suffering still takes place.⁷ Lewis commented on this idea in *Mere Christianity* but took it to its logical conclusion when writing about his former atheism:

⁶ Shakespeare, 870-876.

⁷ William L. Rowe, *God and the Problem of Evil*, First edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2001) 26.

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?⁸

This lead Lewis to the discovery of the Tao of mankind that he talks about in his *Abolition of Man* lectures. He realized that in order for one to even recognize that something is evil, they must first believe that there is some sort of inherent idea of good that all men naturally follow. This takes the main ideas in the problem of evil that are on display in *Macbeth* and flips them into the moral argument for theism, or that the "conscience reveals to us a moral law whose source cannot be found in the natural world, thus pointing to a supernatural Lawgiver."⁹ So while one may first question how any sort of good God could let Macbeth do what he does, they must then wrestle with why they think Macbeth's ambitions are evil in the first place. Without God and the laws of Good and Evil that He enacts, it is as Nietzsche wrote "life itself is will to power" and Macbeth would have committed no

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 2001) 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

crime except for following human nature and succeeding at fulfilling his instinctual will.¹⁰

The second chief emotional response that the reader experiences during *Macbeth* is one of conviction, for Macbeth is shown in the beginning of the play to be an especially valiant, courageous, and strong warrior:

The king hath happily received,
Macbeth, / The news of thy success; and
when he reads / Thy personal venture in
the rebels' fight, / His wonders and his
praises do contend / Which should be
thine or his: / silenced with that, In
viewing o'er the rest o' the selfsame day,
/ He finds thee in the stout Norwegian
ranks, / Nothing afeard of what thyself
didst make, / Strange images of death.
As thick as hail / Came post with post;
and every one did bear / Thy praises in
his kingdom's great defence, / And
pour'd them down before him.¹¹

The reader must come to grips with the fact that Macbeth was not born a conventionally evil man and that perhaps he was a better person than even the reader themselves, for not many have had their

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, Unabridged Edition (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1997) 53.

¹¹ Shakespeare, 860.

name spoken all over a country for being a valiant warrior and leader. He does not instantly give in to delusions of grandeur but at first fights them and seeks to live his life day to day as it comes, only conceding to his dark ambition at the extreme insistence of his wife. This leaves the reader to wonder if such a valiant man can fall to his temptations, then surely they are just as, if not more, likely to fall. It must be made clear to them however, that temptation alone does not make one evil as Lewis wrote:

A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is . . . A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later.¹²

The reader must come to understand that had Macbeth resisted his temptation successfully, it would have been to his credit, but because he did not, the evil is attributed to him regardless of how long he fought it.

Upon reflection the reader can then compare their own experience of temptation with that of Macbeth. Though they may not have been

¹² Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 196.

realistically tempted to murder someone in their past, murder is just one of the many sins the reader has the potential to commit. Since they have realized that good exists in this universe, then they must know that anything that misses the mark of goodness is indeed evil and that even the smallest of these evils tells a tale of temptation and failed resistance. Lewis once commented that "No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good" and only when recounting all the times they have failed to resist temptation does the reader realize how very similar they and Macbeth truly are to one another.¹³ They have, at least once in their lives, acted against their better judgement (the Tao) and like with white linen, found that one blemish has tainted the whole piece. It would be quite natural then for the reader to wonder, just as Lady Macbeth "will these hands ne'er be clean?" as it would seem that no amount of washing or good deeds can undo this blemish for "What's / done cannot be undone."¹⁴ At the time it would not be wholly unreasonable for the reader to believe themselves just as doomed as Lady Macbeth in the story.

The two emotional reactions of disgust and conviction that the reader experiences when reading

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Shakespeare, 867.

Macbeth lead the reader to the conclusion that they have taken part in evil just as Macbeth did and are in no real way better than him, thus bringing them to the realization that they are in need of a savior of some sort to rescue them from their own mistakes. Macbeth, as retribution for his foul deeds draws near, loses all faith he had in life and purpose as he proclaims “it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing”, the reader might share such feelings if they continue to allow their temptations to lead them into the abyss that Macbeth found himself in.¹⁵ This then allows the apologist to present the way out of the abyss that Macbeth never saw, the hope and forgiveness offered by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Few would argue that anyone in this tale deserved death more than Macbeth (especially near its end) but the death of Christ was one of innocence, for only He was able to master His own temptations completely, never missing the mark of goodness. The reader will learn that Christ met the same initial fate as Macbeth so that the reader would not have to, that death, the executioner who comes to exact justice upon all of humanity for the evils they have committed, was finally defeated and his axe stayed. They then are

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 870

given the chance that Macbeth refused to take, the chance to admit their wrongs and turn back:

Progress means getting nearer to the place you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man.¹⁶

With an integrated apologetic approach in mind, *Macbeth* clearly evokes two of the chief emotional responses one must have before recognizing the need for a savior, mainly disgust with evil and conviction of the fact that evil lies within everyone. The fall of Macbeth is the fall of mankind in general, as men often reject the good life given to them in order to follow their temptations, often with hopes of making themselves somehow greater than they would have been before. While on the surface Macbeth may be a stern warning about the dangers of unchecked ambition and adherence to fate over free will, under that very surface the pages seem to cry out "Maranatha!" as Saint Paul once did in his letter to the Corinthians.¹⁷ With the help of the

¹⁶ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 202.

¹⁷ 1 Cor. 16:22 VOICE.

apologist, the reader can be brought forward from the morose discovery of their own personal evil to the all-encompassing hope Christ offers to even the worst of sinners, even those like Macbeth. The mark of goodness is attainable to all, if only they would allow Christ to carry them there. The reader of *Macbeth* must be presented with the Christian's hope for goodness, that:

He does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us; just as the roof of a greenhouse does not attract the sun because it is bright, but becomes bright because the sun shines on it.¹⁸

¹⁸ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 194.

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