

Discuss the role of Macduff within the play Macbeth

Although the character of Macduff is not developed in any great detail, he performs a number of important dramatic functions within Shakespeare's play "Macbeth". While Macbeth is driven by his "vaulting ambitions" and self-interest, Macduff is a true Scottish patriot who puts the well-being of his country before all else, deemed by Ross as "noble, wise, judicious and best knows the fit of the season".

His presence is initially noted immediately following the regicide of Duncan, whom he once described as a "most sainted king". He is appalled at the "most sacrilegious murder" that he has discovered. This outraged reaction underlines the profound gravity of Macbeth's crime. Following the murder, Macduff gives his allegiance to Malcolm, whom he now regards as the lawful king. Malcolm is hugely impressed by Macduff's patriotism, calling him a "child of integrity".

Macduff is also the first to suspect Macbeth as the culprit after he announces that he had killed Duncan's guards, coldly asking "wherefore did you so?". Macduff's shrewdness is also evident in the manner in which he keeps his thoughts and plans to himself. In the atmosphere of mistrust and intrigue that characterises Macbeth's reign, Macduff acts rather than talks.

Indeed, Macduff's concerns for his country are deep and genuine, declaring "O nation miserable with an untitled tyrant, bloody scepter". Following his departure to England, Macduff emerges as a symbol of hope for his suffering country. It is known that Macduff has gone to request the military assistance of "the holy king", in the hope of ridding his suffering country of the tyrannical usurper, Macbeth. The Scottish lord hopes that god will guide Macduff's efforts to save his country, stating "with him above to ratify the work, we may again give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights, free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives." Encouraged by Macduff's enterprise, Lennox is hopeful that "a swift blessing may soon return to this our suffering country under a hand accursed".

His patriotism is such that when Ross arrives in England, Macduff enquires about his country before his own family. He pays an extremely high price for his efforts to rid Scotland of the tyrannical Macbeth

The slaughter of his entire family means that Macduff becomes the embodiment of vengeance and justice. After Ross delivers the devastating news to him, Macduff implores the heavens to bring Macbeth "this fiend of Scotland" within his sword's length. When he enters Macbeth's castle, Macduff reflects that his wife and children will haunt him if he is not the one to end Macbeth's life. Thus, it is entirely appropriate that Macduff should be Macbeth's nemesis, as it seems to be a battle between good and evil, moral and immoral.

Macduff plays a central role in the counter-movement against Macbeth. He seeks out Malcolm because he regards him as the rightful king of Scotland. It is not easy for him to convince the suspicious Malcolm that he can trust him. He underlines the extent of Scotland's suffering under Macbeth's tyranny, stating "each new day, new widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows strike heaven in the face" in the hope of rousing Malcolm into action. When Malcolm declares that he would be an even greater tyrant than Macbeth, Macduff's cry of despair "O Scotland, Scotland" makes it clear that he is a genuine Scottish patriot. Macduff ultimately succeeds in prompting the rightful king of Scotland into action as Malcolm places himself at Macduff's and his country's disposal, stating "What I am truly is thine and my poor country to command". Along with Malcolm, Macduff leads the forces of good against the diabolical Macbeth.

When he finally comes face to face with Macbeth, Macduff reveals the hollowness of the witches' prophecies. The witches had filled Macbeth with a false sense of security and convinced him that he is a "charmed life that must not yield to one of woman born". However, as Macduff points out, he was "from his mother's womb untimely ripped". It is only now that Macbeth realises that the witches have tricked him with their paradoxical prophecies, stating "and be these juggling fiends no more believed that palter with us in a double sense".

The confrontation between the two evidently symbolises good and evil, with the good eventually triumphing as Macduff enters with the "usurper's cursed head", abolishing, as he does, the tyranny of a formally-moral man and restoring the natural order of Scotland. As Macduff declares that "the time is free" he also hails Malcolm as the true King of Scotland, his initial beliefs standing true.