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# Instruments of Darkness

An Analysis of Anti-heroic Figures in  
English Literature

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To Professor Colussa,  
who's watching me from up there



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## **Abstract**

This dissertation aims to analyse works of English literature revolving around the figure of the anti-hero. I argue that this type of character is generally future-oriented, contrary to what others have claimed. Anti-heroes act in the present as much as any other type of character does; by doing that, however, they do not focus exclusively on present gratification but tend to pay constant attention to their next moves. What moves the anti-heroes here discussed is the aim of obtaining more and holding on to it with all their strength. For this purpose, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* will be analysed through a comparison with *Hamlet*, while Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* will be analysed and compared. The popularity of this type of characters will be addressed and explained thanks to the concept of negative empathy.

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## Introduction

This dissertation aims to analyse works of English literature revolving around the figure of the anti-hero, whose traits and peculiarities have been noted and analysed in depth in literary criticism. Anti-heroes have been the subject of works of art for a long time in Western culture, and we could even trace back some of their typical characteristics as early as in pre-modern literature and characters, such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600-1601). In his pensive, wary, and oftentimes almost immobile attitude, we can easily identify this particularly fortunate type of the hero's archetype. As we will see, this type of character has attracted attention in the past, and literary critics tend to define them "neither as outright heroes or villains"<sup>1</sup>. In this vague definition lies their nature of liminal protagonists: anti-heroes are not simply villains or antagonists whose aim is to oppose the tale's protagonist and create that opposition to make the story flow, as much as they are not the stereotypical protagonist endowed with countless positive characteristics. Their very presence alters the structures of the tale, subverting the traditional functions of the other characters and, as a matter of fact, rewriting the entire engine propelling the story forward.

I will start the dissertation by briefly analysing heroism and the archetype of the hero. This is necessary because of the anti-hero's own nature and his existence somewhat diverging from what is described as the traditional protagonist – the Proppian hero, and whom could be easily embodied in Hercules's mythological figure. An important contribution to the definition of the hero has been given by Carl Gustav Jung, who, in discussing the archetypes and their use in psychology, noted that the motifs of the hero and of the rescuer oftentimes coincide and that

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<sup>1</sup> Aulona Ulqinaku and others, 'The Breaking Bad Effect: Priming with an Antihero Increases Sensation Seeking', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 60.1 (2021), 294–315 (p. 294) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12374>>.

“every generation, so far as we can see, has found it [*the hero*] as an old tradition.”<sup>2</sup>. Heroism has permeated Western literature from classic literature (think of poems like the *Iliad* or the epic cycle of the *Nostoi*, to which the *Odyssey* belongs), and it makes the story revolve around the central figure of the protagonist, who has to undergo a series of dangerous challenges to either rescue someone – a princess or lover, for instance – or to gain a treasure. In doing this, the character is endowed with positive characteristics and virtues, making it an example for the reader<sup>3</sup>. In its journey, the hero suffers and has to come to terms with the difficult nature of his quest, but he is also faced with his own imperfection and a fatal flaw, which ultimately gets his story going in the first place.

Having said this, we would naturally conclude that the readers' most beloved stories are those about a positive and heroic protagonist. However, studies prove that it is not always like that, with researchers determining that “bad characters” (where bad stands as a middle ground between absolute evil and absolute good) spark more attention, empathy, and suspense than good or evil characters<sup>4</sup>, while another study asked “German-speaking research participants to list adjectives that they use to label aesthetic dimensions of literature”<sup>5</sup>. The results are clear: ‘suspenseful’ ranks second among the most used adjectives by the poll after “beautiful”<sup>6</sup>. We can then affirm that among the countless genres literature can count on, those typically

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<sup>2</sup> C. G. JUNG, *Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 18* (Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 241, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hhr3v>> [accessed 25 September 2023].

<sup>3</sup> John Frow, *Character and Person* (Oxford: Oxford university press, 2016), pp. 11–24.

<sup>4</sup> Massimo Salgaro, Valentin Wagner, and Winfried Menninghaus, ‘A Good, a Bad, and an Evil Character: Who Renders a Novel Most Enjoyable?☆’, *Poetics*, 87 (2021), 101550 (pp. 7–9) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2021.101550>>.

<sup>5</sup> Christine A. Knoop and others, ‘Mapping the Aesthetic Space of Literature “from Below”’, *Poetics*, 56 (2016), 35–49 (p. 35) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2016.02.001>>.

<sup>6</sup> Knoop and others, p. 39.

associated with suspense, thrill, or even sadness elicit the most attraction and fascination. The genres that we will analyse in this dissertation count in particular with these characteristics to establish a connection with the reader. In giving particular attention to tragedy, I will concentrate solely on anti-heroes, even if some of these genres' protagonists can be considered (and rightfully so) heroes and heroines, like Euripides's Medea.

Thus, an anti-hero is a protagonist that (for as much as this thesis is concerned but not always so) coincides with the tragic hero for a number of reasons. First of all, anti-heroes are mostly evil-doers, characters ready to do anything to achieve their goal, even though it goes against the moral status quo. In behaving like this, anti-heroes act consciously, which causes inner torment and turmoil in their consciences, revealing their psychological depth and round characterisation. This type of protagonist is also endowed with an incredible ability to speak in public, and in doing so, they fascinate and seduce us and the characters around them. These last three elements are essential to the aesthetic experience of negative empathy, where the reader is attracted and repelled at the same time by what s/he is reading.

When it comes to this type of character, it has also been argued that they are more present-oriented and that, due to this, they live a more fast-paced life. This type of approach comes from evolutionary theory, and 'it focuses on *why* and *how* species differ in the amount of energies allocated to continued survival and reproduction.'<sup>7</sup>. Life-history theory divides organisms into two categories, those that live a fast life-history strategy (LHS) from those that live a slow one. While the latter is claimed to be connected to an existence focused on the future and is thus more cautious, the first is described as focused on the present, sensation-seeking, and immediate reward. This research, however, is faulty in this perspective because it compares real-life characteristics of real organisms to fictional characters, who by definition,

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<sup>7</sup> Ulqinaku and others, p. 295.

are not real and will never be endowed with the same amount of characteristics as a real person<sup>8</sup>. A fictional character is not and cannot be as complete as a human being simply because his story does not require him to be complete like humans; in the narrative, we are given what we need for the story's sake, while other particulars are left out because they do not play a role in the narrative itself.

While this theory is flawed, I would like to retain its affirmation regarding the fast-paced life anti-heroes live, but in my discussion, I will argue that these characters generally tend to be future-oriented. Anti-heroes act in the present as much as any other type of character (and like any organism alive) does, but in doing that, they do not focus exclusively on present gratification. What moves the anti-heroes that I will discuss here is the aim of obtaining more and holding on to it for as long as they can. Their goal is to get more and more powerful: once they obtain more power (present gratification), they move on to desiring the next one (future expectation), which in turn creates more anxiety for security in the present, culminating in more preoccupation about the future event. Thus, this movement creates a continuous projection into the future, making it substantially impossible for the character to enjoy their present achievement. We can easily retrace this in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), where the anti-hero – Macbeth himself – is constantly thinking of the future, of a way to accelerate its coming: as soon as the Weird Sisters have saluted him with two titles he does not have yet – namely, Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland – he is rapidly proclaimed with the first by the King, and in an aside, he says:

Macbeth (*aside*)            Two truths are told  
                                         As happy prologues to the swelling Act  
                                         Of the imperial theme. – I thank you gentlemen.  
                                         (*Aside*) This supernatural soliciting

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<sup>8</sup> Frow, p. 71.

Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,  
Why hath it given me *earnest of success*  
*Commencing in a truth?* I am Thane of Cawdor.  
[...] Present fears  
Are less than horrible imaginings.  
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,  
Shakes so my single state of man  
*That function is smothered in surmise,*  
*And nothing is but what is not.*<sup>9</sup>

When characters are presented with the possibility of greatness, the present-oriented satisfaction of needs and wishes, the fast LHS requiring stability fades into the background in favour of the rapid desire to accelerate the arrival of the future itself, also caused by the need to alleviate their anxiety for their perceived instability.

One can easily come across conflicting opinions when it comes to a definition of anti-hero. In this matter, it will be helpful to define characters belonging to this type as deprived ‘of the topic characteristics of the traditional hero, such as determination, courage, enterprising spirit’, while presenting negative others like ‘indecision, ineptitude, inner turmoil’<sup>10</sup>. In some cases (such as in *Macbeth*), these characters also take on the characteristics of negative heroes, where these are often perceived as ‘criminal’ or enacting morally unacceptable behaviours, while still retaining some of their heroic appeal<sup>11</sup>. This thus defines anti-heroes as hybrid, liminal creatures, not yet so bad to fully embody the archetype of the antagonist,

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<sup>9</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by George Hunter, Penguin Classics, New edition (London: Penguin Books, 2015), I. 3. 126-141. (emphases mine)

<sup>10</sup> Stefano Ercolino and Massimo Fusillo, *Empatia Negativa: Il Punto Di Vista Del Male*, Agone, 17, Prima edizione (Milan: Bompiani, 2022), p. 312. (my translation)

<sup>11</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, pp. 312–13.

but also not good enough to be attained as examples. What we are talking about is characters with extremely complex psychology and behaviour, at the same time attracting and repelling us, readers and audience.

We will analyse and describe what it means to be an anti-hero in a narrative, and how a narrative revolving around an anti-heroic character changes compared to one that is centred on the traditional positive hero. In terms of the narrative's structure, the anti-hero describes an inverse parable through the narrative, where he moves from point A, where he is generally appreciated; moving upwards, he then reaches his climax or turning point, where the tragic event is at its apex; he then descends towards the end at a progressively accelerating speed to meet his final demise or a metaphorical decrease of his value in the narrative (Macbeth is a dwarf wearing a giant's clothes; Satan is transformed into a serpent).

The connection between the protagonist and the setting will be addressed, too, as the two constantly influence each other. As a matter of fact, authors often use the setting as a mirror to the character's inner state or health as well. This way, we get a physical description of what is going on inside that character, something that thus constitutes a strong point of interest in character studies, since it allows us to enter the character even deeply.

The positions held by the characters in the narrative framework swap: the morally acceptable character moves to the position of the antagonist, while the troubled protagonist is no longer as accessible or easily categorisable. I say accessible because what the character does would not be as straightforward and morally acceptable in a traditional narrative. In a traditional narrative, the hero might have to fight off or even kill other characters to achieve his (positive) goal, but in a narrative centring around the anti-hero, the character behaves in a morally unacceptable way: the aims, in short, do not justify the means. Thus, sympathy with anti-heroes is not feasible.

In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600-1601), Hamlet's story revolves around his family, but what he does is not something one would easily feel sympathy for. All the plotting, the killing, and the theme of revenge permeate the tragedy, and, though Hamlet remains fascinating, we cannot say that what we feel for Hamlet is straightforward sympathy. Sympathizing with one that provokes his lover's suicide, that kills his family and sees ghosts cannot be easy, but this is because we do not feel sympathy for him, we *empathise* with him. In *Macbeth*, something similar happens, as we witness Macbeth's fall from an esteemed position in Scottish society to that of a tyrant or a brute that has committed the worst atrocities one can think of.

What sets literary empathy in motion is in fact 'the variable configuration of two factors: character identification and narrative situation', where the first one is more prominent than the latter<sup>12</sup>. Character identification is prompted by '[s]pecific aspects of characterisation, such as naming, description, indirect implication of traits, reliance on types, relative flatness or roundness, depicted actions, role in plot trajectories, quality of attributed speech, and mode of representation of consciousness', and thus they also contribute for empathy<sup>13</sup>. It is the way in which Hamlet is built, told, and perceived that makes us empathise with him rather than sympathise.

As readers or viewers, we are fascinated by characters like the anti-heroes because of their very characteristics. We are attracted by their vigorous and hefty presence,

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<sup>12</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, p. 42.

<sup>13</sup> Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback (Oxford New York Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 93.



even by their actions, because it may even be argued that this process of identification provides us with a feeling of catharsis, a way to express repressed impulses and feelings deemed socially unacceptable. And if a wide range of preoccupied thinkers with the power of identification can be observed in the course of history, as previously mentioned<sup>14</sup>, the reading public tends to enjoy these morally complex and liminal characters more. Aristotle himself had advised intermingling badness and goodness to better captivate the viewer's attention and interest<sup>15</sup>. This mixture of good and bad has always been there, and it has always captured our attention and fascinated us.

Reading or watching stories and films about anti-heroes *does* create identification, in terms of negative empathy. In works of art, we are often asked to identify with such characters, despite the fact that what they do, their actions, plotting or scheming, is almost always unapologetically evil. What we do is empathise with them, and the aesthetic dimension resulting from that empathising is one that actively questions and undermines the very possibility to act within shared moral frames<sup>16</sup>. The viewer/reader is torn apart, partially identifying with the character for the positive traits he was initially endowed with, but yet, s/he is also repelled by him because of the atrocities he proves himself capable of. For this reason, negative empathy plays a crucial role in the popularity of the anti-heroes and the success of their stories.

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<sup>14</sup> Ulqinaku and others, pp. 302–12.

<sup>15</sup> After having discussed what does not make a tragic hero and having excluded the ends of the scale between goodness and badness, Aristotle concludes that what “[w]e are left, then, with [is] a person in between: a man not outstanding in virtue or justice, brought down through vice or depravity, who falls into adversity not through vice or depravity but because he errs in some way”. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Anthony Kenny, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 32

<sup>16</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, p. 112.

As we will see, many studies have noted the proliferation of tv-series and movies about these characters. It is appropriate for us to differentiate between the type of character in the object here and other villain-like figures whose popularity has recently risen. There have also been (and continue to be) representations of antihero-akin characters, such as those by DC Comics in *Venom* (2018) or *Suicide Squad* (2016), but these will not be taken into analysis in this study. Their characterisation may be very close to that of the anti-hero we will discuss here, of someone who commits criminal, morally questionable acts to fulfil personal satisfaction, who puzzles and actively challenges the spectator. The characters object of these movies, however, take shape more of dark heroes, endowed with a characterisation typical of the villain, while acting for a greater good, and thus fulfilling the traditional position allotted to a positive protagonist. Characters like Harley Quinn or Deadshot do not constitute examples of narratives of anti-heroes like those analysed here because they still revolve around the classic protagonist-antagonist pair. As the main characters, they are less-traditional protagonists with a *positive* aim (e.g., saving the world from an evil alien, as seen in *Venom*). While the protagonist is endowed with less positive characteristics than usual, he still fights against a traditionally characterised villain for a traditionally positive greater good, while, as I said, the anti-heroes we will deal with here do not do that: in their aim of getting more power or revenge, it is the goal itself which is not positive, and which is achieved through morally questionable and evil actions. For this reason, this research will not consider these types of characters.

This dissertation will also shy away from any encyclopaedic aim. The works considered constitute an adequate pool of research in English literature as they are commonly recognised as the basis of the anti-hero archetype in the field. The structure for this analysis will thus be the following: I will begin with the description of the evolution of the anti-hero's characterisation in the narrative, which will bring him from an esteemed position akin to that of a positive hero to being despised, and where he will experience a decrease in his value in the narrative; I will then move

to a study of the setting, where we will see what kind of connections the author has drawn between the anti-hero and the setting itself to suggest the character's inner or health state; finally, I will address the character's projection to the future and what kind of consequences this brings upon him. The case studies taken into consideration are two from English literature: John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. I have chosen to adhere to the chronological order.

*Macbeth* is Shakespeare's shortest tragedy, and it will provide us with undoubtedly one of the quintessential anti-heroes in English literature. Macbeth constitutes one of the best examples of the crossing between the typical anti-hero embodied by Hamlet, who doubts and broods over actions before taking decisions, and a tragic hero, who manages to incite emotions of pity, fear, and catharsis in the audience<sup>17</sup>. The main action of the tragedy is about Macbeth and his attempt to become King in the fastest way possible, which means killing every person that stands in between himself and his aim after having been prophesied by the three Weird Sisters that one day he shall be King. After doing so, he realises that he is more and more alone, and starts getting sick; this sickness and the unnaturalness of his action (that of killing the rightful King) will bring him and his wife to madness, and we will see this unnatural deed procuring unnatural consequences in the setting, too. The fast pace of the action, the continuous stress on the future and Macbeth's need to accelerate the ripening of time will push him and his wife towards unspeakable actions – even killing their own friend Macduff's wife and children. Macbeth will be analysed together with what is often considered its twin tragedy *Hamlet*, since they both belong to the category of the anti-hero. While keeping the former in a privileged position in the study, the latter will provide substantial examples as well as opportunities for confrontations.

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<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, p. 23.

Milton's epic poem described a break between a before and an after not just in the arts, but in culture as well, and it proved particularly important in the redefinition and new attention drawn on a character like Satan, who is described as the origin of evil by Milton himself. However, because of Satan's particular characterisation and because Milton adopted his point of view to tell the story, we oftentimes recognise Satan as a heroic figure, rather than a simple villain. Satan is the main cause of the Fall of Mankind because he tempted Eve into eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, something that God had specifically forbidden. Throughout the narrative, Satan also presents the characteristics of an anti-hero together with those of a tragic hero, since Milton's aim was combining epic and tragedy; this allows the character to doubt before making his decisions. Satan's story begins in Hell, where he has landed with the other Fallen Angels; a council is held, and he heroically offers to go seek God's new creation to strike back at him by either turning Man on their side or destroying him. The underlying hope is that of regaining Heaven one way or the other, but this is not possible. Satan then tempts Eve and goes back to Hell to boast about his success, which will not last long, for all the Fallen Angels will be turned into snakes under God's command. Satan is thoroughly associated with celestial phenomena that seventeenth-century people believed to be bad omens. His very rebellion also leads to the creation of Hell, often referred to as being inside of him. In his wondering, he thus takes Hell around and influences the narrative in this sense, too. His anxiety to get away from the pain he feels also leads him to make the decision of tempting Eve without thinking enough about the possible consequences, which, in turn, end up being his eternal damnation in Hell and his temporary transformation in a snake. Hints at Adam's anxiety for the future will be made, together with a comparison between his and Eve's loss of innocence with Satan's. For this reason, I will also touch upon William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789), as they deal with the important themes of loss of innocence and experience gained.

On female anti-heroes and gender inequality in literary representation

We live in a patriarchal world with normalised stigmas around women that often impede us from fulfilling our dreams or needs. Unfortunately, this reality extends to movies and literature, too. While this dissertation is certainly not centred on gender studies, I feel the need to make a preliminary remark as a woman addressing solely male characters in the anti-hero category. I will always refer to anti-heroes as men in this dissertation, so I will only use male pronouns. This is not to be taken as an indication that anti-heroes are solely men – there *are* female anti-heroes in movies and literature – but it is needed because the protagonists of the plays and epic here analysed are indeed male. It has been noted that there is a disequilibrium in the depiction of female anti-heroes, and given the little pool of examples available, quality is also affected<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, the traits typically displayed by anti-heroes (e.g., callousness, rebelliousness, the fast life strategy mentioned before etc.) are typically hypermasculine and associated with men, and obviously frowned upon when they are connected to women instead. ‘Female anti-heroes have the additional contend with violating cultural expectations for women (i.e., that women be likeable) and are often depicted questioning or feeling guilty about their actions’<sup>19</sup> when instead for men, it is not only desired but even expected to display such behaviours and are never depicted questioning their actions. While I take into account the issue, given the nature and subject of my dissertation, I will not be addressing it in this context.

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<sup>18</sup> Dara Greenwood, Angélique Ribieras, and Allan Clifton, ‘The Dark Side of Antiheroes: Antisocial Tendencies and Affinity for Morally Ambiguous Characters.’, *Psychology of Popular Media*, 10 (2020), p. 4 <<https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000334>>.

<sup>19</sup> Greenwood, Ribieras, and Clifton, p. 10.



# Chapter 1

## 1.1 Heroism and Its Importance

Most stories we read and analyse revolve around a central character we commonly recognise as the hero, a generally positive character whose aim will take him on a journey from one situation and place to another, where his sacrifice will reward him in some way. This stereotypical perception is to be attributed to the traditional structure of folktales Vladimir Propp analysed, and that bought him to publish an extremely influential book on the theme in 1928, so much so that it gave us the basis to explore most (if not all) stories. In his *Morphology of the Folktale*<sup>1</sup>, he listed and described the types of characters we can encounter in Russian folktales and their function in the story, but most importantly, he gave us a fundamental tool to analyse stories of all types. In his work, he mentions how every character (or *dramatis personae*) has a function and a sphere of action they occupy, and which ‘in toto correspond to their respective performers.’<sup>2</sup> Heroes are the central characters; they are the “good guys” that fight against the villain or antagonist in order to get something or rescue someone. They are thus characters that, as soon as they realise that they are lacking something, either decide to act to fill that lack or suffer passively<sup>3</sup>.

A stereotypical understanding of what a hero is usually resonates much better with the first one, especially since the Western ideal hero was forged under the influence of Hercules<sup>4</sup>, a mythical figure with as many positive traits as one could possibly

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (University of Texas Press, 1968), JSTOR <<https://doi.org/10.7560/783911>>.

<sup>2</sup> Propp, p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> Propp, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Dara Marks, *L'arco di trasformazione del personaggio*, trans. by Daniela Scopelliti, *Manuali*, 89, Nuova edizione (Roma: Dino Audino, 2007), p. 42.

think of (the darker ones, as Marks notices, were conveniently ignored). If we think about it, as suggested by Marks, a typical Western hero is just like him: ‘a champion of justice, the defender of the weak, the champion of the oppressed, a good person in all respects.’. We are thus conditioned to always think of the hero as a positive figure around whom the story unfolds and to whom a restorative or advantageous ending is beneficial. This also helps to explain the proliferation of movies and literature in general centred on the figure of the hero, from superheroes to the dark heroes I was referring to in the Introduction.

### 1.1.1 The Hero Archetype

The idea of a hero has always been fundamental to humans, so much so that it constitutes one of the archetypes described by Carl Gustav Jung. Archetypes are a model of personality always comprising a super-inheritance common to all humans<sup>5</sup>, primordial images shared in a collective unconscious<sup>6</sup>.

Archetypes are typical forms of apprehension; indeed, wherever we meet with uniformly and regularly recurring ways of apprehension, they are referable to archetypes.

The collective unconscious consists of the sum of the instincts and their correlates the archetypes. Just as everybody possesses instincts, so he also possesses archetypes.<sup>7</sup>

Some psychological archetypes can be connected to myths, tales, or life experiences shared by everyone, which are part of the universal language used in the narrative, making it possible to have universal narrations<sup>8</sup>. This is one of the reasons why we can identify with heroes independently of our sociocultural background.

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher Vogler, *Il viaggio dell'eroe: la struttura del mito ad uso di scrittori di narrativa e di cinema*, trans. by Jusi Loreti, Manuali, 1, Nuova edizione (Roma: Dino Audino, 2010), p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> C. G. Jung, ‘INSTINCT AND THE UNCONSCIOUS’, *British Journal of Psychology*, 1904-1920, 10.1 (1919), 15–23 (pp. 19–22) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8295.1919.tb00003.x>>.

<sup>7</sup> Jung, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Vogler, pp. 26–28.



The hero archetype also embodies the Freudian Id, that part of the human mind that sets us apart from the rest of humanity. As a character, the hero is capable of going beyond the limits and illusions of the Id, and, as we will see in the case studies, these traits will be particularly highlighted in a continuous search for completion and fulfilment. This often brings the hero to the final sacrifice, where he renounces something precious to him or even his life<sup>9</sup>. As we will see, Macbeth will pay with his own life for his mistaken interpretation of the Witches' words. At the same time, Satan loses Heaven in rebellion against God, and again, Adam and Eve lose their innocence when they eat the Forbidden Fruit.

In death, 'true heroism is represented' because it shows that the character is open to paying whatever price for what he is striving for. In a way, we could argue, that it is exactly because they die that we identify better with them because they are eager to sacrifice it all. In the case studies that I will analyse, demise comes for the hero in the end, and it is exactly because of that that they strike us the most, for it shows us to what extent human nature can take us. This constitutes an interesting side of heroism, for we usually define it as 'a positive, or pro-social, phenomenon'<sup>10</sup> where the hero is 'a kind of mythological being [...] or person of unique talent, charisma and willpower'<sup>11</sup> and with this, of course, comes a plethora of positive attributes, and most of all a positive aim. However, this is not always the case.

### 1.1.2 The Anti-hero

Just like Propp did, as mentioned before, Vogler identifies two types of hero: one that is determined, enthusiastic, and involved in his adventure and that is capable

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<sup>9</sup> Vogler, pp. 29–31.

<sup>10</sup> Kristian Frisk, 'What Makes a Hero? Theorising the Social Structuring of Heroism', *Sociology*, 53.1 (2019), 87–103 (p. 99) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038518764568>>.

<sup>11</sup> Frisk, p. 93.

of going on with lots of courage and motivation – like Hercules, for instance; and another type which is much more reluctant, full of doubts and hesitation<sup>12</sup> – just like Shakespeare’s Hamlet. This last type engages in copious thinking, doubting, and plotting, and does not spend much time acting. What is interesting about these characters is that they sometimes represent outsiders we would not normally identify with, but we manage to since the only connection we can create with the story is through the protagonist<sup>13</sup>.

Anti-heroes are not the opposite of a Proppian hero and do not automatically constitute negative characters. They are ‘a particular type of Hero’ that can either be cynical and closed off to society for some reason, or tragic heroes<sup>14</sup>. They usually lack the typical characteristics allotted to the positive hero, such as courage, determination, and enterprising spirit, while being portrayed as indecisive, inept, and tormented internally<sup>15</sup>. Tragic heroes were first described by Aristotle, who defined them as particularly able to incite feelings of pity, fear, and catharsis in the spectator, neither outright good nor evil, whose story will revolve around his good luck in life turning into bad.<sup>16</sup> The union of the two categories is possible, and it is the case for the case studies taken into consideration here, which proves to be particularly important for our emotional engagement to the characters<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Vogler, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> Marks, pp. 18–19.

<sup>14</sup> Vogler, p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> Stefano Ercolino and Massimo Fusillo, *Empatia Negativa: Il Punto Di Vista Del Male*, Agone, 17, Prima edizione (Milan: Bompiani, 2022), p. 312.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Anthony Kenny, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 23, 32.

<sup>17</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, pp. 312–13.

Borrowing Propp's words, we could also say that in this particular type of character, the spheres of the hero and the villain slightly coincide<sup>18</sup>, as they do in some cases<sup>19</sup>. The hero becomes darker, his aims and characteristics not so crystal clear, and the means they use, too. This, however, does not automatically make them evil; it attributes some of the villain's characteristics to the hero. Villains are rarely capable of arousing empathy, and something that they typically lack is psychological depth, which, together with a round characterisation, is precisely what triggers the allegiance<sup>20</sup> with the character that ultimately brings to the aesthetic experience of negative empathy<sup>21</sup>, at least in the case studies here analysed. Tragic heroes or anti-heroes cannot defeat their inner turmoil and are consequently crushed by it. While Vogler imputes our attraction to them solely to the possibility of experiencing their fall indirectly, the engagement we develop with them is more complicated. I shall return on this later.

Nevertheless, in the protagonist, we can retrace an urgent need to fulfil one's aim, to complete or overcome internal or external difficulties – which pushes the story forward and ultimately creates a bond with the audience, for this is “the universal common denominator of human experience”, a dilemma that prompts us to go towards an unknown future<sup>22</sup>. We do not know where we are going as much as the protagonist does not; we may have a vague idea, but we cannot fulfil an entire life plan without considering some inevitable changes. This is also a factor that prompts identification with the protagonist-hero. The protagonist is the character through

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<sup>18</sup> Dara Greenwood, Angélique Ribieras, and Allan Clifton, ‘The Dark Side of Antiheroes: Antisocial Tendencies and Affinity for Morally Ambiguous Characters.’, *Psychology of Popular Media*, 10 (2020), p. 4 <<https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000334>>.

<sup>19</sup> Propp, pp. 82–83.

<sup>20</sup> Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 84.

<sup>21</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, pp. 83–91.

<sup>22</sup> Marks, pp. 14–22.

whom we experience the plot because he is the person who is affected by action and conflict, the one around whom the main aims of the plot revolve and the one who carries on the plot. Marks has an interesting take on the protagonist-hero when she argues that the internal aim of the character is always that of becoming a hero but that the positive outcome is not to be taken for granted. She, in fact, argues that the distinction between the enthusiastic and tragic hero depends majorly on the story's end; the character's internal aim describes the trajectory the story has to take and, ultimately, its end, too<sup>23</sup>. The conflict pushes the story forward, and the one that works best seems to be the internal one, as we will see.

The protagonist's needs and aims are at centre stage and shape his journey. Thus, the nature of his choices is ultimately what defines him, just like it happens for humans<sup>24</sup>. Macbeth is defined by his need to be King; Satan is defined by his need for revenge on God, just like Eve and Adam are by their need for knowledge. What is important here is that all these characters act consciously. What they do is propelled by their needs, but they do it because they allow that need to take control of them. It is also important to point out that the type of actions that the protagonists or anti-heroes take to fulfil their needs shapes our understanding and moral judgment of them. This factor, too, guides us in distinguishing a hero from an anti-hero, and, as Greenwood et al. have pointed out, it contributes to their complex morality since there is no clear boundary between morality and immorality in them. Anti-heroes stand equally far from moral heroes and immoral villains. This sub-archetype of hero counts with a broad spectrum of possibilities, but dubious morality always plays an important role in their characterisation<sup>25</sup>. As Greenwood et al. put it, 'one person's hero is another person's villain and vice versa.'<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Marks, p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> Marks, p. 64.

<sup>25</sup> Greenwood, Ribieras, and Clifton, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Greenwood, Ribieras, and Clifton, p. 7.

Since this is a prevalently category male, this type of character's hypermasculine ideals and behaviour have been connected with the Dark Triad (DT)<sup>27</sup>, which refers to personality traits of psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism<sup>28</sup>.

DT traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Muris et al., 2017) seem ripe for examination in the context of antihero affinity; they have been conceptualized as central to the antiheroic archetype in popular culture (Jonason et al., 2012). The three constructs represent negative personality traits that, although not necessarily disordered, all transgress against social norms in different ways. Narcissism (in this sense) is characterized by grandiosity and egotism (Miller et al., 2017), Machiavellianism by getting what one wants at all costs (Christie & Geis, 1970), and psychopathy by a lack of remorse for suffering caused to others (Hare, 1996).<sup>29</sup>

This field of study may again suggest that anti-heroes, indeed, are negative characters, but we should always remember that, in the case of the anti-hero, negative traits can and will be added to more positive ones to obtain a morally ambiguous character whose aim is to question our own moral compass. I will now talk more about these positive traits.

## 1.2 Fatal Flaws Bring on Decreasing Survival Systems

### 1.2.1 Initial Positive Representation

Every character describes an arc that brings him from point A in his fictional existence to point B. What happens in between constitutes the story's plot, but before beginning his journey, the protagonist has to encounter an event that changes his course. As fictional representations of humans, as archetypes, protagonists embody imperfection, but they are first presented as masters with good traits that

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<sup>27</sup> Greenwood, Ribieras, and Clifton, pp. 1–2.

<sup>28</sup> Melissa M. McDonald, M. Brent Donnellan, and Carlos David Navarrete, 'A Life History Approach to Understanding the Dark Triad', *Personality and Individual Differences*, 52.5 (2012), 601–5 (p. 601) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2011.12.003>>.

<sup>29</sup> Greenwood, Ribieras, and Clifton, p. 2.

enable identification<sup>30</sup>. At the beginning of either of the case studies, we frequently find a particular focus on these characteristics. The author enables the connection between the reader-spectator and the protagonist, ‘showing his motivations, social and familial backgrounds, inner conflict’<sup>31</sup>; these are all elements that show us, in the end, how similar we are in the experience of being human. Macbeth starts out as an esteemed Thane to whom are attributed worthiness, manliness, strength, and power; we read through the lines that he is hesitating when faced with the possibility of becoming King. Similarly, Satan is initially moved by the will of reconquering Heaven and not even so deep down is suffering for his loss. These characters need to be represented like this initially because, otherwise, they would be outright villains. If we eliminate the doubts out of Hamlet’s performance on stage and do not let his need for an act of revenge that cannot grant salvation into the scene with us stop him, he would just be an assassin killing his uncle while he is praying – quite unavoidably a trait that would never make a morally ambiguous character, let alone a positive one. However, knowing what we know about his background (namely, that his uncle has killed his father, married his mother and bestowed upon his head a death sentence), we can identify with him.

That first positive characterisation with which the character is presented is precisely the first instance of the empathic bridge, the base that allows negative empathy. First, we engage in an empathic bridge, then that connection is tested by the narrative by having us engage in an aesthetic experience of uneasiness, which in turn makes us swing between emotional attachment and disengagement<sup>32</sup>. What comes later, the evil and wickedness that follow, are too far beyond moral limits to be enjoyable. Slaughtering an entire innocent family cannot enable identification with Macbeth; it only shows to what extent the character can come, and how low

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<sup>30</sup> Marks, p. 83.

<sup>31</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, p. 126.

<sup>32</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, p. 78.

he can get before meeting his final demise. For this reason, Satan is shown as a powerful orator – because we need that same rhetoric to have some catch to identify with him. In their doubting, being tempted, we get to see a spec of the imperfection I mentioned before, which is a remarkable human trait. It is that indecision that we share with them that makes them similar to us; given that we tend to like what is similar to us<sup>33</sup>, we can easily identify with them. And this is precisely what makes a story fascinating and enchanting<sup>34</sup>.

### 1.2.2 Inner Turmoil: A Request for Change

The story's internal strength can be retraced in the character's strive to grow or succumb, for life or death. Macbeth's decisions take him on a course directed to damnation and ultimately death, just like Hamlet's. What Marks defines a character's 'survival system' will bring his value downwards until the point where he will collapse under his own weight if it becomes meaningless, like in the case of Macbeth's descent to a life that signifies nothing. We can build our survival system on dependency or independency from others, but those very others will not take the character to his end, so, this is why the protagonists need an internal struggle first. The biggest transformation in a character is, in fact, the assertion of one's self, but reclaiming that self may disrupt the character altogether<sup>35</sup>.

This happens because, in the case of the anti-hero, what the character claims is actually darkness itself that had been lingering in their system all the while, which, again, is an instance that usually would belong to the villain, not the hero. Marks, quoting Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, remarks that 'the hero has to either set aside his pride, his virtue, his own life and bend, or submit to something absolutely intolerable. Then, he realises that his opposer and he do not

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<sup>33</sup> Greenwood, Ribieras, and Clifton, p. 11.

<sup>34</sup> Marks, p. 78.

<sup>35</sup> Marks, pp. 80–81.

belong to different species but are made of the same substance'<sup>36</sup>. It is exactly pride that the anti-heroes analysed in the case studies cannot cast aside, for it is exactly what constitutes them, as we will see; nonetheless, the way we face experiences is together with the way we picture ourselves what determines who we are, and the same happens for fictional characters.

The next step for the character is to put together and sustain his own survival in an internal struggle. At this point of the story, the protagonist is presented with a 'request or command'<sup>37</sup> that starts his descent; this is the moment where the inner chaos is unleashed and takes control of him. Not only can we identify it in the character's behaviour, but also in the internal turmoil that will push the story forward. This 'fatal flaw' is more evident when the character's growth has to stop because of his actions<sup>38</sup>: think of Macbeth, whose worthiness only diminishes after his series of murders. Antiheroes stop developing when they encounter their fatal flaw, and from that moment on, they try to hold on to their precarious existence with all their strength, but what they have done oftentimes has pushed them too far away for other characters (or us) to associate themselves with him and is thus often found alone<sup>39</sup> (Macbeth is not even human at the end of the tragedy, reduced to an animal, while Adam and Eve walk alone out of the Garden of Eden knowing that have lost it forever). The character's will to stick to this behaviour despite the evident consequences around him is really what shows us that the character is loyal to their nature, and in being so, he does not abandon his code of conduct, even if he is more and more stranded.

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<sup>36</sup> Marks, p. 82.

<sup>37</sup> Propp, p. 36.

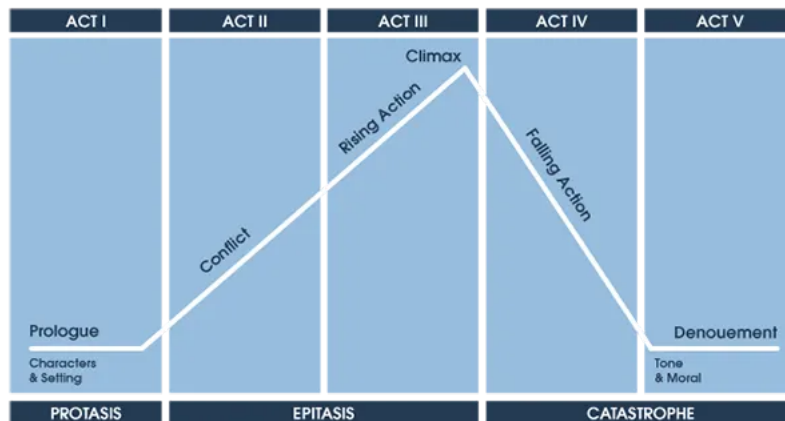
<sup>38</sup> Marks, p. 86.

<sup>39</sup> Marks, pp. 84–87.



### 1.3 The Story's Structure: A Mirror Held Up to the Protagonist

The arc that the protagonist undergoes is reflected in the structure of the story. As I mentioned, the protagonist starts from point A in his fictional life and draws a line that takes him to point B. This line, however, is not straight; it is a parable that brings the tragic hero upwards towards a turning point and then downwards to his demise. This is best exemplified in the structure of a Shakespearian tragedy. Let's then take *Macbeth* as an example. The play begins with Macbeth esteemed and highly valued by everyone (point A), but, unfortunately for him, he encounters the Witches, who hail him with a future of greatness – being King of Scotland. This is when his tragedy is set in motion, and the trajectory starts to take off. Act I makes up the ascent: he is still sane, and we can still retrace his humanity in him; his means are still quite understandable (but note, not justifiable), and identification is still possible. Act II lets the conflict set in: we see a tempted Macbeth doubting, panicking even, over the possibility of being King through murder. Then, in Act III, we have the turning point, where detachment from the character starts to happen. His actions are too far beyond moral restraints to be able to identify with him: first, he kills Banquo and attempts to kill his son, too, and then, when he sees the former's Ghost and is taken by a fit of madness, Macbeth truly reveals his true nature (Turning point or climax). Acts IV and V constitute the descent, with the protagonist progressively losing support, his wife, and sanity too. In the end, he is nothing but a grotesque creature and is even compared to a dwarf wearing a giant's clothes. This trajectory has brought him upwards so fast that his descent is anything but delicate when he goes down, and thus, he is killed.



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Even though it has a twelve-structure book, the same happens in *Paradise Lost*, too. We get a beginning *in medias res* where we meet the Fallen Angels and Satan (point A). They plot against God to regain Paradise, Satan himself manages to corrupt Mankind by tempting Eve and Adam but knows that what he is doing is wrong (climax or turning point). When he returns to Hell to brag about the Fallen Angels' victory over Heaven, they are all turned into serpents and end up sharing the same punishment as they had shared the same guilt (point B). The Angels cannot die, of course, because they are immortal beings, but, given their transformation into animals, we have a *fil rouge* with Macbeth, who, in the end, as we will see, will lose all his human attributes. The same structure can be applied to Adam and Even, and so on. For this reason, a universal structure can be applied to tragedy, so much so that even today, it is still used and proves to be particularly successful<sup>41</sup>. 'The five-act structure gives both the buildup to and fall from the climax whole acts to breathe. Instead of getting stuck in a never-ending second act, much of the story is pushed to the fourth act, or the fallout from the big moment', Saint James argues.

<sup>40</sup> Emily Saint James, 'Breaking Bad at 10: Remembering Its Shakespearean Storytelling Genius', *Vox*, 20 January 2018 <<https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/1/20/16910760/breaking-bad-10th-anniversary-birthday-structure>> [accessed 11 September 2023].

<sup>41</sup> Saint James.

### 1.3.1 The Effects of the Protagonist on His Surroundings

As Watson laments, the setting is oftentimes overlooked in character studies<sup>42</sup>. We tend to focus solely on the character (particularly the main one, the protagonist), leaving behind all that belongs to the setting. However, setting and character help unveil each other, and through the analysis of one, we also understand the other. Quoting Katherine Paterson, Watson reminds us that ‘It is vital that the place in which a story takes place be a true one. Because the place will shape the story, just as place shapes lives in the actual world’, and authors can ‘use setting as atmosphere to skillfully introduce and reinforce their novels’ themes’<sup>43</sup>.

This is where we can trace the anti-hero’s role in shaping the setting. In *Macbeth*, in particular, we see a swift shift in the characteristics of the setting from before to after the murders, and, as we will see, it is arguably the effect of the protagonist on it, not the opposite, happening. It is, in fact, only after the murders, only after Satan’s fall, that Hell is unleashed in Scotland in the Shakespearean tragedy and that Hell is created altogether in Milton’s epic. In Hell, the Fallen Angels lament the fear of losing their angelic traits due to the setting influencing them, as we will see. Thus, the setting also creates a solid foil for the protagonist and his mind. Macbeth’s sickness is reflected in the unnatural deeds happening in Scotland, Satan’s pain could be retraced in the flames of Hell. Precisely as Watson shows, the setting unveils the anti-hero’s state, just like the anti-hero influences it with his doing.

In this remarkable connection, we can trace that the character has a connection with his setting, not just with his plot. ‘Recognizing the importance of setting in isolation

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<sup>42</sup> Jerry J. Watson, ‘An Integral Setting Tells More than When and Where’, *The Reading Teacher*, 44.9 (1991), 638–46 (p. 638).

<sup>43</sup> Watson, pp. 643–44.

from other literary elements does not, in and of itself, provide for a full understanding of an author's work'; however, 'Bernice Cullinan (1989) regards the holistic approach as important to gaining the full benefit of reading fiction. She states, "Theme, plot, and character, all woven into the physical and social fabric of time and place, interact with setting".'<sup>44</sup> This is why I do not consider the setting alone in the case studies' analysis; it represents only a section of the overall project, one whose aim is to mirror and strengthen the themes already explored in the protagonist.

The effect that the anti-hero has on his surroundings is that of turning an otherwise normal, not emotionally charged world into one that not only is but that, as I said, mirrors the devastation and pain that he feels in the first place. I will thus dedicate a section of the analysis to this matter. This is made necessary because of the aforementioned close connection between the protagonist and the setting, and also because it offers us a materialisation of the character's psychology.

#### 1.4 Projection into the Future: How Anti-heroes' Restlessness Affects Their Relationship with Time

We have clearly established that anti-heroes do not stop for any reason and are easily described as restless. In their restlessness, they have been studied through the life-history strategy (LHT) in order to insert them into a theoretical framework. LHT is a theory borrowed from evolutionary theory<sup>45</sup> that seeks to understand 'why and how species differ in the amount of energies allocated to continued survival and reproduction'<sup>46</sup>. It is made up of two directions: on the one hand, we have the

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<sup>44</sup> Watson, p. 645.

<sup>45</sup> McDonald, Donnellan, and Navarrete, p. 601.

<sup>46</sup> Aulona Ulqinaku and others, 'The Breaking Bad Effect: Priming with an Antihero Increases Sensation Seeking', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 60.1 (2021), 294–315 (p. 295) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12374>>.

fast life strategy, where resources are used to get quick results and processes, constituting instant gratification; on the other, there is the slow life strategy, where energy is allotted and distributed evenly towards the future. Ulqinaku et al. argue that humans are mostly described as adopting a slow life strategy depending on the experiences and number of resources they experienced in their childhood. With anti-heroes, however, we get the opposite: they ‘focus on the present and engage in the moment.’<sup>47</sup> While this is true, and anti-heroes effectively seek present gratification, it is not the entire picture.

In fact, this approach has proved only partially the case. McDonald et al. have conducted an interesting study where they crossed the Dark Triad characteristics usually associated with the fast life strategy. This particularly makes sense in our context because the DT traits have been associated with anti-heroes, as we have seen. These scholars have found that only some of those characteristics belong to a fast life strategy, while others within the same category do not. Specifically, ‘impulsive antisociality, entitlement/ exploitativeness, Machiavellianism, unrestricted sociosexuality, and aggression share attributes such as a lack of self-control and a willingness to use others for gain’ and are indicators of a fast life strategy, while ‘fearless dominance, leadership/authority, and grandiose exhibitionism share attributes such as confidence, social dominance, self-esteem, and low anxiety’<sup>48</sup> and are thus indicators of a slow life strategy. Those behaviours associated with impulsiveness and anti-sociality share both characteristics of slow and fast strategy<sup>49</sup>. In short, the elements linked to psychopathy and narcissism can be retraced in both fast and slow life history strategies.

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<sup>47</sup> Ulqinaku and others, p. 312.

<sup>48</sup> McDonald, Donnellan, and Navarrete, p. 604.

<sup>49</sup> McDonald, Donnellan, and Navarrete, p. 605.

This helps us show that, while anti-heroes are focused on present gratification, have bold personalities, and often have high self-esteem, they do not entirely fit into the LHS categorisation. This happens because they also feel anxiety for the future to a point where, in Macbeth's case, for example, he is unable to wait and quite proverbially give time to time and has to act against the natural order for his desire to be met when he wants to. Similarly, Satan is anxious because he is moved by pain and desire to alleviate that very pain. Because of this feeling, he needs to gather his strengths to fully accept evil and go against his conscience in tempting Eve.

Anti-heroes move from one gratification to the next because they are in toto unable to cope with the anxiety that they feel for their future. In *Paradise Lost*, there is a continuous projection to the future in the figure of 'a future promised in vision' and the very last two books of the epic balances the protagonists in between the past and a future only pledged yet to materialise<sup>50</sup>. That continuous projection can be traced in Satan, too, and in his urge to take revenge on God at the expense of man. Macbeth, for his part, kills Duncan to gain the throne but is moved to murder Banquo because of anxiety; again, he visits the Witches because of this very same anxiety.

The effect that this projection strikes is that of an acceleration – at least for what concerns the psycho-physical state of the protagonist. The time between each gratification passes faster and faster as they go on, for they are unable to satisfy themselves entirely with their present state due to the constant state of anxiety they lie in. The acceleration, in turn, produces more anxiety, which fuels the inner turmoil and distress they feel, and so the cycle starts all over again.

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<sup>50</sup> Valerie Carnes, 'Time and Language in Milton's *Paradise Lost*', *ELH*, 37.4 (1970), 517–39 (p. 536) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2872380>>.

### 1.5 The Fascination and Charisma Anti-heroes Exert

Anti-heroes have become more and more popular in the last decades<sup>51</sup>, and we can find proof of this in the proliferation of TV series on them. Din Djarin from *The Mandalorian*, Tony Montana from *Scarface*, and Walter White from *Breaking Bad* are just a few characters belonging to this category that have gained incredible success among the public and critics alike. Given their undeniable success, one might wonder why people would enjoy these characters so much. We tend to associate these characters with moral ambiguity or suspense, and it is indeed suspense that a study found to be one of the most used to describe enjoyable works of literature<sup>52</sup>.

It is actually suspense that is the base of the engagement we feel for these characters because we desire a certain outcome for one character or another, resulting in an urge for resolution throughout the whole suspenseful arc<sup>53</sup>. It becomes clear that a suspenseful character is much more desirable and likeable than an entirely good or evil one, but this suspense comes together a specific type of hero – one that is in between good and bad, one that embodies both and is liminal<sup>54</sup>, that is, the anti-hero. This description clearly shows that liminal beings like anti-heroes have all that takes to be extremely popular because of their very nature; as a matter of fact, Salgaro et al. point out in their study that what they call the BadCharacter in their experiment is described as much more captivating and entertaining than the Evil and the Good one.

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<sup>51</sup> Fuad Halwani, 'The Trickster in Serialized Television: An Anti-Hero of Postmodern Mythologies', *AVANCA | CINEMA*, 2021, 720-727 (p. 720) <<https://doi.org/10.37390/avancacinema.2020.a182>>.

<sup>52</sup> Christine A. Knoop and others, 'Mapping the Aesthetic Space of Literature "from Below"', *Poetics*, 56 (2016), 35–49 (p. 41) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2016.02.001>>.

<sup>53</sup> Knoop and others, p. 41.

<sup>54</sup> Massimo Salgaro, Valentin Wagner, and Winfried Menninghaus, 'A Good, a Bad, and an Evil Character: Who Renders a Novel Most Enjoyable?☆', *Poetics*, 87 (2021), 101550 (p. 7) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2021.101550>>.

A number of literary devices prompt this identification with anti-heroes. We can retrace this in Keen's analysis, cited by Ercolino: 'naming, description, indirect implication of traits, reliance on types, relative flatness or roundness, depicted actions, role in plot trajectories, quality of attributed speech, and mode of representation of consciousness' can contribute to this peculiar aspect of our aesthetic experience. Moreover, Keen points out that even peculiar narrative settings or situations can direct us towards a specific narrative response towards the character: among these, not only the person in which the narration is told and the location of the narrator, but also 'the style of representation of character's consciousness', while Ercolino adds that 'genre, seriality, length of narration, and narrative pace (slow or fast)' can lead in this direction, too<sup>55</sup>.

Another study found that adopting the perspective of the character can redirect entirely the reader's experience:

When readers adopt the perspective of the protagonist, they become sensitive to information from the character's point view, which may include a variety of elements that encompass the protagonist's physical or mental experience. When engaged in perspective-taking, readers imagine themselves in the role of the "shoes" of the protagonist and, as a result, reading involves a sense of "being there" (Brunyé et al., 2009). There is evidence that perspective-taking includes spatial and visual information the protagonist "sees" (Brunyé et al., 2001; Creer et al., 2019; Horton & Rapp, 2003; O'Brien & Albrecht, 1992; Smith & O'Brien, 2012). Other evidence indicates that perspective-taking also involves the internal state of the character, such as emotional engagement (Brunyé et al., 2011; Child et al., 2018).<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Stefano Ercolino, 'Negative Empathy: History, Theory, Criticism', *Orbis Litterarum*, 73.3 (2018), 243–62 (p. 248) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/oli.12175>>.

<sup>56</sup> Sarah D Creer, Anne E Cook, and Edward J O'Brien, 'Can Readers Fully Adopt the Perspective of the Protagonist?', *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 73.5 (2020), 664–75 (p. 665) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1747021819891407>>.



And again, ‘the first-person point of view can be used as a text-based manipulation that encourages readers to adopt the protagonist’s perspective’<sup>57</sup>, and most importantly, as we said, that ‘a suspenseful context can impact comprehension, even when the readers already know the outcome’<sup>58</sup>. This highlights how central and fundamental the protagonist is and why it is so important to analyse his presence and influence in the story since he shapes our perspective and channels our comprehension to a specific type of liking<sup>59</sup>.

However, despite all the reasons we may find in the search for our engagement to the protagonist in the narrative text itself, we have set aside an important aspect: the empathic response connecting the reader-subject to the protagonist-object.

### 1.5.1 Negative Empathy

When we read, we engage in an empathic relationship with the protagonist<sup>60</sup>. This particular empathic relationship has been the subject of many studies, and the process that shapes the identification and the aesthetic experience has taken on the name of negative empathy.

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<sup>57</sup> Creer, Cook, and O’Brien, p. 672.

<sup>58</sup> Creer, Cook, and O’Brien, p. 671.

<sup>59</sup> For further research on the protagonist’s role in shaping our understanding of the narrative, especially in spatial terms, see also: Adamantini Hatzipanayioti, Alexia Galati, and Marios N. Avraamides, ‘The Protagonist’s First Perspective Influences the Encoding of Spatial Information in Narratives’, *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 69.3 (2016), 506–20 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17470218.2015.1056194>>.

<sup>60</sup> Amy Coplan, ‘Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 62.2 (2004), 141–52 (pp. 148–49).

Negative empathy is a concept first described by Theodor Lipps<sup>61</sup>, which he distinguishes from positive empathy. The former is a particular type of empathy that engages mainly in negative emotions and is able to realise a distance between the empathising subject and the empathised object<sup>62</sup>, while the subject does not consent freely to the experience. The latter, instead, implies a self-activation prompted by the object with which the subject complies willingly<sup>63</sup>. The notion of willing compliance with the experience is extremely important: Lipps argues, as quoted by Ercolino, that ‘in negative empathy, the subject experiences a sort of resistance against what is perceived as an “enemy request” by the object (p. 107); a resistance the introduction of something unpleasurable inside of her-/himself, which generates interior detachment’<sup>64</sup>.

According to Lipps’s view, then, the experience of negative empathy is a ‘specific experience response to objects and people generating (1) conflict, (2) unpleasure, (3) interior detachment, (4) intersubjective awareness, and (5) a judgement of ugliness’<sup>65</sup>. The conflict generates because the activation required by the object cannot be willing on the side of the subject (1) due to the fact that the feeling aroused is one of unpleasure (2), resulting in an interior detachment for the empathising subject that cannot be connected to the object in any way and only stands in front of it (4). This results in a multiplication of perceived individuals, thus making us depart the status of collectiveness with others. In particular, this experience prompts Lipps to affirm that we call ugly (5) the objects that engage us in an experience negative empathy, especially the aesthetic ones.

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<sup>61</sup> Ercolino, p. 244; Ercolino and Fusillo, p. 10.

<sup>62</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, pp. 26–27.

<sup>63</sup> Ercolino, p. 245.

<sup>64</sup> Ercolino, p. 245.

<sup>65</sup> Ercolino, p. 246; Ercolino and Fusillo, p. 33.

When it comes to the aesthetic sphere and because we can enjoy works of art that depict negative or repulsive subjects, Lipps highlights that we true negative empathy is intrinsically impossible in this domain. This happens because of two reasons: firstly, it is the very ‘aesthetic nature of the subject with which we empathise that *protects us* from the negative content of the representation’<sup>66</sup>, which means that no fictional emotion can elicit a similar or corresponding response in the reader, and secondly, ‘the representation of the negative, in the end, would do nothing but affirm the positive’<sup>67</sup>.

Lipps’s conceptualisation has, however, been disregarded through the years, and the concept of negative empathy has evolved a lot from his definition, since ‘strong empirical evidence is still missing in order to unequivocally advocate for the existence of such a connection also in the aesthetic sphere’<sup>68</sup>. Scholars such as Edith Stein and Max Scheler have raised strong arguments against the fusional account of empathy in Lipps’s conceptualisation but oftentimes ended up oversimplifying the concept altogether. It is, in fact, clearly stated in Lipps that empathy is not a fusional experience, as we have seen. Other intellectuals have recently formulated concepts close to Lipps’s, with empathic distress and personal distress coming into play, but these concepts are closer to the idea of sympathy Adam Smith had in the seventeenth century and are more centred on the idea of imagining to feel what the other feels rather than actually feeling it, as in the fusion advocated by Lipps, thus resulting in an experience of closeness<sup>69</sup>.

Keen, however, as we have seen above, points out that identification and situation trigger narrative empathy, where identification is largely more prevalent.

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<sup>66</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, p. 28.

<sup>67</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, p. 30.

<sup>68</sup> Ercolino, p. 245.

<sup>69</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, pp. 35–40.

Nevertheless, this poses a question that cannot be solved, whether the identification or the empathic engagement takes place first, so the issue remains open<sup>70</sup>. As a matter of fact, Ercolino has pointed out that character identification and narrative empathy are different phenomena<sup>71</sup> since they go back to different theoretical backgrounds<sup>72</sup>. It is with Hans Robert Jauss that we see a comeback for pleasure in the aesthetic experience, especially when he talks of the various types of identification that one can have with a work of art, being either associative, admiring, sympathetic, cathartic, and ironic, as Ercolino recalls. In what he calls “aesthetic attitude” to works of art, the cathartic one is particularly important for our speculation, since it, as Ercolino reports, ‘frees the spectator from the real interests and affective entanglements of this world, and puts him into the position of the suffering and beset hero so that his mind and heart may find liberation through tragic emotion or comic relief’<sup>73</sup>. In his account, a safe distance is required for the spectator to enjoy the experience represented in the work of art: no one would enjoy *being* in the same situation as that of a tragic hero, but from a protective distance, we can enjoy the work of art. This came to be particularly celebrated in Burke’s notion of the sublime, where delight (a sort of painful pleasure; pain and pleasure combined) originated from its experience<sup>74</sup>.

While in recent studies mirror neurons have seemingly taken over any other explanation for empathy<sup>75</sup>, it is hardly the case for fictional characters. In real life, as Ercolino and Fusillo quote Morton pointing out, it is arguably impossible to

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<sup>70</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, pp. 42–44.

<sup>71</sup> Ercolino, p. 248.

<sup>72</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, p. 44.

<sup>73</sup> Ercolino, p. 248.

<sup>74</sup> Ercolino, p. 249.

<sup>75</sup> Paolo Legrenzi and Alessandra Jacomuzzi, *Fondamenti di psicologia generale*, 2. ed (Bologna: Il mulino, 2021), pp. 82–83; Paolo Legrenzi and Alessandra Jacomuzzi, *Si fa presto a dire psicologia: come siamo e come crediamo di essere* (Bologna: Il mulino, 2020), pp. 103–4.

empathise with a person that has committed atrocious crimes because of the ‘barrier of decency’, but in the aesthetic sphere, there is no such thing, to the point that there is almost no moral restraint to the empathic response<sup>76</sup>. This is why we can easily empathise with characters like Macbeth, Hamlet, and Satan, for there is no barrier of decency that restrains us from doing so. This happens because in a fictional narrative, we can reconstruct the socioeconomic and psychological background of the character in great detail, and thus we can find all the motifs that prompted him to do so. After all, the key aspect in identifying with fictional characters is that we do not do so in a constant way throughout the narrative. On the contrary, our empathic engagement proves to be discontinuous and only pertinent to certain aspects of the character, something that could never happen in a real-life situation<sup>77</sup>.

‘Freud links the aesthetic pleasure of character identification not only with a catharsis occurring in the safe environment of the fruition of the work of art but *also* with a poietic work of our mind. Novel readers or spectators in the theatre (or the cinema) can give way to negative and repressed emotions and thus empathize with suffering characters’, Ercolino argues, since the subject experiencing the act is other to us that could never cause us harm. This, then, prompts the release of great pleasure in the ‘return of the repressed and the surmounted’, two regressive experiences<sup>78</sup>. This type of experience may be a form of moral contagion that transfers what the author feels for that specific character to the reader, even though the character is negatively described<sup>79</sup>. Gorgias (once again in Ercolino) argued that ‘the aesthetic experience made possible by catharsis is thus characterized by a fundamental ambivalence, which we may regard as the price for the fact that liberating catharsis is acquired through the mediation of the imagery: it is able to

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<sup>76</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, p. 54.

<sup>77</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, pp. 53–56.

<sup>78</sup> Ercolino, p. 251.

<sup>79</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, pp. 62–63.

break the entanglement in the world life, but it can either lead the spectator to free moral identification with an exemplary action, or lock him into mere curiosity, or, finally, drag him through emotional identification into manipulated collected behaviour'. Catharsis can then lead to either pro-social behaviour or not<sup>80</sup>, which makes it possible for us to finally debate over empathy in the aesthetic sphere and to go beyond the obvious but inconvenient connection between empathy and altruism<sup>81</sup>.

When it comes to literature, negative empathy can thus be defined as '*a potentially regressive aesthetic experience, consisting in a cathartic identification with negative characters, which can be either open to agency—indifferently leading either to pro- or antisocial behavior—or limited to the inner life of the empathizing subject*'<sup>82</sup>. These negative characters are so in a disturbing yet seductive way, which may end up evoking destabilizing primary violence, triggering moral anguish, which in its turn prompts the empathizing subject to question his moral assumptions and forces him to take a stance in that regard<sup>83</sup>.

Negative empathy is not exclusive prerogative of anti-heroes (we can feel it also for negative heroes<sup>84</sup>, since the definition game is very broad and variegated, as we said), but their liminal, ambiguous, and moral-questioning natures are incredibly suitable to a kind of empathy that, by definition, too challenges our own morality. Anti-heroes charisma derives from a number of devices prompted to have us identify with them, such as their great rhetorical ability. In dissuading the other characters, they also manage to win over our empathic engagement. As we said,

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<sup>80</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, pp. 66–67.

<sup>81</sup> For more on the illusion of the connection between empathy and altruism or pro-social behaviour, see: Legrenzi and Jacomuzzi, *Si fa presto a dire psicologia*, pp. 137–51.

<sup>82</sup> Ercolino, p. 252.

<sup>83</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, p. 70.

<sup>84</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, p. 312.

then, the mixture of good and evil in them has always proved particularly successful in winning our attention.

### 1.5.2 Devices Conveying Negative Empathy

This section aims to describe the literary devices that convey the aesthetic experience of negative empathy. As seen above, we can and will be attracted by negative emotions and by any type of work of art conveying said emotions. We can consciously enjoy a work of art that depicts horrible deeds, like a movie about the horror of the First World War like *All Quiet on the Western Front*<sup>85</sup>, or a novel on the awful events unfolding to a group of orphan siblings, like in the case of Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden*<sup>86</sup>. In the first, we witness long distressful takes of battle, culminating in one where German soldier Paul is stuck in a crater with an unknown dying soldier that he has just stabbed; the man's gasps and loud coughs for air torment Paul and the viewer alike, occupying and overcoming all the sounds of battle to the point that they are the only sounds to be heard. In the second, the siblings' descent into chaos unfolding before our eyes depicting Jack discovering his body and adolescence, culminates in the final pages, where Julie and he are portrayed having sex in what becomes a horrifying scene of incest<sup>87</sup>. Despite the horror depicted with pictures or words, the reader feels a sense of repulsion together with a form of wicked fascination that glues our eyes to the scene or page alike. This is the effect that negative empathy exerts on us: we end up oscillating between detachment and empathic engagement<sup>88</sup>.

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<sup>85</sup> *All Quiet on the Western Front*, dir. by Edward Berger (Netflix, 2022).

<sup>86</sup> Ian McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, Vintage Fiction, Reissued edition (New York: Vintage, 2016).

<sup>87</sup> McEwan, pp. 149–52.

<sup>88</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, p. 78.

Felski talks about four types of identification: alignment, allegiance, recognition, and empathy<sup>89</sup>. For the aim of this dissertation, I will only focus on the first two.

*Alignment* refers to the formal means by which texts shape a reader's or viewer's access to character: the part played by the work rather than its audience. (It is, in this sense, akin to the idea of "focalization" in narrative theory.) It points to the directive force of narrative, description, and point of view: whose decisions or desires drive a plot; which figures are depicted in scrupulous detail; whose perspective we are invited to adopt. Some characters bask in the ambient warmth of the novel's attention, while others are relegated to a Siberian wasteland, we are made privy to every rueful reflection or flutter of desire in the mind of X, while the inner life of Y remains utterly beyond reach. [...]

*Allegiance* speaks to the question of how ethical or political values—that is, acts of evaluating—draw audiences closer to some figures rather than others. [...] The "is" cannot be disentangled from the "ought"; matters of fact are mixed up with matters of concern. And here there are countless crossings between the modes of aesthetics, ethics, and politics; attempts to purify these modes by keeping them entirely separate are an exercise in futility.

Allegiance, then, is in play whenever we find ourselves siding with a character and what we take that character to stand for—an allegiance that can, of course, be partial, qualified, or ambivalent. Such acts of evaluating affect what audiences perceive and how they respond, shaping assessments of character and situation.<sup>90</sup>

The attachment we feel to the character can be brief and thus last only for the length of the movie or work of literature, or it can have long-lasting effects on how we perceive the world. We can feel aligned with a character who is a victim of events and an anti-hero, but we cannot feel allegiance to both. Doing so with the first does not question our morality, whereas doing it with a character of dubious moral background does<sup>91</sup>. Allegiance, in fact, problematises our relationship with the character.

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<sup>89</sup> Felski, p. xiii.

<sup>90</sup> Felski, pp. 94–96.

<sup>91</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, pp. 82–83.



The kind of ‘empathic distress’ Ercolino and Fusillo talk about is and has been indeed a common device in literature and cinema, especially starting from early modern and modern times, when the ‘psychology of the evil-doer character begins to be defined with more care and to assume a certain degree of complexity.’ This process begins with the anti-hero protagonist of one of the case studies analysed here, Satan from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. This evolution in the characterisation of evil-doer characters is key: as a matter of fact, it seems that psychological profundity, round characterisation, and inner turmoil are indeed essential to trigger the aesthetic experience of negative empathy<sup>92</sup>. We will meet these devices oftentimes in the course of the analysis of the case studies. In fact, what does not lack the anti-heroes analysed here are exactly these characteristics: it is through monologues that we access their psychology, through their own and other characters’ words that we see their turmoil and in foils around the artwork that we witness their distress, while their characterisation is more and more defined as we go on.

As we can see in Ercolino and Fusillo’s analysis of Iago<sup>93</sup>, villains in stories often lack the psychological depth component to trigger our empathic engagement. It is because we have seen an innocent Paul falsifying his age to get enlisted and believing that the wrong name attached to his uniform was because it was too big for the other soldier that we empathise with him even when he kills before our very eyes the French soldier. He cannot be a positive hero, for, even though he is fighting in a war, he remains an assassin, a killer who is confronted for the first time with the consequences of his actions for the first time. His inability to cope with the noises produced by the dying soldier singles him out to himself too as a murderer, and his hysterical crying fit and the sudden need to comfort (at his best) the poor

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<sup>92</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, p. 83.

<sup>93</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, pp. 84-89.

soul drowning in his own blood signal us the inner turmoil and extreme distress of a person who, after all, has a conscience and goes beyond the simple picture of a villain. Paul is a victim, sent to die literally in the last fifteen minutes before the armistice comes into being, and so, in a way, is Satan, too, whose rebellion and subsequent damnation are not caused by his decision, but by God's superior will.

Paul and Satan are both pawns in a war they did not want nor begin. We experience negative empathy exactly when we see the French soldier's terrified eyes stare into Paul's: it is not a pleasant sight, it is ugly and upsetting, and it can only excite a feeling of uneasiness in the viewer. This, however, is precisely what negative empathy is all about: ugly feeling, a deeply tragic aesthetic experience that will not cease to problematise our moral stand<sup>94</sup>. What sets Paul and Satan apart is the end of their story: Paul dies in an insignificant way as much as insignificant his life had been, making his struggle almost a heroic one – it is in death that he finds redemption for his actions, as the serene look on his deceased body testimonies; for Satan, on the other end, there is no such thing, as we will see. A fact, this, that testimonies how anti-heroes are true to their ambiguous nature oscillating between good and evil until their very end.

#### 1.6 Anti-hero: A Definition

After this analysis of the traits and characteristics of this type of hero, let us finally give a definition of the anti-hero: an anti-hero is a character not directly described as outright good or evil, an evil-doer that can consciously procure harm to others, but who, in doing that, experiences inner turmoil and oftentimes is aware that what he is doing is wrong. He is endowed with psychological depth, round characterisation, and powerful rhetoric. These traits notwithstanding, he encounters a fatal flow that pushes him on a parable that first takes him upwards, only to slam him downwards soon after to encounter his demise, something typical of the tragic

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<sup>94</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, p. 112.

hero with whom thy type can overlap. This type of character experiences strong anxiety connected with his urge to present gratification, which in turn makes him worried about the future, creating a strong projection and acceleration of time. Finally, the anti-hero tends to shrink throughout the story, starting as a positively endowed character who ends up losing all his positive attributes in the desperate search for fulfilment through unnatural means. Anti-heroes are particularly apt to trigger the aesthetic experience of negative empathy by questioning the empathising subject's moral stands, thus also becoming extremely interesting and captivating. This is the type of character against whom I will be pitting the case studies.

## Chapter 2

In the present chapter, I will Shakespeare's *Macbeth* while comparing it with *Hamlet*. The two present many similarities, the most important one being that the main character is an anti-hero. The study of Macbeth's character will be conducted by providing substantial examples and points of comparison with Hamlet, while also noting possible differences in their characterisation or interaction with the setting.

*Macbeth* is Shakespeare's most fast-paced tragedy and the shortest of the tragedies altogether (where Hamlet counts 4,000 lines ca., Macbeth only has 2,100<sup>1</sup>), but it sure does not lack elements to analyse. While there are several points open to study running through the play, such as the recurring clothing imagery, the animal one, and the theme of the double or of equivocation, in *Macbeth*, I have chosen to direct my attention to four specific features:

- Time, especially concerning the acceleration (particularly evident in the shortened process it takes Macbeth to ponder over an assassination and commit it, culminating in the fatal "From this moment | The very firstlings of my heart shall be | The Firstlings of my hand"<sup>2</sup>) and the extreme focus on the future, embodied in the peculiar obsession Macbeth has with the "imperial theme", that ultimately bring him to his demise.
- The effect that the anti-hero has on his surroundings and how his presence influences the setting altogether. It is also worth noting the power of linguistic assimilation throughout the play, which incites numerous questions regarding Macbeth's nature before his encounter with the Witches

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by George Hunter, Penguin Classics, New edition (London: Penguin Books, 2015), p. lxxiii.

<sup>2</sup> *Macbeth*, IV. 1. 145-147.

– his words already recall those of the Witches even before meeting them when he says, “So foul and fair a day I have not seen”<sup>3</sup>. Interestingly, this particular aspect is intertwined with the theme of disease and madness. Seemingly, in *Hamlet*, we can retrace the same device: the country is sick, ravaged by preparations for war, and only Hamlet seems to be able to notice it.

- The evolution of Macbeth’s characterisation from an esteemed and valued Thane to a tyrant, a bear tied to a stake, ultimately brings him to the nihilistic conclusion that life signifies nothing.
- Negative empathy, which plays a key role in the popularity of the character as well as providing an explanation for the aesthetic experience we embark on when we read about him or see a performance of the play.

## 2.1 The Evolution of the Character

### 2.1.1 The Absence of a Positive Protagonist

Let us start with the consideration that in *Macbeth* there aren’t any “good guys”: Macbeth, for starters, seemingly under the influence of the Witches, takes on an obsessive journey that brings him to kill the lawful king Duncan, his best friend Banquo and Macduff’s entire family; Banquo himself seems to be more than once tempted by the words of the witches and indulges on the idea of fathering a line of kings; Macduff flees the country leaving his family behind to be savagely slaughtered; Malcolm proves to be a suitable heir to throne by demonstrating that he can lie very well; Seyward, Malcolm’s uncle, is invading another country with five thousand men, and as uncle to the heir, he could have a claim on the throne himself, leaving us pondering whether his is an army of liberation or of occupation; and again, if we extend our gaze to what happens after the end of the play, Donalbain returns to murder his own brother, and Fleance, after fleeing to Wales,

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<sup>3</sup> *Macbeth*, I. 3. 37.

is taken into the King's household, proceeds to rape his daughter and eventually generates a son who will father the first Stuart King<sup>4</sup>.

The same happens in *Hamlet* as well: while being the centre of the action, Hamlet lies, swears, suffers and murders to avenge his father; his uncle and stepfather murders his own brother; his mother does not seem so honest either since she cannot see late Hamlet father's ghost<sup>5</sup>; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are double-crossers. Here, though, there are positive characters, at least to a modern eye: Ophelia and Laertes, but they too are eventually crushed under the violent machine propelled by the protagonist.

We can clearly see that, in *Macbeth*, there isn't such thing as a Proppian positively characterised protagonist (or any other character, as mentioned). This leaves us with a theoretical void, a question left hanging. If there is not such a character in the play, since there is no positively characterised protagonist, we might be tempted to doubt the presence of a protagonist at all in the play. The absence of a positive protagonist, though, does not prevent an artwork from *having* a protagonist. In fact, that Macbeth is the protagonist, there are no doubts. We can grasp this by the title of the tragedy, obviously, but also by the indirect presentation that we have of him in the first scene when the Witches are discussing the setting of their next meeting:

FIRST WITCH

Where the place?

SECOND WITCH Upon the heath.

THIRD WITCH

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<sup>4</sup> *Macbeth*, p. lxvii–lxviii.

<sup>5</sup> 'NOTES', in *Hamlet*, by William Shakespeare, ed. by John Dover Wilson, 1st edn (Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 214 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511704130.006>>.

There to meet with Macbeth.<sup>6</sup>

This way, we get to meet him indirectly, and even if he isn't present on stage, his presence permeates the play in the form of influences on the setting (as we will see) and in the words of other characters so that, even though he isn't at the centre stage, he is still there all the time.

### 2.1.2 The Anti-hero Under a Positive Light

As we have seen, the characterisation of the protagonist begins with remarking on his positive traits, his manliness and worthiness<sup>7</sup>, such as the one offered by Hamlet to his mother when describing his late father:

HAMLET

Look here upon this picture, and on this,  
The counterfeit presentment of the two brothers.  
See what a grace was seated on this brow:  
Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,  
An eye like Mars, to threaten and command,  
A station like the herald Mercury  
New lightened on a heaven-kissing ill –  
A combination and a form indeed  
Where every god did seem to set his seal  
To give the world assurance of a man.

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<sup>6</sup> *Macbeth*, I. 1. 6-7.

<sup>7</sup> Stefano Ercolino and Massimo Fusillo, *Empatia Negativa: Il Punto Di Vista Del Male*, Agone, 17, Prima edizione (Milan: Bompiani, 2022), p. 126; Marina Favila, ““Mortal Thoughts” and Magical Thinking in “Macbeth””, *Modern Philology*, 99.1 (2001), 1–25 (p. 5).

This was your husband. [...] <sup>8</sup>

Besides the positive characteristics, heroes act fast. They are decisive and resolute. Again, we can retrace this in *Hamlet* in Laertes, who, with his swift and decisive revenge, constitutes a sharp foil to Hamlet himself. The former acts immediately, as soon as the news of his father's death gets to him, while the latter keeps projecting it into the future. Laertes manages to be so determined that he rounds up a group of rebels who follow him and 'call him lord' (IV. 5. 104) at the cry of 'Choose we! Laertes shall be king' (IV. 5. 108). Not only do we identify with them, but so do the characters in the play because of their very characterisation.

These men are strong, powerful, and ruthless, yet they retain some of those positive characteristics long enough to establish a connection with us. This offers us the anti-hero in the light of a hero and thus allows us to identify with him under the pretence that he is a hero. After all, the remark of manliness, power, and worthiness in *Macbeth* on the part of the Bloody Captain first and of the King later<sup>9</sup> helps to establish a good feeling of trust towards the character. As a worthy character, we trust him. The Bloody Captain remarks how 'brave' Macbeth has been during the battle against the Norwegian forces and how 'well he deserves that name' (I. 2. 16), while the King observes what a 'valiant' and 'worthy gentleman' he is (I. 2. 24). He is also paired with images of strength when the Captain is describing the action of the fight, where Macbeth and Banquo were not frightened by the renewed attack on the enemy's side, but in fact, the enemy scared them 'as sparrows, eagles, or the

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<sup>8</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Paul Prescott and T. J. B. Spencer, Penguin Classics, New edition (London: Penguin Books, 2015), III. 4. 54-64.

<sup>9</sup> Jarold Ramsey, 'The Perversion of Manliness in Macbeth', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 13.2 (1973), 285-300 (p. 287) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/449740>>; James J. Greene, 'Macbeth: Masculinity as Murder', *American Imago*, 41.2 (1984), 155-80 (p. 156).



hare, the lion' (I. 2. 35). It is safe to say that, at least at the beginning, Macbeth is a positively characterised character.

Things get trickier with *Hamlet*, instead. It appears straight on that something is off in Denmark and through an obvious remark on the side of Francisco: '[...] I am sick at heart' (I. 1. 9). Hamlet appears grieving his father's loss, while everyone else has moved on quickly: 'But two months dead, nay, not so much, not two! (I. 2. 138). He is still wearing black clothes and seems under the weather, while the others have seemingly forgotten about the King's tragic passing in no time. We don't have an explicit characterisation like in Macbeth's case; we don't get a third-party character describing his attributes – the only possible outcome here is that we, as readers, identify with Hamlet by filling in the gaps. He is non-overtly positively characterised, but the fact that he is the only one still mourning the King after so little time helps to establish him as the only sane person in the play. While in *Macbeth*'s case, this mechanism is used overtly, in *Hamlet*, it is covert.

This remarking of positive (or positively perceived) characteristics prompts emotional involvement between the character and the reader-spectator. If we were in Hamlet's shoes, we would probably behave like him. The events play on something particularly emotionally charged – the loss of a parent – so it is easy for us to get involved. And in Macbeth's case, he is described multiple times as worthy, so why wouldn't he be? The first emotional bond is thus instituted; we are chained to the story and the main character.

### 2.1.3 The Turning Point in the Character's Course

However, the tables are quickly turned. Only in the second scene of Act I do the Witches hail Macbeth as Thane of Glamis and Cawdor and as King of Scotland, when he is just Thane of Glamis. We are not given a detailed description of Macbeth's reaction since it falls on the performer's side, but Banquo notices something interesting:

BANQUO

Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear  
Things that do sound so fair? – I’the name of truth,  
Are ye fantastical, or that indeed  
Which outwardly ye show? My noble partner  
You greet with present grace, and great predictions  
Of noble having and of royal hope  
That he seems *rapt* withal. [...] <sup>10</sup>

‘Rapt’ is a keyword that returns twice again<sup>11</sup>. The first time is what we can define as the inception of evil in Macbeth’s mind when Ross comes in to proclaim him Thane of Cawdor, and even Banquo startles at hearing that. The latter then notices how ‘rapt’ his partner is, just as Macbeth is already fantasising over his next grim move:

MACBETH (*aside*)

As happy prologues to the swelling Act  
Of the imperial theme. – I thank you, gentlemen.  
(*Aside*) This supernatural solliciting  
Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,  
Why hath it given me earnest of success  
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.  
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion  
Whose *horrid image* doth unfix my hair,  
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs  
Against the use of nature? Present fears

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<sup>10</sup> *Macbeth*, I. 2. 50-56. (emphasis mine)

<sup>11</sup> Ramsey, p. 295; Favila, p. 6.

Are less than horrible imaginings.  
My thought, whose *murder* yet is but fantastical,  
Shakes so my single state of man  
That function is smothered by surmise,  
And nothing is but what is not.

BANQUO    Look how our partner's *rapt*.<sup>12</sup>

Again, just one scene later, when Lady Macbeth reads the letter her husband has sent her, in his own words, he is 'rapt':

LADY [...] Whiles I stood *rapt* in the wonder of it, came missives from  
the King, who all-hailed me Thane of Cawdor [...]<sup>13</sup>

'Rapt' is fundamental here: it signals us that Macbeth is already changing, that the words pronounced by the Witches have either sparked in him the idea of the murder or have renewed an interest that already existed in him. We are not given to know whether this is something that he had been concealing or whether it is some spell cast by the witches. Macbeth's fall to the dark side is fast – very fast. It takes him only three scenes to decide to commit the murder, and in a swirl, at the beginning of Act II, he has 'done the deed' (II. 2. 14). I shall return on the rapidity of the act later on.

Interestingly, there are a couple of hints on Macbeth's future dispersed here and there. At the end of the second scene in Act I, after having decanted his actions, his fury in battle, and his worthiness, the King pronounces the death of the traitor Thane

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<sup>12</sup> *Macbeth*, I. 3. 127-142. (emphases mine)

<sup>13</sup> *Macbeth*, II. 1. 5-6. (emphasis mine)

of Cawdor and thus proclaims unaware Macbeth – who, in the meantime, is being stopped by the Witches with their prophecies – the new Thane of Cawdor:

KING

No more of that Thane of Cawdor shall deceive  
Our bosom interest. Go pronounce his present death,  
And with his former title greet Macbeth.

ROSS

I'll see it done.

KING

What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won.<sup>14</sup>

Here, Macbeth is associated with a traitor and, in the words of the King, a deceiver<sup>15</sup>. Funnily enough, the King will be deceived again, this time by the new Thane of Cawdor. It is as if the title made it so that the bearer becomes a traitor. This signals to us that something in him can't be associated with the manly and worthy person of a positive hero. There is something more there that will eventually bring him to his demise. We can safely say that from the beginning of the tragedy, we have hints of the imminent change in Macbeth, a change that will transform him from a supposed, apparent hero to an anti-hero.

This strategy is also adopted in *Hamlet*, where the protagonist is forced to become a deceiver, for, in his opinion (and in his father's ghost's), he is being deceived in the first place. Hamlet puts up a farce in which he pretends to be mad, having erratic

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<sup>14</sup> *Macbeth*, I. 2. 66-70.

<sup>15</sup> Rebecca Lemon, 'Scaffolds of Treason in "Macbeth"', *Theatre Journal*, 54.1 (2002), 25–43 (p. 26).

and bizarre behaviour around his family and all the other characters. It is evident from the beginning in the passage quoted above, when they ask him why he is still under the weather, that he isn't acting like his usual self, but things take a different turn. In front of his friends, he takes a decision that is set to change his life: the Ghost asks for revenge, and in the turmoil that follows when Horatio and Marcellus enter on stage, Hamlet exclaims, 'So be it!' (I. 5. 114), choosing revenge and murder before having the other two swear that they will never reveal what they have seen or heard. What comes next is particularly interesting, for it shows that Hamlet consciously chooses to alter his behaviour to pretend that he is mad:

HAMLET

[...]

Here as before, never, so help you mercy,

*How strange or odd some'er I bear myself –*

As I perchance hereafter shall think meet

To put an antic disposition on –

That you, as such times seeing me, never shall,

[...] to note

That you know aught of me [...] <sup>16</sup>

We have proof of this at the beginning of Act II when the King notices that '[...] nor th'exterior nor the inward man | Resembles that it was' (II. 2. 6-7). Even Polonius tells the king ('[...] your noble son is mad'<sup>17</sup>), and Hamlet's plan to deceive the people close to him from believing that he is plotting behind everyone's back to avenge his father seems to work.

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<sup>16</sup> *Hamlet*, I. 5. 169-179. (emphasis mine)

<sup>17</sup> *Hamlet*, II. 2. 92.

Thus, we have established that both Macbeth and Hamlet become deceivers at a certain point – when he pretends to welcome Malcolm only to kill him in the following scene; the latter when he pretends to be mad to hide his deception to avenge his late father. We have also seen how these characters start as heroes to win our sympathy and empathy. Still, hints soon remind us that these are not ordinary heroes, characters endowed with positive characteristics. These are murderers with whom we surprisingly empathise. They start from a positively enforced surrounding and move to a different one, where an event prompts them to change. That event for Macbeth is when the Witches salute him with a future of greatness, and in turn, for Hamlet, it is when his father's Ghost tells him his uncle has assassinated him.

#### 2.1.4 The Reality Underneath: The Revelation of the Character's True Nature

At this point, things are already too far away for the purpose of the story to turn back, and the character's fate is already sealed. Here is where we can trace one of the most significant differences between Macbeth and Hamlet: the two characters react to the coming of the future in different ways, the former trying everything he can to accelerate it by fighting against it, while the latter continuously postponing his fate to a later time by engaging in petty conversations with the other characters or simply not replying to the timing as correct.

Macbeth moves swiftly: he tells his wife, ponders over the pros and cons, and finally decides not to do it, but not because it is against moral, divine, and human decrees to do so. He is afraid that in trying to achieve what he was promised via a shortcut, he might overdo it and ruin everything<sup>18</sup>:

MACBETH

[...] I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent but only

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<sup>18</sup> Greene, p. 159.



When you durst do it, then you were a man;  
And to be more than what you were, you would  
Be so much more the man.<sup>22</sup>

She would be ready to dash ‘the brains out’ of her newborn ‘babe’ had she promised the same thing to him (I. 7. 55-58)<sup>23</sup>. And it is through this violent image of death and killing that Macbeth starts leaning more and more towards murder. He has been lured into it by his ‘dearest partner of greatness’ (I. 5. 10-11) through the use of violent or demeaning images, such as the threat of unmanliness, the killing of a baby, and the idea expressed by the adage ‘The cat wanted to eat the fish but would not get her feet wet’ (I. 7. 41-45). And finally, it is through the very image of the plan for the murder per se that he gives in. After all, what ‘cannot [he] and [Lady] perform?’ (I. 7. 69). From that moment onwards, we will not see any more of the good and worthy Macbeth we encountered initially. Macbeth gives in and declares himself just a few lines later ‘settled’ (I. 7. 79); what he needs to do now is simply deceive the King, who is a guest at his palace in Inverness and is sleeping under his roof ‘in double trust’ (I. 7. 12). Not only does he betray his trust as ‘his kinsman and subject’ (I. 7. 13), but also as ‘his host, | who should against his murderer shut the door’ (I. 7. 14-15). Instead, he is himself bearing the knife.

For this reason and for the fact that he only doubts the feasibility of the murder and not the moral price per se, Macbeth is not and cannot be a positive character. His central role in the play grants him the role of the positive protagonist, but as an anti-hero.

Similarly, in Hamlet, we have a revelation regarding Hamlet’s nature, too, when he kills Polonius in cold blood, believing it is, in fact, the King. He appears so

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<sup>22</sup> *Macbeth*, I. 7. 41-51.

<sup>23</sup> Ramsey, p. 289.



bewildered that the Queen, his mother, for an instant, thinks that he is going to kill her, 'What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?' (III. 4. 22). Polonius is the unfortunate one, which is taken for 'thy better' (III. 4. 33) and killed. In raging against his mother, Hamlet invokes a number of times hell:

HAMLET

[...] What devil was't  
That thus hath cozen'd you at hoodman-blind?  
Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,  
Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,  
Or but a sickly part of one true sense  
Could not so mope.  
O shame, where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,  
If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,  
To flaming youth let virtue be as wax,  
And melt in her own fire: [...] <sup>24</sup>

Through these caustic words, Hamlet reveals to his mother her fault, but he also reveals to us his nature as a ruthless killer.

#### 2.1.5 The 'Deed' is Done

##### 2.1.5.1 'To be thus...': Duncan's Murder

At this point, Macbeth is settled, as we have said, and while going to Duncan's room, he stops by to talk to Banquo, who is together with his son Fleance. Banquo admits to dreaming about the Witches (and we can quite literally grasp that he's being tempted the same way as Macbeth has been):

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<sup>24</sup> *Hamlet*, III. 4. 77-86.

## BANQUO

[...] Merciful powers,  
Restrain me in the cursed thoughts that nature  
Gives was to in repose.<sup>25</sup>

He then requests Macbeth's counsel at a later time regarding this matter. In this and in a later passage, we can see that the Witches' charm did not just strike on Macbeth, but that it is much more pervasive and that it has managed to infect Banquo too. This is just another remark that there is no such thing as "good guys" in Macbeth.

After dismissing the servant, Macbeth remains alone on stage, and a strange image appears in front of him: that of a dagger as if the murder was taking a tangible form before his eyes. He is left wondering whether it is 'sensible | to feeling as to as sight' or 'a dagger of the mind, a false creation' (II. 2. 38), and it reveals why the character was up so late, in fact:

## MACBETH

Thou marshall'st me the way I was going  
And such an instrument I was to use. –  
[...] I see thou still;  
And, on thy blade and dungeon, gouts of blood,  
Which was not so before. There's no such thing,  
It is the bloody business which informs  
Thus to mine eyes. [...] <sup>26</sup>

And again, in his words, this time there are dreadful images because the world is now asleep and 'nature seems dead' and as 'wicked dreams abuse | The curtained

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<sup>25</sup> *Macbeth*, II. 1. 7-9.

<sup>26</sup> *Macbeth*, II. 1. 42-49.

sleep', 'Witchcraft celebrates | Pale Hecat's offerings; and withered Murder, | [...] Moves like a ghost' (II. 1. 50-56). Since it is Macbeth who is moving around the castle with murderous intentions, he is like the ghost he cites. He is blood-thirsty; he is plotting while the King is still alive. Then, a bell rings, calling him back from his wonderings to the 'deed' that he has to commit. Interestingly, Shakespeare finds yet another way to foreshadow Macbeth's future demise. Upon hearing the knell, Macbeth comments that that sound is the one calling Duncan to heaven or hell,<sup>27</sup> and while this is true (the King is, after all, about to die and meet his final destination), the same can be said of Macbeth. Up to now, he has just been plotting in words, he has not technically done anything incriminating (if we admit the exception of treason). His plan to murder the King is still 'yet but fantastical' (I. 3. 138), and there could still be space for his salvation, probably, if he repented and restrained himself from actually doing the 'deed'. His soul is still in a precarious balance between salvation and damnation, and he could still be saved.

Unfortunately for him, he chooses to commit the murder and therefore, from now on, it is him and Lady Macbeth 'That death and nature do contend [...] | whether they live or die' (II. 2. 8-9) for a pervasive sense of sickness will surround not only the setting but also the two characters themselves. Killing Duncan is an act against the natural order of things as God wanted them, and as they have altered this order, they will pay for it from the very first moment they gain what they wanted, fulfilling the 'imperial theme'. We shall return to the theme of disease in the part dedicated to the influence that the character has on the setting.

'The doors are open' (II. 2. 5), moral and cosmic laws have been altered, and now chaos unleashes in the next scene when Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are seen together in a frenzy to cover up their doing. The two have appeared quite on the

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<sup>27</sup> Greene, p. 163.

same page until now when the syntax becomes corrupted and frenetic as the verses are broken up into one-word lines.

LADY

[...]

Did not you speak?

MACBETH

When?

LADY

Now.

MACBETH

As I ascended?

LADY

Ay.

MACBETH

Hark!<sup>28</sup>

And again, Macbeth seems shaken upon the sight of his bloody hands, he couldn't pronounce an amen when he most needed it and is convinced that he 'heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more! | Macbeth does murder sleep [...]' (II. 2. 35-36) and as he has done that, he 'Shall sleep no more' (II. 2. 43). This recalls directly the spell cast by one of the Witches in I. 3., when she says:

FIRST WITCH

[...]

I'll drain him dry as hay;

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<sup>28</sup> *Macbeth*, 15-18.

Sleep shall neither night nor day  
Hang upon his penthouse lid.  
He shall never love a man forbid.  
Weary sev'n-nights nine times nine  
Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine.<sup>29</sup>

An entire Act before the scene of the murder happens, we already have the trace of what would have been the consequence of Macbeth's actions – his sleeplessness. This will be most evident in Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene, where she won't be able to cope with the moral consequences of their doing anymore and will frantically try to rinse a spot from her hands. The impossibility of redemption will be epitomised by the 'What's | Done cannot be undone' (V. 1. 63-64), with the Doctor concluding that 'unnatural deeds | Do breed unnatural troubles' (V. 1. 67-68)<sup>30</sup>.

Macbeth is shaken by the 'unnatural deeds'<sup>31</sup> so much so that he even says:

MACBETH

I am afraid to think what I have done;  
Look on't again I dare not.

The deed is done, the King's dead, they have seemingly managed to blame it on Duncan's heirs. Macbeth and the Lady his wife should be able to enjoy what they have now gained – the status of royalty but they cannot. Even before the murder, Lady Macbeth had to intoxicate herself with alcohol to gain the courage to proceed

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<sup>29</sup> *Macbeth*, I. 3. 18-23.

<sup>30</sup> Jeremy Cornelius, 'The Elements of Ecological Style: Poetic Contagion and Epidemiological Witches in *Macbeth*', *The Journal of the Wooden O*, 19 (2019), 1–19 (pp. 11–13).

<sup>31</sup> Ramsey, p. 292.

with the murder<sup>32</sup> ('That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold; | What hath quenched them hath given me fire. – Hark! –'<sup>33</sup>), while Macbeth cannot stand the very idea of what he has done ('To know my deed 'twere best not know myself'<sup>34</sup>). Both are miserable already and their descent is yet to begin.

The Macbeths then play the role of the unknowing hosts under whose roof the King has been killed, and she even pretends to faint. Macbeth, in a fit of pain for such unnatural action, kills the two guards that have been framed with the killing<sup>35</sup>, and they obtain their new status when Donalbain and Malcolm flee the country. Suspicions of the Macbeths' involvement, however, have already started to arise, with Malcolm denoting that the nearer in blood someone is, 'the nearer the bloody' (II. 3. 137-138). The pressure (and suspicion) starts rising, and, in fact, Lennox sarcastically notes how conveniently 'The expedition of violent love outrun the pauser reason' (II. 3. 107-108) and pushed Macbeth to kill the two guards:

LENNOX

How it did grieve Macbeth! Did he not straight –  
In pious rage – the two delinquents tear,  
That were the slaves of drink, and thralls of sleep?  
Was not that *nobly done*? Ay, and wisely too;  
For 'twould have angered any heart alive  
To hear the men deny't. So that I say  
He has borne all things well; [...]<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Greene, p. 165.

<sup>33</sup> *Macbeth*, II. 2. 1-2.

<sup>34</sup> *Macbeth*, II. 2. 73.

<sup>35</sup> Ramsey, p. 290.

<sup>36</sup> *Macbeth*, III. 6. 11-17. (emphasis mine)

#### 2.1.5.2 'But to be safely thus!': Banquo's Murder

At this point, Macbeth should feel secure in his grip on the 'imperial theme', but there is something unsettling him. The Witches have prophesied to Banquo that 'Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none' (I. 3. 66), and this very thing makes both Macbeth and Banquo wander over what is really to come. In fact, the latter is considering it at the beginning of Act III: '[...] myself should be the root and father | Of many kings' (III. 1. 5-6). Why would things turn out to be true for Macbeth but not for him?

We then get to see that even noble Banquo is tempted by evil; he has to beg for the 'Merciful powers' to 'Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature | Gives way to in repose' (II. 1. 7-9), but he never fully commits to it. Macbeth, however, is obsessed with this: 'To be thus is nothing' without being totally certain of maintaining his newly acquired power, 'but to be safely thus!' (III. 1. 47-48). All he has done up to now, killing Duncan, and condemning his soul to damnation, just 'To make them kings, the seeds of Banquo kings!' (III. 1. 69) since he has no heirs of his own.

Thus, he again chooses the fastest way to make sure this will not happen: he has Banquo murdered during his first banquet as King. He calls in some murderers, tells them where to wait for him and to convince them to do their job, he persuades them with the same threat of unmanliness his wife had waged on him<sup>37</sup>, while also describing the unknowing Banquo as their 'enemy' (III. 1. 104 and 114). This eventually constitutes a nice demonstration that tyranny depends on mistrust<sup>38</sup>, for to the two initial murderers chosen by Macbeth, a third unites to spy on the first two. 'He needs not our mistrust' (III. 3. 2) laments the First Murderer, but that's what tyranny is founded on.

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<sup>37</sup> Ramsey, p. 291.

<sup>38</sup> *Macbeth*, p. 129.





MACBETH

[...] I am in blood  
Stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more,  
Returning were as tedious as go o' ver.  
Strange things I have in my head, that will to hand;  
Which must be acted ere they may be scanned.<sup>41</sup>

Unfortunately for him, though, he has gone too far to come back. The only way out of this chaos is forward. His wife suggests that some sleep will make him feel better, but, unluckily enough, he had murdered sleep together with Duncan, and madness will just keep on creeping on Macbeth as he progresses in his carnage.

#### 2.1.5.3 'Blood will have blood': Macduff's Family's Slaughter

We have known that Macduff is Macbeth's opposer for a while: immediately after Duncan's death, all the Lords set off for Scone, where the coronation will take place, but Macduff does not go. He announces that he is going to Fife, and in a quite uneasy remark, he hopes that 'our old robes' will not 'sit easier than our new' (II. 4. 38). Then again, we get to know that he has not gone to the supper at Forres, where Banquo found his death.

After having dismissed the guests, the Macbeths talk about the fact that he hasn't come to the banquet.

MACBETH

How sayst thou, that Macduff denies his person  
At our great bidding?

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<sup>41</sup> *Macbeth*, III. 4. 135-139.

LADY

Did you send to him, sir?

MACBETH

I hear by the way. But I will send.

There's not a one of them, but in his house

I keep a servant fee'd. [...]

[...] For mine own good

All causes shall give way.<sup>42</sup>

This ominous remark on the part of Macbeth signals to us that he has already been thinking about what should be done with him and that he only needs a little push to finalise the order. This comes upon his second encounter with the Weird Sisters, where he asks them to tell him more about his future. As he gets to them, he conjures them (with a nice double meaning of begging and evoking<sup>43</sup>, signalling the beginning of his despair, for he is starting to realise that the 'imperial theme' is failing him) to answer him. In this speech, we can retrace some hues of despair: after all, he's trying so hard to hold on to his kingship by killing everyone that dares to obstacle him, but Fleance, Banquo's son, has managed to escape the attempted murder against him, and he is still not 'safely thus'. Now, he is willing to sacrifice everything for the knowledge that would grant him security, at last. He begs the Witches to grant him that knowledge at whatever price:

MACBETH

I conjure you, by that which you profess,

How'ver you come to know it, answer me –

Though you untie the winds and let them fight

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<sup>42</sup> *Macbeth*, III. 4. 126-135.

<sup>43</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 'Conjure, v.' (Oxford University Press, 2023), Oxford English Dictionary <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9397813135>>.

Against the churches; though the yesty waves  
Confound and swallow navigation up;  
Though bladed corn be lodged and trees blown down;  
Though the castle topple on their wanders' heads;  
Though palaces and pyramids do slope  
Their heads to their foundations; though the treasure  
Of nature's germens tumble all together  
Even till destruction sicken – answer me  
To what I ask you.<sup>44</sup>

The Witches conjure up three apparitions: the first is an armed head that tells him to beware of Macduff; the second, instead, grants him that 'none of woman born | shall harm Macbeth' (IV. 1. 79-80), and the third grants him that no one will harm him until 'Great Birnan Wood to high Dunsinane Hill | Shall come against him.' (IV. 1. 92-93)<sup>45</sup>. Macbeth is desperate to have his answers and has good reason to be. When he incites them to tell him if 'Banquo's issue ever | Reign in this kingdom?', they discourage him from seeking to know more; it is interesting here that after being refused the answer, Macbeth loses his temper:

MACBETH

I will be satisfied! Deny me this  
And an eternal curse fall on you! [...]

This is crucial in the development of the character: it is now he who is cursing. We have seen how, in the beginning, he was a 'most worthy thane', and we have accompanied him through the tragedy up to this point, and he has been progressively losing his attributes of worthiness. Characters now suspect him of the

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<sup>44</sup> *Macbeth*, IV. 1. 49-60.

<sup>45</sup> Ramsey, p. 292.

murder of King Duncan, and there are obvious reasons to do so for Banquo's murder, too. It is the moment when the dumbshow of kings – the third apparition – presents him with a mirror that he foresees the future:<sup>46</sup> in that reflection, he sees the only reason for his demise – himself. It is he who has trusted blindly the words of the Weird Sisters, it is he who has killed his King and kin, his companion, who has damned (and sold) his soul, but he has done so just for smoke and mirrors. This idea is also starting to creep into his mind, for he says, 'damned all those who trust them' (IV. 1. 138) and refers to the Witches as a disease.

At this point, Lennox tells him that Macduff has gone to England, and Macbeth, still on the wave of feelings provoked by the Witches, decides to surprise Macduff's castle and to 'give to the edge o'the sword | His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls | That trace him in his line' (IV. 1. 150-152).

The following scene is a masterpiece of tenderness: Lady Macduff, her son, and a Lord talk, and soft, tender, affectionate language permeate the scene. She is a 'wren' (IV. 2. 9) fighting for her 'young ones' (IV. 2. 11) in her 'nest, against the owl' (IV. 2. 11). The son is a 'poor bird' (IV. 2. 35) who will survive on what he gets, 'with worms and flies' (IV. 2. 33), and in her accusing words, we retrace a worried wife, someone who already has a hunch of what's to come. After all, 'All is fear and nothing is love' (IV. 2. 12). A messenger tries to warn her of the upcoming danger, but she settles for her fate because she has nowhere to go and has done no harm to anyone. But murderers do come, and they kill both of them.

We should also notice how in the beginning it was Macbeth who performed the first murder first-hand, but he has now been descending into increasing cruelty, to culminate in 'the ruffians of this scene'<sup>47</sup>. The cruelty of this scene stands a striking

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<sup>46</sup> Ramsey, p. 293.

<sup>47</sup> *Macbeth*, p. 142.

difference to the first murder, where there was chaos and excitement after the action committed first-hand by Macbeth. What we witness here is pure cruelty, an act of aberrant violence that effectively has no meaning, if not that of hurting his opponent – and, perhaps, the symbolic one of killing the future. Macbeth’s progressive inability to cope with what he has been doing is also signalled by this, with a distancing and incapacity to look at what his orders provoke in the world. The clock is ticking fast, and his time as King (and in this world altogether) is limited. He has lost his hope, his friends, and the support of his subjects and Lords, he is more and more alone<sup>48</sup>. At this point, the only thing the rest of the characters can do is take down the tyrant.

#### 2.1.6 The Tyrant

The change in Macbeth’s characterisation is also noted by Malcolm in Act IV. The latter ‘Was once thought honest; you have loved him well’ since ‘he hath not touched you yet’, but now he is a ‘tyrant, whose sole name blisters our tongues’ (IV. 3. 12-14). After all, we are almost in the last Act, and the real tragedy is preparing to unfold. We are charging towards the bottom at full speed, and we are about to reach it at the expense of Macbeth himself. Throughout the scene, he is described as ‘treacherous’ (IV. 3. 18), ‘black’ (IV. 3. 52), an ‘untitled tyrant, bloody sceptred’ (IV. 3. 104), and ‘devilish’ (IV. 3. 117) – a striking difference from the ‘worthy’, ‘valiant’, and ‘brave’ of the first scene of the play. We have seen the steps that have brought him here, the inception of evil in him, the fast progression into evil and murder, the inability to cope, and the first signs of physical sickness signalling a diseased soul. His future is grim, and Lady Macbeth gets a glimpse of it in her sleeplessness: ‘Hell is murky!’ she cries frantically, trying to wash an invisible physical spot – it is indeed a metaphor for the spot on her soul, the same as in Macbeth’s case. Their hands will never be clean again, for their souls will not in the first place, and this brings the physician on stage to denote that ‘This disease is

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<sup>48</sup> Ramsey, p. 292.

beyond my practice' (V. 1. 55) and that 'more she needs the divine than the physician' (V. 1. 70). The same can be said about Macbeth. And in fact:

CATHNESS

[...] Some say he's mad. [...]  
[...] but for certain  
He cannot buckle his distempered cause  
Within the belt of rule.

ANGUS

Now does he feel

His secret murders sticking on his hands;  
Now minutely revolts upbraid his faith-breach.  
Those he commands move only in command,  
Nothing in love. Now does he feel his title  
Hang loose upon him like a giant's robe  
Upon a dwarfish thief.<sup>49</sup>

If Macduff was left hoping that 'our old robes' would not 'sit easier than our new', we can easily retrace an answer here. When Ross and Angus were sent to proclaim Macbeth as the new Thane of Cawdor, he didn't want to be dressed in 'borrowed robes' (I. 3. 108), and once he was provided with an explanation, these new clothes were still 'strange garments' (I. 3. 145). In his conversation with his wife, his new clothes were 'golden opinions' (I. 7. 33) that he wasn't ready to set aside to take the fastest route to his future. He felt naked after the discovery of the murder and suggested meeting again in order to 'put on manly readiness' (II. 3. 130). It is worth noting how Macbeth felt more manly in his daytime dress as if the night-time one could in some way reveal his doing – this creates a nice parallel between the secrets that are to be covered and their bodies as if the 'spots' Lady Macbeth was

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<sup>49</sup> *Macbeth*, V. 2. 13-22.

desperately trying to wash out of her soul could also be seen through the more delicate bedtime robes. Finally, Macbeth's clothes hang upon him in an unsettling way: he is a dwarf wearing the clothes of a giant.

In trying to refute and run away from what he has done, Macbeth has shrunk and so has the number of people supporting him. He admits to his servant Seyton (a cunning homophone with the pronunciation of the word Satan<sup>50</sup>, with whom he will spend eternity after his death) that he is 'sick at heart' (V. 3. 19). And sick he is because:

MACBETH

[...]

I have lived long enough: my way of life  
Is fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf;  
And that which should accompany old age,  
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,  
I must not look to have; but in their stead,  
Curses, not loud, but deep, mouth-honour, breath  
Which the poor heart would fain deny and dare not.

[...] <sup>51</sup>

He has become so desensitised from life, so apathic that, upon hearing some women cry, he says:

MACBETH

I have almost forgot the taste of fears.

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<sup>50</sup> Larisa Kocic-Zámbó and Ágnes Matuska, *Essays on the Medieval Period and the Renaissance: Things New and Old* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), pp. 33–34.

<sup>51</sup> *Macbeth*, V. 3. 22-28.

The time has been my senses would have cooled  
To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair  
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir  
As life were in't. I have supped full of horrors:  
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,  
Cannot once start me.<sup>52</sup>

Then his 'partner in greatness', his last known companion, dies, and he is finally confronted with the reality of loneliness<sup>53</sup>. He has no one left in this world, since he has no children too. And with words full of sorrow and despair, Macbeth realises that his obsession with the 'imperial theme' has left him empty-handed, living a life that signifies nothing. It is at this point that we can see how deep his nihilism is:

#### MACBETH

She should have died hereafter<sup>54</sup>.  
There would have been a time for such a word –  
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorder time;  
All of our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death! *Out, out, brief candle!*  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is *a tale*

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<sup>52</sup> *Macbeth*, V. 5. 9-15.

<sup>53</sup> Ramsey, p. 298.

<sup>54</sup> It is also worth noting how the Witches greeted him as King who shall be hereafter, and here we have the same word associated with death. This creates a strong connection because Macbeth thinks of his wife's death while desiring his own.



*Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.*<sup>55</sup>

In the end, Macbeth's life really does signify nothing. All he has done he did because of the absolute trust he had in the words of the Weird Sisters, but there was no guarantee in those words. It is because of this that, a few lines later, he says that he has started 'To doubt the equivocation of the fiend | that lies like truth' (V. 5. 43-44), but unfortunately for him, it is too late. Nothing can be done to save him; he has already sealed his destructive fate, and now he is bound to confront it, even though he only wishes for death: 'I 'gin to be weary of the sun, | And wish the estate of the world were now undone' (V. 5. 49-50).

As his own fate 'creeps' towards his end, he is again called tyrant by Seyward and his son, while the second also openly associates him with hell:

YOUNG SEYWARD

What is thy name?

MACBETH            Thou'lt be afraid to hear it.

YOUNG SEYWARD

No, though thou call'st thyself a hotter name  
Than any is in hell.

MACBETH            My name's Macbeth

YOUNG SEYWARD

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<sup>55</sup> *Macbeth*, V. 5. 17-28 (emphases mine).



me to interpret | That you are so' (I. 3. 44-46)<sup>59</sup>. The Witches express themselves with riddles, and it is their language that ultimately brings Macbeth to his demise. Their language always united opposites, as we will see, and redoubles concepts, as in the case of Act I Scene I.

We get to meet them in the first scene of the play while they are performing a spell, and at the end of it, they sentence in a gloomy and prophetic way that 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' (I. 1. 9), in a bizarre phrasing constituted by an antithesis and by a redoubling. Just two scenes later, Macbeth himself notes that the day is 'So foul and fair' (I. 3. 37), in a first instance of language assimilation. Again, Macbeth can be seen pondering over their prophecies, suspecting that 'This supernatural soliciting | Cannot be ill, cannot be good' (I. 3. 129-130), while remarking that 'nothing is but what is not' (I. 3. 141).

Secondly, the Witches' lines always rhyme, while the blank verse mostly doesn't. This is important because we can see the inception of evil in Macbeth through the use of redoubling language and antitheses and the rhyming scheme. For example, when Macbeth is about to enter Duncan's room to murder him, Macbeth pronounces in an ominous way:

#### MACBETH

I go, and it is done; the bell invites me.  
Hear it not, Duncan, for it is the *knell*  
That summons thee to heaven or to *hell*.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Cornelius, p. 2.

<sup>60</sup> *Macbeth*, II. 1. 62-64. (emphases mine)



to the other characters (namely, the absence of rhymes) to identify himself to the Witches so much that he starts speaking like one.

## 2.2 The Setting

When it comes to the analysis of the setting, I will concentrate on what the characters say to relate what their world is like to the spectator. Being *Macbeth* a play, we don't get detailed descriptions of what the setting looks like before and after the coming of the anti-hero. It is interesting to examine what the characters report to us and what image said words construct nonetheless, for characters affect their surroundings by acting in their environment just like we do.

The play opens in a war-torn country, where everything is 'foul' but somehow also 'fair', but all is well until the Macbeths are set upon killing the King. Even before the 'deed' is committed, the night is unruly, and Banquo himself notices that. The chaos that the characters can feel is about to unfold is summoned by the Macbeths' actions, and since these are unnatural, what follows is an unnatural reaction in nature itself.

### BANQUO

Hold, take my sword. There's husbandry in heaven;  
Their candles are all out. Take thee that too.  
A heavy summons lieth like lead upon me  
And yet I would not sleep. [...] <sup>63</sup>

And soon after the murder, an unknowing Lennox laments that the night has been strange too:

### LENNOX

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<sup>63</sup> *Macbeth*, II. 1. 4.7.

The night has been unruly. Where we lay,  
Our chimneys were blown down, and, as they say,  
Lamentings heard i'the air, strange screams of death,  
And prophesying, with accents terrible,  
Of dire combustion and confused events  
New-hatched to the woeful time. The obscure bird  
Clamoured the live-long night. Some say the earth  
Was feverous and did shake.<sup>64</sup>

This signals us that Macbeth's character is beginning to affect his surroundings and that the setting is a foil or a mirror to what is happening inside him too, since what he's done – killing the King – has left a mark on his hands that not even 'Neptune's ocean [will] wash this blood | clean from my hand' (II. 2. 60-61), for even if it would, in the end the ocean itself would become red to show everyone what Macbeth has done.

That Duncan's murder is sacrilegious and unnatural we find proof in the text. First, Macduff comes on stage denouncing the horrible deed saying that 'Most sacrilegious murder has broke open | The Lord's anointed temple and stole thence | the life o'the building.' (II. 3. 64-66); and again later, Macbeth himself remarks that 'his gashed stabs looked like a breach in nature' (II. 3. 110)<sup>65</sup>. In the next scene, then, we witness Old Man talking to Ross, and they lament how crazy the times have been, with deeds happening that keep subverting the natural order of things, like Duncan's horses eating each other and a hawk being killed by an owl. Most unnatural to them, though, seems that the sons of the King would do such a thing because it is "'Gainst nature still!' (II. 4. 27). Even more against nature is how dark

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<sup>64</sup> *Macbeth*, II. 3. 51-58.

<sup>65</sup> Cornelius, p. 16.

it has got after the murder. Macduff notes how it should be day by the hour ‘And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp’ (II. 4. 7).

We have thus established that the natural order of things has been subverted due to Duncan’s murder and that this affects the order of the world as well. Not only does this happen, but, as we have seen, disorder takes up Macbeth’s mind, slowly driving him to madness and dehumanising him. The disorder in his mind is mirrored in social disorder: the guests were welcomed to the first royal supper without a specific order, and, subsequently to Macbeth’s fit, they have to leave the feast without standing ‘upon the order of your going’ (III. 4. 118).

This happens in *Hamlet*, too. We witness the effect of Hamlet’s pretended disease on the social order around him. Upon meeting the Ghost, Horatio is weary of it for he is afraid that it or forms similar to him ‘might deprive your sovereignty of reason | and draw [Hamlet] into madness’ (I. 4. 73-74), and as soon as Hamlet follows the Ghost, Horatio remarks that ‘He waxes desperate with imagination’ (I. 4. 87) – where imagination plays a key role in Macbeth too, since his produces disturbing and tangible images of what he is to do, like with the dagger or with Banquo’s Ghost, who could be a product of his imagination. The cause for Hamlet’s madness is attributed to Ophelia rejecting his visits, but nothing could be further from the truth. His antic disposition is, in fact, a choice, for he decides to behave in a ‘strange or odd some’er’ way (I. 5. 170) to deceive the other character from knowing his plan to kill the King. His pretended madness has everyone worried – from the King to Polonius to the Queen herself, but most importantly, it brings Ophelia to madness first and ultimately to suicide. This provokes Laertes’s response and his plotting with the King to kill Hamlet.

Speaking of killing, the Macbeths can no longer sleep because they have murdered sleep, as we have discussed. Their doing has brought the night ‘at odd with the morning’ (III. 4. 126) in a way that they are indistinguishable, and nature itself plots

to reveal what has been done: ‘Stones have been known to move and trees to speak | Augurs and understood relations have | By maggot-pies, and choughs, and rocks brought forth | The secret’st man of blood.’ (III. 4. 122-125).

Finally, when the Thanes start plotting against Macbeth, he sends for Macduff’s family to be murdered, and Ross invokes better times by saying that ‘Things at the worst will cease or climb upward | To what they were before.’ (IV. 2. 24-25), but unfortunately, this is a world where ‘to do harm | Is often laudable, to do good sometime | Accounted dangerously folly.’ (IV. 2. 75-77). And in fact:

MACDUFF

[...] Each new morn  
New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows  
Strike heaven on the face, that it resounds  
As is it felt with Scotland, and yelled out  
Like syllable of dolour.<sup>66</sup>

It is in the striking difference with the English King and England in general that we also get to see how diseased Scotland is: where in England the King is able to cure the sick and is blessed by God with the gift of prophecy, Scotland is in ruins and its King is so obsessed with the future to be blind to the present:

MACDUFF

Stands Scotland where it did?

ROSS

Alas, poor country.

Almost afraid to know itself! It cannot  
Be called out mother, but our grave; where nothing

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<sup>66</sup> *Macbeth*, IV. 3. 4-8.





That should applaud again. [...] <sup>69</sup>

We find this in *Hamlet* too, even if the connection between the health of the protagonist and that of the country is not so well established and clear. The country is ‘contracted in one brown of woe’ (I. 2. 4) and can be said to be in a ‘warlike state’ (I. 2. 9). We know that the country is in a state of war in which, like in *Macbeth*, day and night are made indistinguishable.

#### MARCELLUS

Good now, sit down, and tell me he that knows  
Why this same strict and most observant watch  
So nightly toils the subject of the land,  
And why such daily cast of brazen cannon  
And foreign mart for implements of war,  
Why such impress of shipwrights, whose sore task  
Does not divide the Sunday from the week.  
What might be toward that this sweaty haste  
Doth make the night joint-laboured with the day?<sup>70</sup>

The very fact that the ghost of Hamlet’s father in arms appears signals us that there is something off, but most importantly Denmark is signalled like the country of the crazy in Act V Scene I, when Hamlet talks with the Gravedigger. There is something wrong, for the present King has killed the former (who also happened to be his brother) and has subsequently married his wife (and sister-in-law). Everything is back to normality after the final carnage, with a kingly Fortinbras ‘with sorrow’ (V. 2. 382) embracing his ‘rights of memory’ (V. 1. 383). He, in turn, is much different

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<sup>69</sup> *Macbeth*, 39-54.

<sup>70</sup> *Hamlet*, I. 1. 70-78.

from Malcolm, for he is ‘the rightful heir to the throne who outs a regicide and usurper and so can cleanse the kingdom of corruption’<sup>71</sup>.

The end of *Macbeth* is indeed restorative, for we see how Malcolm tries to give a new order to the country by making the thanes into earls and ‘by the grace of Grace | We will perform in measure, time, and peace.’ (V. 6. 111-112). The ending, though, still has some eerie details that recall the language assimilation I talked about before: it is a Thane – Macduff – who savagely kills the King, just like Macbeth had done with Duncan; there are references to violence, for Macduff enters the stage with Macbeth’s head<sup>72</sup> and Young Seyward’s death is not much cried upon; and finally, the new King Malcolm is saluted in the same way Macbeth had by the Witches: ‘Hail, King of Scotland!’ (V. 7. 98). Despite the restorative ending, some of Macbeth’s influence can still be seen<sup>73</sup>, even though we get to know that ‘The time is free.’ (V. 7. 94).

### 2.2.1 Darkness and Coldness

It is undeniable that *Macbeth* is a play almost entirely set in darkness<sup>74</sup>, and the evil deeds that happen on stage take place in it. Darkness is called upon to cover up the thought that Macbeth already has regarding murder when Malcolm is named Prince of Cumberland, and with that heir to the throne, since ‘he needs the darkness to hide the deeds that will win him what he somehow senses that he, rather than Duncan or Malcolm, ought to have.’<sup>75</sup> Lady Macbeth herself asks the spirits and the ‘thick

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<sup>71</sup> *Hamlet*, p. 319

<sup>72</sup> Ramsey, p. 299.

<sup>73</sup> Rebecca Lemon, ‘Scaffolds of Treason in “Macbeth”’, *Theatre Journal*, 54.1 (2002), 25–43 (p. 28); Ramsey, p. 295-297.

<sup>74</sup> Neil Bowen and others, *The Art of Drama, Volume 2: Macbeth* (Peripeteia Press, 2019), II, p. 67.

<sup>75</sup> Timothy W. Burns, ‘Macbeth: Ambition Driven Into Darkness’, in *Shakespeare’s Political Wisdom*, ed. by Timothy W. Burns (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), p. 70  
<[https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137314659\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137314659_3)>. Hereafter cited in the text.

night' (I. 5. 49) to unsex her and not to make her see the 'wound' her knife makes 'Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark' (I. 5. 50-51), and her husband recalls these words when he invokes the 'seeling night' (III. 2. 46) to have the strength to proceed with Banquo's murder.

The image cluster of darkness constitutes one of the most important ones in the play, and it is connected with the idea of evil; it is for this reason that by the end of the tragedy, Lady Macbeth can no longer withstand it and so 'She has light by | Her continually' (V. 1. 22-23) by her command. But, unfortunately for her, Bowen continues, 'As with sickness, the primary sources of the darkness appear to be the Witches and the Macbeths' (p. 67), so it is quite literally impossible to run away from it.

Another hint of darkness and hell can be found in the Porter scene, a comic interplay embrewed with references to hell itself. The Porter is drunk and keeps pouting about the 'devil' (II. 3. 7), 'equivocation' (II. 3. 8), and even refers to himself as the 'porter of | hell-gate' (II. 3. 2), but most importantly, he notices that the castle 'is too cold for hell' (II. 3. 16), directly connecting the Macbeths' ancestral home to the reign of evil itself. This is particularly interesting because something similar happens in *Hamlet*, too. Both darkness and coldness are emphasised in the first scenes of the play where the characters meet the Ghost for the first time ('Tis bitter cold' laments Francisco at I. 1. 8, and we know for a fact that it is dark because Bernardo confirms that it is midnight, the hour when the Ghost walks) and again at I. 4. 1-2 when Hamlet and Horatio denote that for themselves. The idea of frostiness and bleakness are thus clearly connected, and this naturally constitutes a metaphor containing the horrible deeds that have been committed – in Macbeth's case, the carnage he orders, and in Hamlet's, the state of the unnaturalness of his uncle's wedding to his mother and murder of his father. In both cases, the unnatural state of things is signalled by the presence of night and cold.

### 2.3 Macbeth's Obsession with Time and the Future

*Macbeth* is a play that is obsessed with time, and we can safely say that it is so because the very first word of the play is 'When' and it is emphasised three times:

#### FIRST WITCH

*When* shall we three meet again

In thunder, lightning or in rain?

#### SECOND WITCH

*When* the hurly-burly's done,

*When* the battle's lost and won.<sup>76</sup>

It is actually with the apparition of the Witches to Macbeth that linear time is broken; in fact, before that, in the scene with the Bloody Captain and King Duncan, time runs free, with the Captain telling of Banquo and Macbeth's acts in a linear way. It is when the Witches appear to Macbeth and Banquo that the future breaks in in a preponderate way. As Marchiatello puts it:

[...] the model of acceleration is the supernatural figured in the three witches and the astonishing, absolute manner in which they disappear. The pure disappearance of bodies troubles the nature of duration as a "flow of time" that itself takes time, as the supernatural act of disappearance literally takes place at the speed of light (absolute speed) and effectively takes no time at all. Indeed, *Macbeth* is the play (more than *Hamlet*) that attempts to rethink time that has become utterly "out of joint" (*Hamlet*, 1.5.189). Temporality is the play's proper subject, and disappearance is its proper method.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *Macbeth*, I. 1. 1-4. (emphases mine)

<sup>77</sup> Howard Marchiatello, 'Speed and the Problem of Real Time in "Macbeth"', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 64.4 (2013), 425-48 (p. 435).

This new time breaks the pre-existing unity of time and space in the play and brings Macbeth to try to make himself anew in an attempt to model his persona to it. This culminates in his affirmation that ‘nothing is but what is not’: his power to act has been annihilated by the power of his imagination, and he is so ‘rapt’ in what the future things might or might not bring him that the only thing existing for him is what does not – the future. Lady Macbeth matches her husband in this too: when she reads his letter, she confesses that<sup>78</sup>:

LADY

Thy letters have transported me beyond  
This ignorant present, and I feel now  
The future in the instant.<sup>79</sup>

‘In the service of this fantasy, Macbeth appears always to push himself forward through time with a momentum that seems to promise to move him ever closer to “the future in the instant.”’<sup>80</sup> His mind project him instantly into the future, and he would like to ‘jump the life to come’ (I. 7. 6): here he is still pondering whether to do it or not, but this request shows that he is already deeply desiring to have done it. In his projection, he finds ‘nothing serious in mortality’ (II. 3. 90), his only aim is ‘to be thus’.

‘The first three acts of *Macbeth* invoke Time in various ways, often returning to them later in the play’<sup>81</sup>: Act I is concerned with Macbeth’s swings between future and honesty, like when he sentences that if he shall be king, he will be so ‘without

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<sup>78</sup> Marchitello, p. 444.

<sup>79</sup> *Macbeth*, I. 5. 54-56.

<sup>80</sup> Marchitello, p. 448.

<sup>81</sup> Peter R. Moore, ‘Epicurean Time in Macbeth’, *Brief Chronicles: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Authorship Studies*, 1 (2009), 141–54 (p. 143).

my stir' (I. 3. 143); Act II sees the murder of Duncan and of sleep too, which Moore argues to be 'humanity's refuge from Time'; and finally in Act III, Macbeth obsesses over Banquo's future descendants as kings, which brings him to kill his friend ruthlessly<sup>82</sup>, but immediately Banquo's ghost brings him back to the past and what he has done. Macbeth immediately after inquiries about Macduff and decides to meet with the witches, sends out orders to murder him without thinking about it too much:

#### MACBETH

Time, thou anticipas't my dread exploits.  
The flighty purpose never is o'ertook  
Unless the deed go with it. from this moment  
The very firstlings of my heart shall be  
The firstlings of my hand. And even now,  
To crown my thoughts with acts, be in thought and done:  
The castle of Macduff I will surprise,  
Seize upon Fife, give to the edge o'the sword  
His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls  
That trace him in his line. No boasting, like a fool;  
This deed I'll do before this purpose cool.  
But no more sights! – Where are these gentlemen?  
Come, bring me where they are.<sup>83</sup>

Here, Macbeth is directly challenging Time<sup>84</sup>, but the undertone here (and in other parts of the tragedy too) is even eerier: Macbeth's decision isn't aimed directly at Macduff, it is aimed at his kids, just like he wanted to erase Banquo and his progeny.

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<sup>82</sup> Ramsey, p. 290.

<sup>83</sup> *Macbeth*, IV. 1. 143-155.

<sup>84</sup> Moore, p. 151.

Macbeth's war on Time is actually a war on children<sup>85</sup>, for they embody the future in themselves<sup>86</sup>. Since he has none to bring on his own line of succession, they only thing he can do to preserve for the time being his is to prevent the others from having the possibility to. This is the bleakest part of the tragedy, not all the murders, not all the darkness and evil, and it is particularly well represented in the stark opposition between IV. 1 and IV. 2, where Macduff's wife is together with her son, as we have seen.

Macbeth, like any other human being, cannot win a war against time. His wife loses her mind in the attempt to follow him: she re-enacts the 'speeches uttered at the killings of Duncan, Banquo, and Lady Macduff, but jumbled together, out of their chronological order' because she 'has manifestly lost the present tense'<sup>87</sup>. Her body is in the present, but her mind keeps going backwards, it's stuck in a loop and obsessing over a spot much more spiritual than physical. 'Nothing she can do can now will redeem her future. [...] This is what damnation looks like'<sup>88</sup>.

In killing the King and all the kids scattered in the play, Macbeth is trying to get and secure his crown, but by doing this, he is also trying to stop time. In his war, he is trying to control the future<sup>89</sup> and stop it (because with it, the end of his reign would come since he has no heirs) and to do that, he attempts to kill the future. In doing that, his life becomes meaningless. With no future, indeed, there is no point in existing:

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<sup>85</sup> Greene, p. 172.

<sup>86</sup> *Macbeth*, p. lxxv.

<sup>87</sup> Moore, p. 151.

<sup>88</sup> *Macbeth*, p. lii.

<sup>89</sup> Marina Bondi and Annalisa Sezzi, "'Come What Come May, Time, and the Hour, Runs through the Roughest Day': Temporal Phraseology and the Conceptual Space of Futurity in *Macbeth*", *English Text Construction*, 11.1 (2018), 81–104 (p. 100)

<<https://doi.org/10.1075/etc.00005.bon>>.



## MACBETH

[...]

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.<sup>90</sup>

Time in this tragedy accelerates, and in doing so, it is not just because Macbeth is impatient or simply sick. 'Macbeth's violent and frenetic actions are less the sequences of a certain pathology and more the manifestation of what it means to exist in a world radically accelerated toward a mode of being [...] in which temporality collapses into functional instantaneity.'<sup>91</sup> When he feels 'the future in an instant', he collapses present and future together, and from that moment onwards, it takes him less and less time to murder someone: first, he needs his wife's approval to kill Duncan, then she is left behind and unbeknownst to her he kills Banquo, and finally, as we have seen, in ten lines he decides to cancel Macbeth's family from existence. This is why, more than Hamlet, this is the play whose subject is the relationship between the character and time: in the former, Hamlet urges his father's Ghost to make haste, to tell him what he needs so that he

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<sup>90</sup> *Macbeth*, V. 5. 19-28.

<sup>91</sup> Marchitello, p. 433.

can hurry and avenge him; but in the latter, as we have seen, the affair that Macbeth has with time is so preponderous that we can truly talk of a war against it.

#### 2.4 Macbeth the Anti-hero

In this chapter, we have analysed the characteristics that make Macbeth belong to the category of anti-heroes rather than that of positive protagonists. In his characterisation, he moves from being an esteemed member of his society to a tyrant, a bear tied to a stake whose life signifies nothing. His morally questionable choices put to the test our empathic connection to him, a key factor for the aesthetic experience of negative empathy. In proceeding with his desperate plan to be a King and keep his power, he proves to have committed a series of unnatural acts. His constant anxiety revolving around his obsession to keep the power forces him into a vicious circle where he cannot focus on his present achievements and has to constantly fear what in the future may threaten him, creating a constant sense of projection into the future. His dramatic arc describes a parable that first has him go upward until he reaches his climax, where he is then quickly slammed toward his demise.

## Chapter 3

This chapter is dedicated to the analysis of Milton's *Paradise Lost* in the same way that followed in the analysis of Macbeth. I shall also use William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* to better understand the theme of the loss of innocence and experience gained.

*Paradise Lost* by John Milton was first published in 1667, and it constitutes Milton's life-long dream of writing an epic poem about space and time<sup>1</sup>. In the Penguin Classics edition's introduction, Leonard relates how the poet's great aim was to combine tragedy and epic in one great work that would be able to rival both the great classical epics and tragedies; to do that, he chose not to write about England's history, but about the history of time itself stretching from before the Creation to the Second Coming<sup>2</sup>. The subject of the poem is the Fall of Mankind, as we can tell from the prologue<sup>3</sup>, but because of the structure of the epic itself, it is Satan who ends up taking up the role of hero and protagonist in the poem<sup>4</sup> in a way that encourages readers to 'decide for themselves whether Milton Satanizes the epic or measures Satan against an epic standard'<sup>5</sup>. It is thus because of the prominent role given to the character like Satan that I have decided to analyse this work of art in terms of:

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<sup>1</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by John Leonard, Penguin Classics, Revised edition (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. vii.

<sup>2</sup> *Paradise Lost*, pp. viii–xi.

<sup>3</sup> *Paradise Lost*, I. 1-5.

<sup>4</sup> *Paradise Lost*, p. xii; Shen Hong, 'On the Encounter of Satan and Christ in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*', *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, 7 (2017), 528–41 (p. 528) <<https://doi.org/10.17265/2159-5836/2017.05.005>>.

<sup>5</sup> *Paradise Lost*, p. xii.

- The evolution of the character's characterization, which brings Satan from the brightest among the Angels to the rebellion against God, and ultimately to his becoming the Devil himself. *Paradise Lost* constitutes a different example from *Macbeth* because it begins in medias res, and we only get to know Satan the angel through Raphael's words, once the rebellion has already taken place. In this context, it is of primal importance the role played by negative empathy, without which we would not be emotionally engaged with Satan.
- The interaction that the anti-hero has with the setting of his story, which brings God to the creation of Hell, Mankind to lose its place in Eden, and ultimately to a long list of negative consequences (all listed in the last book of the epic, where Michael shows Adam visions of future things). Despite not being the direct consequence of Satan's actions, the future of woe foreshadowed to Adam is primarily caused by Satan's actions in the first place, and as such, it should be attributed to him, at least in this context. The question of the loss of innocence will also be addressed, as Satan himself loses it upon realising that he will not gain Heaven anymore. To do this, I will use some of the poems from William Blake's Songs of Innocence and of Experience, a collection particularly focused on this precise aspect.
- The projection into the future, which brings Satan (and his peers, too) to obsess over his future, how to reconquer Heaven and have revenge on God, something that ultimately brings Satan to take his anger on Adam and Eve, so that God's supposed favourite new creation is spoiled forever.
- Negative empathy, which is the main factor allowing the reader to establish an empathic connection with Satan's character. It plays a particularly important role since there is not a positive description to begin with, and so, it allows us to identify with the character.

### 3.1 The Character's Evolution

*Paradise Lost* is an epic that narrates the Fall of Mankind from the Garden of Eden, which can be attributed to Satan's action. The epic is undoubtedly about this topic because the very prologue tells us this:

*Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit  
Of the forbidden tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,  
With loss of Eden, till one greater man  
Restore us, and regain the blissful state,  
Sing Heav'nly Muse, [...]*<sup>6</sup>

Even though the Fall is the main topic of the epic, Satan's prominent role in the poem problematises this stand<sup>7</sup>, since Milton takes up a lot of space telling his story from his point of view. William Empson takes a marvellous stand when he says the epic is so good because it makes God look so bad<sup>8</sup>, because, despite it being a direct consequence of Satan's doing, it was God's plan, too<sup>9</sup>.

Milton takes a remarkable amount of time dwelling on Satan's experience and his point of view: the entirety of Books I and II is dedicated to the narration of the settling in Hell, the construction of Pandemonium, and the ultimate decision not to wage direct war against God, but rather to take their revenge on his new creation, Mankind. This particular focus on the character, his later central role in Raphael's narration of the deeds that happened in Heaven before the Creation, his role in the

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<sup>6</sup> *Paradise Lost*, I. 1-5. (emphases mine)

<sup>7</sup> William Empson, 'The Satan of Milton', *The Hudson Review*, 13.1 (1960), 33–59 (p. 33) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3848205>>; William R. Herman, 'Heroism and *Paradise Lost*', *College English*, 21.1 (1959), 13–17 (p. 14) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/372433>>.

<sup>8</sup> *Paradise Lost*, p. xxiii.

<sup>9</sup> Empson, p. 35.

Temptation of Adam and Eve, and ultimately his return to Hell to boast of his victory on God and the Fallen Angels' transmutation into snakes make for a complete characterisation, which, in turn, places Satan in the position of a central character, opposed to the Machiavellian and rather flat villain I talked about in Chapter 1. The round characterisation and the inner turmoil and anxiety suggest a morally complex character, diametrically opposed to the flat character we may be prompted to think of when considering an antagonist. This complexity and prominent role in the artwork creates tension in the epic's fabric, ultimately resulting in the paradoxical experience of identifying with Satan<sup>10</sup>. This is why a deepened analysis of the character is not only needed but also reasonable in the context of this dissertation.

### 3.1.1 Beginning in Medias Res

Satan is not and cannot adhere to the classical ideal of a hero that we have discussed in the figure of Hercules<sup>11</sup> for a number of reasons: first of all, he is a Fallen Angel, the head of the rebellion against God, which means that he has forsaken and betrayed his creator; he is a proud liar, bold and overconfident, all characteristics that do not adhere to those traditionally attributed to a hero; arguably, he commits a terrible sin, that of corrupting Mankind to get back at God; while doing so, he is continuously morally challenged and actually feels guilty too, which makes for a strong morality that pushes him forward<sup>12</sup>. Ultimately, we can see from his morally questionable actions and decisions, and from his depiction of being proud and bold, as we will see, he does not belong to the category of a stereotypical positive hero. What keeps him in this category, though, what makes him an anti-hero, is his moral turmoil when he strikes God through Adam and Eve's temptation and his

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<sup>10</sup> Stefano Ercolino and Massimo Fusillo, *Empatia Negativa: Il Punto Di Vista Del Male*, Agone, 17, Prima edizione (Milan: Bompiani, 2022), pp. 92–97.

<sup>11</sup> Herman, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Herman, p. 13.

undeniable rhetorical ability<sup>13</sup>, together with a number of neutral heroic qualities such as contempt of danger, fortitude of mind and body alike, and prudence<sup>14</sup>. These few elements are instances of his heroism. This is a particularly interesting side of the poem, for as much as Satan has his moments at centre stage or Hell has its own with brightness, ‘Heaven has long periods of gloom’<sup>15</sup>, too. This particular overturn in characterisation is what Empson was hinting at, as I have said above. It is precisely because of this particular effect that we sometimes get the feeling that God is not as good as we might think (like in the moment when he condemns the entire Mankind for the sin of just two people), and Satan’s logic starts feeling quite right<sup>16</sup>.

This said, Satan’s characterisation, however, is slightly different from Macbeth’s. We have to wait for Raphael to tell Adam and Eve about Satan’s fall from Heaven before getting some hints of this side. This happens because the poem begins in medias res<sup>17</sup>, as the Fallen Angels have just landed in Hell. This case study, then, constitutes an even more important and particular one, since the aesthetic experience of negative empathy proves crucial to connect with the character and enable identification. Otherwise, we would not be engaged on Satan’s side. It is not, however, an instance of differentiation from the archetype of the anti-hero for the very elements that allow negative empathy (namely, his powerful rhetoric, firm revanchism, and point of view) make for positive ones, allowing the reader to see reality through Satan’s eyes.

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<sup>13</sup> Ercolino and Fusillo, pp. 92–94.

<sup>14</sup> John M. Steadman, ‘The Idea of Satan as the Hero of “Paradise Lost”’, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 120.4 (1976), 253–94 (p. 255).

<sup>15</sup> *Paradise Lost*, p. xvii.

<sup>16</sup> Steadman, p. 255; Empson, p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> Empson, p. 46.

### 3.1.2 Satan in Hell

From the beginning of the poem, we get a description of Satan's involvement in the Fall of Mankind when Milton laments that it was because of him that humanity lost his place in Eden:

Th' infernal Serpent; he it was, whose guile  
Stirred up with envy and revenge, deceived  
The mother of mankind, what time his pride  
Had cast him out from Heav'n, with all his host  
Of rebel angels, by whose aid aspiring  
To set himself in glory above his peers,  
He trusted to have equalled the Most High,  
If he opposed; [...] <sup>18</sup>

In this passage, we also get some keywords describing Satan's personality's main traits: he is proud, envious, and desirous of revenge, qualities that we have already found in Macbeth and Hamlet, too. As we will see, there is a particular emphasis on his pride and boldness throughout the poem, something that suggests that his characterisation is precisely that of an anti-hero. When Raphael describes his uprising in Heaven and the subsequent battle that unfolded, he is still represented as such:

[...] he of the first,  
If not the first Archangel, great in power,  
In favour and pre-eminence, yet fraught  
With envy against the Son of God, that day  
Honoured by his great Father, and proclaimed

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<sup>18</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I. 34-41.



Messiah King anointed, could not bear  
Through pride that sight, and thought himself impaired.<sup>19</sup>

Milton here does not clearly say whether Satan before his fall was the most powerful Angel, but that subtle hint ('Of the first | If not the first') reverses a good amount of importance on him. In feeling betrayed by God for placing such great honour on the Son, he resembles Macbeth when Duncan proclaims Malcolm Prince of Cumberland. No Witches are involved here, but the supernatural part is still very present since we are talking about deities and gods.

Raphael's rendition of him before the rebellion is similar to the version we first encounter in Book I, for there is nothing 'but his doom' that 'Reserved him to more wrath; for now the thought | Both of lost happiness and lasting pain' (I. 53-55) torments him. In his 'obdurate pride and steadfast hate' (I. 58) and with 'bold words' (I. 82), the 'Arch-Enemy' (I. 81) first addresses his peers, admitting to the pain of losing their brightness in Heaven since they outshone 'Myriads | though bright' (I. 87; this again suggests that the angels that rebelled were the best and possibly closest to God<sup>20</sup>), but still refusing to repent:

[...] yet not for those,  
Nor what the potent Victor in his rage  
Can else inflict, do I repent or change,  
Though changed in outward lustre, that fixed mind  
And high disdain, from sense of injured merit,  
That with the mightiest raised me to contend,<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Paradise Lost*, I. 659-665.

<sup>20</sup> Empson, p. 47.

<sup>21</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I. 94-99.

Immediately after, we get the first of many examples of his revanchism:

All is not lost; the unconquerable will,  
And study of revenge, immortal hate,  
And courage never to submit or yield:  
And what is else not to be overcome?  
*That Glory never shall his wrath or might  
Extort from me.* To bow and sue for grace  
With suppliant knee, and deify his power  
Who from the terror of this arm so late  
Doubted his empire, that were low indeed,  
That were an ignominy and shame beneath  
This downfall; [...]<sup>22</sup>

It is important to notice that, even though he is putting together an image of strength, power, and obdurateness, Satan is speaking ‘though in pain | Vaunting aloud, but racked with deep despair’ (I. 125-126). In delineating Satan, Milton put a lot of effort into underlining how constantly in pain he is, and he is so not only because he lost Heaven and his seat there, but also because he is (in his view) forced to do things that go against his moral compass, as we will see analysing the temptation of Eve. This psychological depth allows us to connect with him, to take his stand and temporarily see things from his point of view.

His next request is that of a consultation among the Fallen Angels to determine which course of action is to be taken against God, ‘our own loss how repair, | How overcome this dire calamity, | What reinforcement we may gain from hope, | If not what resolution from despair.’ (I. 188-191). In surveying his hellish surroundings,

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<sup>22</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I. 106-116. (emphasis mine)

Satan does not yield to the temptation of calling them unapt for the 'gods' (I. 240) they are and pronounces an epic soliloquy:

Is this the region, this the soil, the clime,  
Said then the lost Archangel, this the seat  
That we must change for Heav'n, this mournful gloom  
For that celestial light? Be it so, since he  
Who now is sov'reign can dispose and bid  
What shall be right: farthest from him is best  
Whom reason hath equalled, force hath made supreme  
Above his equals. Farewell happy fields  
Where joy for ever dwells: hail horrors, hail  
Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell  
Receive thy new possessor: one who brings  
A mind not to be changed by place or time.  
The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.  
What matter where, if I be still the same,  
And what I should be, all but less than he  
Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least  
We shall be free; th' Almighty hath not built  
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:  
Here we may reign secure, and in my choice  
To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:  
Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n.<sup>23</sup>

Even though Satan recognises the 'mournful gloom' of the place, this does not stop him from claiming it. He welcomes the 'horrors' and the new 'infernal world',

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<sup>23</sup> *Paradise Lost*, I. 242-263.

claiming it with pride and pain alike, for it is possible to make your own Heaven out of Hell. This last phrasing is very important because it shows how powerful his moral inner strength is. In affirming this, Satan also self-proclaims himself an equal to God<sup>24</sup> and underlines how the Fallen Angels can now be free, despite the gloominess of the place, from God's overbearing and imposing figure. Almost with eagerness, he welcomes his new home, accepting it in all its new possibilities and is ready to make a Heaven of it – echoing that tradition that saw Hell or Heaven as a state of mind<sup>25</sup>. While Satan proudly proclaims this, he is convinced that his actions will not have such consequences as to make his experience in Hell even worse. However, as we will see, the victory he foreshadows to himself and his peers will never come. In his 'ambition', he seems to forget that God is an all-seeing being and that, unbeknownst to him, it was God's plan from the beginning for him to rebel and fall. Nevertheless, thanks to this powerful rhetorical ability and to the use of a limited point of view, we see Satan as a powerful, worthy, and equal adversary to God<sup>26</sup>.

Throughout Book I and II, Satan's presence is mighty, and his will for revenge is mirrored in all the Fallen Angels' need for it. We know that they all are in pain since they are described 'with looks | Downcast and damp', but 'within appeared | Obscure some glimpse of joy, to have found their chief | Not in despair' (I. 522-524). Satan exercises his powers not only on us but also on his peers. Because of this powerful influence, the Fallen Angels decide to react to their tough luck and hold a council to decide what is to be done against God. In all this process, Satan is continuously remarked as powerful, hefty, and proud, characteristics that we can normally also attribute to a hero:

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<sup>24</sup> Empson, p. 41.

<sup>25</sup> Milton, p. 296.

<sup>26</sup> William A. McQueen, "'The Hateful Siege of Contraries': Satan's Interior Monologues in Paradise Lost", *Milton Quarterly*, 4.4 (1970), 60–65 (p. 60).

[...] he above the rest  
In shape and gesture proudly eminent  
Stood like a tow'r; his form had yet not lost  
All her original brightness, nor appeared  
Less than archangel ruined, and th' excess  
Of glory obscured: [...]<sup>27</sup>

Despite this, Satan appears to have lost some of his original brightness, and, in fact, he is 'Darkened so' but yet he 'shone | Above them all', even if his face is covered in 'Deep scars' (I. 599-601). He tries to address the other angels, yet 'Tears such as angels weep, burst forth' (I. 620), again showing his sore side. Nevertheless, he is able to propose an idea to strike back at God by taking their revenge on this new creature God wanted to create: Mankind.

Space may produce new worlds; whereof so rife  
There went a fame in Heav'n that he ere long  
Intended to create, and therein plant  
A generation, whom his choice regard  
Should favour equal to the sons of Heaven:  
Thither, if but to pry, shall be perhaps  
Our first eruption, thither or elsewhere:  
For this infernal pit shall never hold  
Celestial Spirits in bondage, nor th' abyss  
Long under darkness cover [...]<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Paradise Lost*, I. 589-594.

<sup>28</sup> *Paradise Lost*, I. 650-659.

This idea is generated by ‘despair’, but their hope to defeat God ‘uplifted beyond hope’ (II. 6-7). Satan is continuously described as ‘the strongest and the fiercest Spirit | That fought in Heav’n’ made ‘now fiercer by despair’ (II. 44-45). This continuous reminder of the Fallen Angel’s heroic virtue is what puzzles the reader, who is prompted to identify with Satan and for whom is tempted to demand justice<sup>29</sup>. We know that we should not feel for a character like Satan, yet, his characterisation as heroic, great, and in some instances even worthy, pushes us in the opposite direction.

Book II continues in this direction, with Satan continuing to depict God as their enemy that forced the angels to ‘splendid vassalage’ (II. 252) while spending their eternity ‘in worship’ of someone ‘we hate’ (II. 248-249). The Fallen Angels' argument is that they can ‘Thrive under evil’ (II. 261), where they can be free to do as they please, whereas in Heaven, they would be forced to serve. Three main propositions are made to take revenge on God: open war, do nothing or enjoy the relative security they have now. It is Satan that comes forward (through Beëlzebub) to instruct what is to be done, for they will never have peace with Heaven, only ‘custody severe’ (II. 334). Something needs to be done, and here he offers himself heroically to seek out this new creature God has created and spoil it.

[...] What if we find  
Some easier enterprise? There is a place  
(If ancient and prophetic fame in Heav’n  
Err not) another world, the happy seat  
Of some new race called *Man*, about this time  
To be created like to us, though less  
In power and excellence, but favoured more  
Of him who rules above; so was his will

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<sup>29</sup> Steadman, p. 253.

Pronounced among the gods, and by an oath,  
That shook Heav'ns whole circumference, confirmed.  
Thither let us bend all our thoughts, to learn  
What creatures there inhabit, of what mould,  
Or substance, how endued, and what their power,  
And where their weakness, how attempted best,  
By force or subtlety: though Heav'n be shut,  
And Heav'ns high Arbitrator sit secure  
In his own strength, this place may lie exposed  
The utmost border of his Kingdom, left  
To their defence who hold it: here perhaps  
Some advantageous act may be achieved  
By sudden onset, either with Hell fire  
To waste his whole Creation, or possess  
All as our own, and drive as we were driven,  
The puny habitants, or if not drive,  
Seduce them to our Party, that their God  
May prove their foe, and with repenting hand  
Abolish his own works. This would surpass  
Common revenge, and interrupt his joy  
In our confusion, and our joy upraise  
In his disturbance; when his darling sons  
Hurled headlong to partake with us, shall curse  
Their frail Originals, and faded bliss,  
Faded so soon. [...] <sup>30</sup>

The main idea here is to make God suffer the same way they are suffering by either turning Man on the Fallen Angels' side or burning the entire place where he sits.

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<sup>30</sup> *Paradise Lost*, II. 344-376.

To do this, they need a volunteer to go and venture out in Chaos to find the place where Man is located and then proceed with the plan. Their hope that ‘we may chance | Re-enter Heav’n’ (II. 396-397) would reside only on that volunteer to face a long ‘way | And hard’ (II. 432-433) full of ‘unknown dangers’ (II. 444), so that ‘on whom we send | The weight of all and our last hope relies’ (II. 415-416). When asked who can do so for their cause, ‘all sat mute | Pondering the danger with deep thoughts’ (II. 420-421), ‘till at last | Satan, whom now transcendent glory raised | Above his fellows, with monarchal pride | Conscious of highest worth, unmoved thus spake’ (II. 424-429). This, again, is another occasion for Milton to stress the heroic virtue in Satan, for he volunteers to go alone, proud of himself while also conscious of his own worth. Satan volunteers for the dangerous enterprise on the condition that he goes by himself:

[...] I abroad  
Through all the coasts of dark destruction seek  
Deliverance for us all: this enterprise  
None shall partake with me.<sup>31</sup>

The Fallen Angels then erupt in a jubilee, ‘rejoicing their matchless chief’ (II. 487) that ‘seemed | Alone th’ Antagonist of Heav’n, nor less | Than Hell’s dread Emperor with pomp supreme, | And God-like imitated state’ (II. 509-511). Though Milton’s aim was to limit the image’s power by suggesting that this triumph is just an imitation of God’s real triumph, it still makes for an image of Satan of great power. By adding that Satan is ‘matchless’, the immediate consequence is that of thinking of Satan as absolutely so, even when confronted with God. This inner tension is also reflected in our behaviour towards the character: on the one hand, we are attracted to him because he is presented as an instance of heroism and endowed with heroic virtue; on the other, however, we are also repelled because he is the

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<sup>31</sup> *Paradise Lost*, II. 463-465.



Devil, the cause of our Fall, and acts in despicable ways. The ‘heroic deeds’ (II. 549) that he is about to commit are not so heroic after all, but because we are induced to take his point of view by the very way the narration is created, we tend to keep that ‘false presumptuous hope’ (II. 522) that he, together with the other Fallen Angels, will eventually be able to regain Heaven. However, our ‘hope’, just like Satan and the angels’, is nothing but ‘fallacious’ (II. 569).

Another instance where Satan is indirectly connected to a god is when the narrator relates Sin’s birth. As Satan’s daughter, she was not conceived in a sexual way but rather sprang from her father’s head as Athena did with Zeus<sup>32</sup>. The striking difference is that in the first case, we have an instance of evil being born out of a yet-to-fall angel, and in the second, we have the embodiment of pure knowledge being born. Both, though, are born as ‘a goddess armed’ (II. 757), something that may suggest that not only is Satan capable of creating life like God but that he can also create other deities. The difference between the two goddesses is striking, but still, Satan is again juxtaposed to God, and those ‘matchless’ and ‘God-like’ attributes further problematise Milton’s stand when it comes to Satan.

Despite Satan’s powerful description, he is still an imperfect hero, for he hesitates before diving into Chaos, demonstrating that he might be more “human” than we could imagine. It takes him a while to muster the necessary strength and courage to jump into the abyss.

[...]; Chaos Umpire sits,  
And by decision more embroils the fray  
By which he reigns: next him high arbiter  
Chance governs all. *Into this wild abyss,*  
The womb of Nature and perhaps her grave,

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<sup>32</sup> Empson, p. 46.

Of neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire,  
But all these in their pregnant causes mixt  
Confus'dly, and which thus must ever fight,  
Unless th' Almighty Maker them ordain  
His dark materials to create more Worlds,  
*Into this wild abyss the wary Fiend*  
*Stood* on the brink of Hell and looked a while,  
Pondering his Voyage; [...] <sup>33</sup>

By postponing the main verb of many lines, Milton successfully conveys the hesitation in Satan that, though described as 'matchless', still hesitates to plunge into dark and immense Chaos<sup>34</sup>. Strictly speaking, he only stares into the abyss before diving in, but the main verb's syntax and delaying mimic his unsure decision. Once he does, he meets Night, to whom he asks to 'direct my course' (II. 980) to get to God's new creation – earth, and she obliges.

### 3.1.3 Satan's Restlessness

Even in God's words, Satan sounds like a heroic figure that no one and nothing can stop.

Only begotten Son, seest thou what rage  
Transports our Adversary, whom no bounds  
Prescribed, no bars of Hell, nor all the chains  
Heaped on him there, nor yet the main abyss  
Wide interrupt can hold; so bent he seems

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<sup>33</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, II. 907-919.

<sup>34</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, p. 321.

On desperate revenge, that shall redound  
Upon his own rebellious head. And now  
Through all restraint broke loose he wings his way  
Not far off Heav'n, in the precincts of light,  
Directly towards the new created world,  
And man there placed, with purpose to assay  
If him by force he can destroy, or worse,  
By some false guile pervert; and shall pervert;<sup>35</sup>

Satan is fuelled by his desire for revenge and his hope to regain Heaven (though under his own conditions). In his fierce determination, he is compared to a bird of prey coming down on its prey (another element reminiscent of Macbeth, too). This further conveys the idea of strength and power that we have been trying to delineate.

Here walked the Fiend at large in spacious field.  
As when a vulture on Imaus bred,  
Whose snowy ridge the roving Tartar bounds,  
Dislodging from a Region scarce of prey  
To gorge the flesh of Lambs or yeanling kids  
On hills where flocks are fed, flies toward the springs  
Of Ganges or Hydaspes, Indian streams;  
But in his way lights on the barren plains  
Of Sericana, where Chineses drive  
With sails and Wind their cany wagons light:  
So on this windy sea of land,  
the Fiend Walked up and down alone bent on his prey,<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, III. 80-92.

<sup>36</sup> *Paradise Lost*, III. 430-441.

It is with 'envy' (III. 553) that Satan looks at Eden, though first he was struck with 'wonder' (III. 542). Like 'a scout' (III. 543), he came to conquer the place and have revenge on God. This is where we can observe another shared element between the Shakespearean characters and Satan – deception. In order to properly mingle in the place, Satan has to shapeshift into an innocent-looking and unimportant 'Cherub' (III. 636) so that he can deceive the other angels at the scene and freely roam the place and prepare for his action while 'unperceived' (III. 681) thanks to his 'Hypocrisy' (683). Again, later on, Satan will strike back at God through Eve's deception and ultimate Fall by transmuting into a serpent. He manages to deceive her by shapeshifting and talking to her eloquently (proof that is not only eloquence alluring for the reader but also for the other characters).

Though Satan comes down to Eden 'inflamed with rage' (IV. 9) with the aim of wrecking 'on innocent frail man his loss | Of that first battle, and his flight to Hell' (IV. 11-12), 'horror and doubt distract | His troubled thoughts' (IV. 18-19). It is his conscience waking up to remind him 'Of what he was, what is, and what must be | Worse; of worse deeds worse suffering must ensure.' (IV. 25-26). He feels 'miserable' (IV. 73) in thinking that 'all his good proved ill in me, | And wrought but malice', and even wonders if there is 'place | Left for repentance, nor for pardon left' (IV. 79-80). This hesitation, together with his one when overlooking Chaos, is an example of his troubled, anxious self. He stops, ponders, doubts and waits, all demeanours typical of an anti-hero, just like Macbeth and Hamlet do when confronted with an imminent action. After this hesitation, though, his 'deadly hate' (IV. 99) springs up again, and he reconfirms his decision to abide to evil:

All hope excluded thus, behold instead  
Of us outcast, exiled, his new delight,  
Mankind created, and for him this world.  
So farewell hope, and with hope farewell fear,

Farwell remorse: all good to me is lost;  
Evil be thou my good; by thee at least  
Divided empire with Heav'n's King I hold  
By thee, and more than half perhaps will reign;  
As man ere long, and this new world shall know.<sup>37</sup>

After this pledge, 'the Fiend | Saw undelighted all delight' (IV. 284), but after seeing how happy Adam and Eve are, he is so amazed at the scene that 'Scarce thus at length failed speech recovered sad' (IV. 337). In seeing how perfect and happy their state is compared to his sorrowful and desperate one, Satan is enraged and proclaim that 'Hall shall unfold | To entertain these two' (IV. 381-382), proclaiming that it is necessity that forces him to do 'what else though damned I should abhor' (IV. 393). This continuous tension between "have to do" and "should not" evidently creates an anxiety or inner turmoil in Satan, who is pushed to take revenge by his pride (while unknowingly also being necessitated by God's will, of course), but who also repels his own actions, for he has to spoil such a splendid place as Eden and such an innocent as Man, that, though is a 'Sight hateful' and 'tormenting' (IV. 505), provokes such envy in him that prompts him to act.

Having decided to proceed in this direction, he insinuates a troubling dream in Eve's mind for her to go and fetch the Tree of Knowledge and eat its fruit. While he is doing so, other angels find him, bring him to Gabriel, where he is reprimanded for his actions, and set on his way back to Hell. Unbeknownst to the Angels, Satan keeps circling the world as Raphael tells his story to Adam and Eve to warn them of the danger.

While Raphael tells Adam and Eve Satan's story, as I said, we see reiterated the same qualities that we find throughout the epic: he is proud, envious of the Son's

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<sup>37</sup> *Paradise Lost*, IV. 105-113.

new state in Heaven, he urges to tell his ‘suggested cause’ (V. 702) using ‘Ambiguous words and jealousies’ (V. 703). He rounds up his troops and starts relating his motifs for waging war against God: he says that in Heaven they cannot be free and that they would be bound to an eternity of servitude not just to one, but now two entities. Abdiel alone stands against his words and is subsequently forced to leave to return to the side still faithful to God ‘through hostile scorn’ (V. 904). The battle continues for three days until the Son comes to banish Satan and his followers from Heaven into Hell, where he should ‘Reign’ his ‘Kingdom’ (VI. 183), ‘Yet chains in Hell, not realms expect’ (VI. 186). In Raphael’s words, that day, Satan ‘Prodigious power had shown, and met in arms | No equal’ (VI. 246-247), another example of how the narration depicts him as a hero, and like one he also did not flee from Michael, ‘but sought thee far and nigh’ (VI. 295). It is also in the fight with Michael that Satan first come to know what physical pain is<sup>38</sup>, foreshadowing his future existence of pure pain for having lost Heaven. Though ‘Purest at first’, Satan’s rebellion has made him ‘now gross by sinning’ (VI. 661)<sup>39</sup>. Raphael’s cautionary tale of Satan’s rebellion finally invokes in Adam and Eve, and in the reader alike not to ‘listen to his temptation’ (VI. 908) and be aware of what kind of ‘reward’ (VI. 910) is given to ‘disobedience’ (VI. 911).

#### 3.1.4 Climaxing and Descending Towards the End

Satan is then completely absent from Books VII and VIII and only comes back in Book IX, which we can consider the climax of his arc. Now Satan returns ‘full of anguish’ (IX. 62), ‘fearless’ (IX. 57), and ‘improved | In meditated fraud and malice’ (IX. 54-55) with the aim of committing ‘man’s destruction’ (IX. 56). While first, he

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<sup>38</sup> Empson, p. 44.

<sup>39</sup> Empson argues that Satan’s fall into evil is gradual, since ‘[w]e first meet him certain of the righteous defeated, follow him into doubt and despa tive of Raphael to find him confident th as well as just, then return to the story a rotting away.’ Empson, p. 53.

shapeshifted into a cormorant to observe Adam and Eve, after more pondering, he chooses a serpent:

[...]; and found  
The serpent subtlest beast of all the field.  
Him after long debate, irresolute  
Of thoughts revolved, his final sentence chose  
Fit vessel, fittest imp of fraud, in whom  
To enter, and his dark suggestions hide  
From sharpest sight: for in the wily snake,  
Whatever sleights none would suspicious mark,  
As from his wit and native subtlety  
Proceeding, which in other beasts observed  
Doubt might beget of diabolic power  
Active within beyond the sense of brute.<sup>40</sup>

Here we have one more example of Satan's reluctance to do what he must, according to his moral compass. Immediately after this idea creeps into his mind, Satan rebukes it, for he claims that his life would be much worse in Heaven serving God. He is then resolute in going on:

With what delight could I have walkt thee round,  
If I could joy in aught, sweet interchange  
of hill and valley, rivers, woods and plains,  
Now land, now sea, & shores with forest crowned,  
Rocks, dens, and caves; but I in none of these  
Find place or refuge; *and the more I see*  
*Pleasures about me, so much more I feel*

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<sup>40</sup> *Paradise Lost*, IX. 84-96.

*Torment within me, as from the hateful siege  
Of contraries; all good to me becomes  
Bane, and in Heav'n much worse would be my state.*<sup>41</sup>

His only aim is to destroy God, 'For only in destroying I find ease | to my relentless thoughts' (IX. 129-130). He notices his fate as an angel that used to 'sit the highest' (IX. 164) with anger now that he is 'costrained | Into a beast' with anger, and envious, proclaims that 'spite then with spite is best repaid' (IX. 178). Thus, with even more vigour, he charges at Eve by first entering the serpent and pretending to have eaten the fruit himself. He approached 'his purposed prey' (IX. 416), remains again stupefied at seeing Eve and disarmed of 'enmity' or 'of guile, of hate, of envy, of revenge' (IX. 465-466). 'But the hot Hell that always in him burns, | Though in Heav'n, soon ended his delight, | And tortures him now more' (IX. 467-469). He gets 'fierce' (IX. 471) her attention and most eloquently tempts her into eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge:

Till on a day roving the field, I chanced  
A goodly tree far distant to behold  
Loaden with fruit of fairest colours mixed,  
Ruddy and gold: I nearer drew to gaze;  
When from the boughs a savory odour blown,  
Grateful to appetite, more pleased my sense  
Then smell of sweetest fennel, or the teats  
Of ewe or goat dropping with Milk at ev'n,  
Unsucked of lamb or kid, that tend their play.  
To satisfy the sharp desire I had  
Of tasting those fair apples, I resolved  
Not to defer; hunger and thirst at once,

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<sup>41</sup> *Paradise Lost*, IX. 114-123. (emphasis mine)



Powerful persuaders, quickened at the scent  
Of that alluring fruit, urged me so keen.  
About the mossy trunk I wound me soon,  
For high from ground the branches would require  
Thy utmost reach or Adam's; [...] <sup>42</sup>

Satan's eloquence is so 'tempting' (IX. 595) that he manages to 'into fraud | lead Eve' (IX. 643-644), and so eloquent and convincing he is that the narrator himself compares him to an orator:

As when of old some orator renowned  
In Athens or free Rome, where eloquence  
Flourished, since mute, to some great cause addressed,  
Stood in himself collected, while each part,  
Motion, each act won audience ere the tongue,  
Sometimes in heighth began, as no delay  
Of preface brooking through his zeal of right. <sup>43</sup>

This is the same ability that is able to win us over to his side, and while Satan uses it to have Eve commit sin and strike back at God, Milton carefully draws Satan's character as endowed with incredible charisma and eloquence to be able to win us, readers, over, too. He alleges that God would have never put the Tree there if he did not intend them to try it and pretends to have eaten from it himself and not to have suffered any consequences. And Eve, thinking that he is 'friendly to man, far from deceit or guile' (IX. 772), gives in and eats from the Tree.

O sacred, wise, and wisdom-giving plant,

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<sup>42</sup> *Paradise Lost*, IX. 575-591.

<sup>43</sup> *Paradise Lost*, IX. 670-676.

Mother of science, now I feel thy power  
Within me clear, not only to discern  
Things in their causes, but to trace the ways  
Of highest agents, deemed however wise.  
Queen of this universe, do not believe  
Those rigid threats of death; ye shall not die:  
How should ye? by the fruit? it gives you life  
To knowledge. By the Threat'ner? look on me,  
Me who have touched and tasted, yet both live,  
And life more perfect have attained than Fate  
Meant me, by vent'ring higher than my lot.  
Shall that be shut to man, which to the beast  
Is open? or will God incense his ire  
For such a petty trespass, and not praise  
Rather your dauntless virtue, whom the pain  
Of death denounced, whatever thing death be,  
Deterred not from achieving what might lead  
To happier life, knowledge of good and evil;  
Of good, how just? of evil, if what is evil  
Be real, why not known, since easier shunned?  
God therefore cannot hurt ye, and be just;  
(Not just, not God, not feared then, nor obeyed:  
Your fear itself of death removes the fear.  
Why then was this forbid? Why but to awe,  
Why but to keep ye low and ignorant,  
His worshippers; he knows that in the day  
Ye eat thereof, your eyes that seem so clear,  
Yet are but dim, shall perfectly be then  
Opened and cleared, and ye shall be as gods,  
Knowing both good and evil as they know.

That ye should be as gods, since I as man,  
Internal man, is but proportion meet,  
I of brute human, ye of human gods.  
So ye shall die perhaps, by putting off  
Human, to put on gods, death to be wished,  
Though threatened, which no worse than this can bring.  
And what are gods that man may not become  
As they, participating god-like food?  
The gods are first, and that advantage use  
On our belief, that all from them proceeds;  
I question it, for this fair earth I see,  
Warmed by the sun, producing every kind,  
Them nothing: if they all things, who enclosed  
Knowledge of good and evil in this tree,  
That whoso eats thereof, forthwith attains  
Wisdom without their leave? and wherein lies  
Th' offence, that man should thus attain to know?  
What can your knowledge hurt him, or this tree  
Impart against his will if all be his?  
Or is it envy, and can envy dwell  
in Heav'nly breasts? these, these and many more  
Causes import your need of this fair fruit.  
Goddess humane, reach then, and freely taste.  
He ended, and his words replete with guile  
Into her heart too easy entrance won.<sup>44</sup>

After doing this, he changes shape once more to observe what happens in the Garden, but once he sees the Son, 'terrified | He fled' (X. 338-339). 'With joy' (X.

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<sup>44</sup> *Paradise Lost*, IX. 679-734.

345), he returns to Hell, where he is welcomed by Sin, who chants of ‘thy virtue’ (X. 372), ‘thy wisdom’ (X. 373), having him ‘avenged | our foil in Heaven’ (X. 374-375). Satan then enters Hell ‘unseen’ (X. 448), taking the shape of a ‘plebeian angel militant’ (X. 442). There, ‘the Stygian throng | Bent their aspect’ (X. 443-444), acclaiming his return loudly. Satan is lastly deceived by his own self when he proclaims his victory:

Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers,  
For in possession such, not only of right,  
I call ye and declare ye now, returned  
Successful beyond hope, to lead ye forth  
Triumphant out of this infernal pit  
Abominable, accursed, the house of woe,  
And dungeon of our tyrant. Now possess,  
As lords, a spacious world, to our native Heaven  
Little inferior, by my adventure hard  
With peril great achieved.<sup>45</sup>

In his pride, he boasts about the victory and that he has not been judged like the serpent he used. He is so convinced that nothing will happen to him or the other Fallen Angels that he proclaims, ‘what remains, ye gods, | But up and enter now into full bliss’ (X. 502-503), only for his last word, ‘bliss’, to rhyme with the ‘hiss’ (X. 508), the sound that all the Fallen Angels turned into snakes do. And again, as in a second fall, ‘down he fell’ (X. 513) with ‘horror’ and ‘horrid sympathy’ (X. 539-540). All the now-serpents follow him to witness dozens of Trees of Knowledge sprouting from the ground, hissing. What was meant as a moment of triumph turned into an ‘exploding hiss’ (X. 546). When they reach for the fruits of the Trees to quench their thirst and hunger, the fruits turn to ashes in their mouths,

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<sup>45</sup> *Paradise Lost*, X. 460-469.

‘so oft the fell | Into the same illusion, not as man | Whom they triumphed once lapsed’ (X. 570-572).

This episode marks the end of Satan as a character in *Paradise Lost*, and it represents a humbling shrinking for him in his parabolic arc since he started out as an angel and is now turned into a snake. His value has decreased from that of the highest and most valued angel to the creature that he used to seduce Eve into committing sin.

Like the decay of Satan's visible glory, his transformation from godlike to brutish shape is a reflection of the alteration in his character; it involves a dramatic change from the symbolic form of heroic virtue to the symbolic form of its contrary vice.

Nevertheless more than the mere pretense of heroism has been lost; and more than the heroic image has been destroyed. The darkening of original luster, the transition from Lucifer to lucifuge, and the metamorphoses from archangelic to bestial form—these involve a positive reversal of the original order of creation: the production of light out of darkness, and of peace out of discord. In the alterations in Satan's character, and in his external form, we encounter the exact reverse of these processes. We see not only the transformation of apparent heroic virtue into its logical contrary, but (more significantly) a progressive moral annihilation, a spiritual *decreation*.<sup>46</sup>

## 3.2 The Setting

### 3.2.1 Association With Celestial Phenomena

Milton does a remarkable job at constantly associating Satan with celestial phenomena associated with the fallen world and aligned with cosmic events like

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<sup>46</sup> Steadman, pp. 293–94.

the appearance of new stars or comets that belong to the postlapsarian state of the world. These elements project Satan as a constant threat to the prelapsarian reality and are, in fact, ‘a powerful narrative device through which Satan’s true self is revealed’, becoming ‘another instance of his evil intentions recoiling back on himself.’<sup>47</sup> Sarkar highlights that ‘New stars and comets of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were visible signs that acted as a catalyst for intense debate about the possibilities of the end of the world and the coming of the new millennium.’<sup>48</sup>, which means that if a comet appeared, people perceived that the end of the world was near. The association of Satan or his followers to these astronomical events thus makes even more sense in the light of what is about to happen in the epic.

Milton associates the Fallen Angels with these phenomena from the beginning, when, for instance, he describes how Mulciber fell from Heaven by dropping ‘from the zenith like a falling star’ (I. 745). Moreover, when Satan is associated with stars or comets alike, it results that his destructive potential is thoroughly emphasised<sup>49</sup>, as when Gabriel confronts him for having entered Eden, and he is associated to gunpowder when Ithuriel touches him with his spear:

Him thus intent Ithuriel with his Spear  
Touched lightly; for no falsehood can endure  
Touch of celestial temper, but returns  
Of force to its own likeness: up he starts  
Discovered and surprised. As when a spark  
Lights on a heap of nitrous powder, laid

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<sup>47</sup> Malabika Sarkar, *Cosmos and Character in Paradise Lost*, 1st ed (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 125.

<sup>48</sup> Sarkar, p. 108.

<sup>49</sup> Sarkar, p. 119.

Fit for the Tun some magazine to store  
Against a rumoured war, the smutty grain  
With sudden blaze diffused, inflames the air:  
So started up in his own shape the Fiend.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, Satan appears as a comet first in Book II, when he confronts Death while on his way out of Hell:

Incensed with indignation Satan stood  
Unterrified, and like a comet burned,  
That fires the length of Ophiucus huge  
In the Arctic sky, and from his horrid hair  
Shakes pestilence and war.<sup>51</sup>

And, again, in Book IV, when he confronts Gabriel:

On the other side Satan alarmed  
Collecting all his might dilated stood,  
Like Teneriff or Atlas unremoved:  
His stature reached the sky, and on his crest  
Sat Horror plumed; [...] <sup>52</sup>

So, it appears that Satan's strength and hefty presence are constantly reinforced when he confronts other characters, resulting in the reiteration of his characteristics of power, which is also an ominous sign:

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<sup>50</sup> *Paradise Lost*, IV. 810-818.

<sup>51</sup> *Paradise Lost*, II. 707-711.

<sup>52</sup> *Paradise Lost*, IV. 985-989.

Within the context of seventeenth-century millennialism, the appearance of Satan as the comet and the new star in Ophiucus enhances our perception of him as powerful and compelling, but also as deceitful and evil. Helen Gardener has written of a progressive degeneration of Satan indicated through his disguises of cherub, toad, and serpent.<sup>29</sup> Yet these disguises are but instances of cunning and expediency. Satan's self-fashioning is proactive and he uses disguise for the purpose of negotiation and control.<sup>53</sup>

### 3.2.2 Hell Within and Without

Satan's rebellion is the prime motif that brings to the creation of Hell. Without the rebellion, there would have been no need for such place, so, it would have been unnecessary altogether. While a picture of Hell is more or less present in everyone's imagination, it is interesting to take a look at what kind of associations can be made with the character of Satan.

The first description of the place can be found in Book I as Satan is looking around at the desolate place of his and his companions' landing:

At once as far as angels ken he views  
The dismal situation waste and wild,  
A dungeon horrible, on all sides round  
As one great furnace flamed, yet from those flames  
No light, but rather darkness visible  
Served only to discover sights of woe,  
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace  
And rest can never dwell, hope never comes  
That comes to all; but torture without end

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<sup>53</sup> Sarkar, p. 121.



Still urges, and a fiery deluge, fed  
With ever-burning sulphur unconsumed:  
Such place Eternal Justice had prepared  
For those rebellious, here their Prison ordained  
In utter darkness, and their portion set  
As far removed from God and light of Heav'n  
As from the Center thrice to th' utmost Pole.  
O how unlike the place from whence they fell!<sup>54</sup>

Hell is thus a place of 'woe', where light is completely removed, full of 'waste', 'wild', and constantly burning. It evokes feelings of 'sorrow' and eternal pain since the Fallen Angels see no way out of there. It is further described as a 'seat of desolation' (I. 181) with a lake full 'of liquid fire' (I. 229), 'all involved | With stench and smoke' (I. 236-237). It is worth noting that Satan proclaims that Heaven and Hell are mental states, as we said earlier, and that they can thus 'make a Heaven out of a Hell' (I. 255). This becomes important when Satan lands in Eden but cannot actually get away from Hell because it is 'within him, for within him Hell | Springs' (IV. 20). He too notices this aspect for himself when he says, 'myself am Hell' (IV. 75). It is thus logical to say that when Satan moves around in *Paradise Lost's* cosmos, he does by bringing Hell around with him and influencing the setting. His presence is so powerful in this sense that when he is forced to leave Eden, 'with him fled the shades of night' (IV. 1015), which implies that he brings night around. This is logical when we understand that Hell is a place of darkness (like Macbeth's castle is), and being Hell inside of him, he brings that darkness when he visits Eden.

This aspect can be also retraced in his confrontation with Gabriel. After shapeshifting into a lesser angel, he is still found in Eden by Ithuriel and Zephon,

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<sup>54</sup> *Paradise Lost*, I. 59-74.

who bring him to Gabriel. Upon discovering him, though, they notice how his brightness has diminished since he has fallen:

Think not, revolted Spirit, thy shape the same,  
Or undiminished brightness, to be known  
As when thou stood'st in Heav'n upright and pure;  
That glory then, when thou no more wast good,  
Departed from thee, and thou resemblest now  
Thy sin and place of doom obscure and foul.<sup>55</sup>

We get two confirmations from this passage: first, that his diminished brightness is due to his sin, his rebellion, and therefore that that darkness that he carries around in his self has affected this side of his characterization; second, Zephon's words clearly establish a connection between Satan and Hell since they share common traits, such as darkness.

As a matter of fact, when Satan manages to tempt Eve into eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, his influence is also heard in Eden, for 'Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat | Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe, | That all was lost' (IX. 782-784). Again, when Adam too gives in (not out of pity for Eve, but for himself), 'Earth trembled from her entrails, as again | In pangs, and Nature gave a second groan; | Sky louder, and muttering thunder, some sad drops | Wept at completing of the moral sin | Original' (IX. 1000-1004). Nature and the Earth feel the pain of Adam and Eve committing the crime that Satan prompted them to commit in the first place, and so, the setting becomes a foil unto which Milton projects the consequences to Satan's actions.

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<sup>55</sup> *Paradise Lost*, IV. 835-840.

It is clear and logical at this point to draw a connection between the character of Satan and his setting, since we have established that there is a correspondence between what is within the character and what is without. Satan brings Hell into Eden, and in doing so, he exerts a negative influence that ultimately takes to the end of Paradise as it is and to the world as we know it today: postlapsarian, determined with time (as we will see) and seasons, too<sup>56</sup>. Before turning to time, though, there is another interesting aspect with regard to the influence of Satan's character that I would like to explore: the foil Milton establishes between Satan's fall and Adam and Eve's in terms of loss of innocence and experience gained.

### 3.2.3 Loss of Innocence and Experience Gained

As Spratt reports, Schneider noticed that Milton's concept of innocence is equated to being sinless<sup>57</sup>, and even though the question cannot be reduced to just this

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<sup>56</sup> The end of the perpetual prelapsarian spring is described in Book X. 668-681, where Milton juxtaposes Ptolemaic and Copernican explanations:

Some say he bid his Angels turn askance  
The poles of earth twice ten degrees and more  
From the sun's axle; they with labour pushed  
Oblique the centric globe: some say the Sun  
Was bid turn reins from th' equinoctial rode  
Like distant breadth to Taurus with the seav'n  
Atlantic Sisters, and the Spartan Twins  
Up to the Tropic Crab; thence down amain  
By *Leo* and the Virgin and the Scales,  
As deep as Capricorn, to bring in change  
Of seasons to each clime; else had the spring  
Perpetual smiled on Earth with vernant flow'rs,  
Equal in days and nights, except to those  
Beyond the Polar Circles; [...]

<sup>57</sup> Andrew M Spratt, 'Innocence Lost: The Tension of Contrary States in Blake and Milton' (Utah State University, 2011), p. 13

<[https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/honors/97/?utm\\_source=digitalcommons.usu.edu%2Fhonors%2F](https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/honors/97/?utm_source=digitalcommons.usu.edu%2Fhonors%2F)

aspect, it is particularly true when we analyse Book IX, where the Temptation takes place: while Satan, in the shape of a snake, is trying to convince Eve that eating the fruit can bring no evil, she is ‘yet sinless’ (IX. 659). As soon as she has eaten, she gains ‘Experience’ (IX. 807), without which she would have ‘remained | In ignorance’ (IX. 808-809). In eating the fruit, though, she has not tasted only knowledge, but actually knowledge of good and evil. And to know evil, it means that good has been lost (‘we know | Both good and evil, good lost, and evil got,’ IX. 1072).

Innocence cannot be known from the state of bliss Adam and Eve were in, for to know it, one has to have lost it. Innocence is thus a construct that exists only for those who have already lost it because it cannot be known from within the state itself, and because, as Saint Augustine put it, it is nothing but ‘the privation of good’<sup>58</sup>. Only through experience do we know what innocence is, and what it was like when we were actively in its state. Upon seeing the couple, Satan laments their state with sorrow, for ‘ye little think how nigh | Your change approaches when all the delights | Will vanish and deliver ye to woe, | More woe the more your taste is now of joy!’ (IV. 366-370). These are words that imply two things. First, Satan himself knows what it is to lose his innocence: he lost his when he fell from Heaven, and now, as we have seen, he lives in a world of constant pain and sorrow because he has experience of what it meant to live in sinlessness and innocence. The second is that innocence is not only futile since it gives us nothing and it does not add to our knowledge, but it is also something whose only aim is to make us miserable after its loss<sup>59</sup>.

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97&utm\_medium=PDF&utm\_campaign=PDFCoverPages> [accessed 30 August 2023]; Milton, p. xxxii.

<sup>58</sup> Milton, p. xxxiii.

<sup>59</sup> Spratt, p. 15.

The loss of innocence comes together with anxiety: in Satan's case, it is an anxiety connected with the future and his need for revenge; in Adam and Eve's, it is the loss of innocence which preoccupies them<sup>60</sup>, beginning with the dream Satan incited in Eve's mind while she was asleep when she laments more than once that she dreamt 'of offence and trouble which my mind | Knew never till this irksome night' (IV. 34-35).

William Blake mentions innocence in a number of his poems, such as *The Ecchoing Green* and *Nurse's Song* in both her versions. In the first one, the adults are aware of how inevitable the loss of innocence is and also of how hard life will be for children once their childhood is over:

Old John, with white hair  
Does laugh away care,  
Sitting under the oak,  
Among the old folk,  
They laugh at our play,  
And soon they all say.  
'Such, such were the joys.  
When we all girls & boys,  
In our youth-time were seen,  
On the Ecchoing Green.'

Till the little ones weary  
No more can be merry  
The sun does descend,  
And our sports have an end:  
Round the laps of their mothers,

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<sup>60</sup> Spratt, p. 15.

Many sisters and brothers,  
Like birds in their nest,  
Are ready for rest;  
And sport no more seen,  
On the darkening Green.<sup>61</sup>

In the poem, elderly people are laughing away their issues, which undoubtedly suggests that they are leading or have led difficult lives, which the children are bound to experience soon enough. This also suggests the transient nature of youth and innocence, which the children will one day know 'no more', Blake notices in an ominous way. The hint to a 'darkening Green' could also be read under the light of experience being negative; Adam and Eve, too, after having tasted the fruit, have suffered the same process. Once they wake up after having had sex, the two find each other different:

Soon as the force of that fallacious fruit,  
That with exhilarating vapour bland  
About their spirits had played, and inmost powers  
Made err, was now exhaled, and grosser sleep  
Bred of unkindly fumes, with conscious dreams  
Encumbered, now had left them, up they rose  
As from unrest, and each the other viewing,  
Soon found their eyes how opened, and their minds  
How darkened; innocence, that as a veil  
Had shadowed them from knowing ill, was gone;  
Just confidence, and native righteousness  
And honour from about them, naked left

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<sup>61</sup> William Blake, 'The Echoing Green', ed. by G. E. Bentley, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, (London: Penguin, 2006), in *Selected Poems*, pp. 25-26, ll. 11-30.

To guilty shame: [...] <sup>62</sup>

The darkening aspect of experience once again takes us back to Satan, who has lost his brightness due to his rebellion, which we can also now name his experience. It seems, then, that experience has a darkening effect on innocence, ‘a suggestion that the bright memories of the innocence of youth have been supplanted by the dark reality of experience.’<sup>63</sup> *Nurse’s Song* further reinforces this idea:

When the voices of children are heard on the green  
And laughing is heard on the hill,  
My heart is at rest within my breast  
And every thing else is still

‘Then come home my children, the sun is gone down  
And the dews of night arise;  
Come, come, leave off play, and let us away  
Till the morning appears in the skies.’

‘No, no, let us play, for it is yet day  
And we cannot go to sleep;  
Besides in the sky, the little birds fly  
And the hills are all covered with sheep.’

‘Well, well, go & play till the light fades away  
And then go home to bed.’

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<sup>62</sup> *Paradise Lost*, IX. 1046-1058.

<sup>63</sup> Spratt, p. 18.

The little ones leaped & shouted & laugh'd  
And all the hills ecchoed.<sup>64</sup>

Again, here we have the idea of innocence as something transient, that does not last. 'Well, well, go & play till the light fades away | And then go home to bed' sounds particularly ominous and eerie under our light of investigation. The opposition between the nurse's desire for the kids to come in and the kids' own to stay out is reminiscent of the opposition between Adam's and Eve's (when she wants them to go separate for their daily duties, arguing that they are capable enough of withstanding Satan's temptation on their own, while he says the opposite) as well as the very opposition between God and Satan<sup>65</sup>. As Spratt remarks:

*Paradise Lost* contains strong elements which suggest that innocence, rather than being a virtue, is in fact a weakness which makes its subjects vulnerable to manipulation and abuse. This theme is carried into Blake's poetry and illustrations, where innocence is shown to be a tool which is exploited by those seeking power in order to take advantage of those who are in a state of innocence. Milton presents Satan as the chief abuser of the innocent, and Blake, by extending Milton's argument, aligns any person who abuses another's ignorance with Satan himself.<sup>66</sup>

There is another Song by Blake that particularly resounds with Satan's story. Even though Satan believes that he is 'self-begot, self-raised' (V. 860), Milton believed that the angels' creation proceeded from the Son, who in turn was created by God<sup>67</sup>. This particular familial relationship is further complicated in the light of God's plan

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<sup>64</sup> Blake, 'Nurse's Song', in *Selected Poems*, p. 34.

<sup>65</sup> Spratt, p. 20.

<sup>66</sup> Spratt, p. 24.

<sup>67</sup> Milton, p. 367.



for Satan to rebel in order to create Hell and ultimately test Man's strength in resisting evil. Milton's ultimate plan for *Paradise Lost* was theodicy, that is explaining God's motifs to mankind<sup>68</sup>. While Christianity hides behind the comfortable explanation of God's plans being imprescriptible, this particular familial relationship ends up assuming uncomfortable nuances: it is as if, after all, a "father" planned for his "son" not only to suffer in life but also to create an entirely new world of sufferings for him, an entity that knows no evil since all he knows comes from God. Satan would then work for God rather than against him<sup>69</sup>. This idea particularly resonates with *The Chimney Sweeper* by Blake, where the children are exploited by their parents, who take comfort in seeing that they are happy to make them continue to work as sweepers:

A little black thing among the snow,  
Crying 'weep, weep,' in notes of woe!  
'Where are thy father and mother? say?'  
'They are both gone up to the church to pray.

'Because I was happy upon the heath,  
And smil'd among the winter's snow,  
They clothed me in the clothes of death,  
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

'And because I am happy & dance & sing,

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<sup>68</sup> Milton, p. xxiv; Peter F. Fisher, 'Milton's Theodicy', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 17.1 (1956), 28–53 (p. 29) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2707684>>; Harry Berger, "'PARADISE LOST" EVOLVING: BOOKS I-VI: Toward a New View of the Poem as the Speaker's Experience', *The Centennial Review*, 11.4 (1967), 483–531 (p. 486).

<sup>69</sup> Lowell K. Handy, 'The Authorization of Divine Power and the Guilt of God in the Book of Job: Useful Ugaritic Parallels', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 18.60 (1993), 107–18 (pp. 108–9) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/030908929301806008>>.

They think they have done me no injury:  
And are gone to praise God and his Priest & King,  
Who make up a heaven of our misery.<sup>70</sup>

In a way, God's plan for Satan (and all his peers) is for him to be driven to evil first and then to be miserable<sup>71</sup>, while he frolics in Heaven with the other angels and a part of humanity<sup>72</sup>. The idea of being forbidden from entering both Heaven and Paradise (which causes a lot of pain for Satan, as we have seen) is one of the motifs that pushes Satan to act, even against his conscience initially, and strike back at God through Adam and Eve. His being forbidden from entering can be recalled in another Song, *The Garden of Love*:

I went to the Garden of Love,  
And saw what I never had seen:  
A Chapel was built in the midst,  
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,  
And 'Thou shalt not' writ over the door;  
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,  
That so many sweet flowers bore.

And I saw it was filled with graves,  
And tomb-stones where flowers should be:  
And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,

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<sup>70</sup> Blake, 'The Chimney Sweeper', in *Selected Poems*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>71</sup> Empson, p. 37.

<sup>72</sup> Empson, p. 40.

And binding with briars, my joys & desires.<sup>73</sup>

Though proud, bold, and restless, Satan is still an angel of God who has been banished from his ‘garden of love’, Heaven. In being turned away from it, he discovers how painful his existence is without it, just like Adam and Eve when Gabriel escorts them out of their Paradise. The only difference is that, in losing their innocence, Adam and Eve have gained the possibility of regaining Heaven, while Satan has lost it in favour of an experience he did not seek firsthand, but that was unknowingly imposed on him. He is then locked out of his Heaven and finds himself in the midst of a gloomy world, full of anger and resentment (and, quite arguably, rightfully so).

### 3.3 The Question of Time

As Carnes argues, after his fall, Satan essentially sees times as static, only recognising the temporal values of present, immediate past and future<sup>74</sup>. This, however, does not forbid him to feel deep anxiety for his future. the first time he manifests it is upon entering in Eden and seeing how bountiful the place is:

[...] Now conscience wakes despair  
That slumbered, wakes the bitter memory  
Of what he was, what is, and what must be  
Worse; *of worse deeds worse sufferings must ensue.*<sup>75</sup>

His anxiety is motivated by his need to move from suffering back to his seat in Heaven, where he will supposedly go back to feeling like he used to. He cannot

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<sup>73</sup> Blake, 'The Garden of Love', in *Selected Poems*, pp. 122-123.

<sup>74</sup> Valerie Carnes, 'Time and Language in Milton's Paradise Lost', *ELH*, 37.4 (1970), 517–39 (p. 527) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2872380>>.

<sup>75</sup> *Paradise Lost*, IV. 23-26. (emphasis mine)

endure this state of 'still to owe' (IV. 53), so, he refuses to. Upon deciding that there is no 'place | Left for repentance' (IV. 79-80), if not 'submission' (IV. 81), in a matter of less than twenty lines he decides to embrace evil, which shall 'be thou my good' (IV. 110) since 'all good to me is lost' (IV. 109). That said, he decides to immediately proceed with his plan to tempt and seduce Eve.

This anxiety is felt throughout the first Books in the shape of the constant pain that accompanies Satan that we have already analysed, and, when brought against his very plan, Satan cannot bear that pain anymore and has to relieve it at the expense of Mankind immediately. This instance of urge for instant relief conveys his anxiety for the future and acceleration; he cannot wait or think about what he is about to do, or its possible consequences. Once he realises there is no way of getting Heaven back, if not through servitude, he pushes for an immediate solution to his issue, which draws him near to Macbeth and that decision that brings Macduff's family to their demise: 'From this moment | The very firstlings of my heart shall be | The firstlings of my hand', (IV. 1. 145-147). In this, he is completely blind to what his actions might cause, and this is why he returns to Hell, ready to celebrate an eternity of bliss. Lest does he know, however, that it is not bliss that is awaiting him, but rather more pain of the same kind that he was trying to run away from in the first place, this time for eternity.

Another instance of anxiety for the future resides in Adam, for 'in me all | Posterity stands cursed' (X. 817-818). He keeps obsessing over what may happen, what death is (X. 780-789), and he gets to the point of cursing 'his creation' (X. 852). His anxiety for the future and what may happen to Eve and him is the reason why God sends Michael to show him visions of the future. This anxiety of Adam's has a particular reason to be, since '[a]fter the Fall, time comes to be a very different

thing. Once the hierarchy of being is broken in the Fall, time (unlike eternity), becomes historical, finite, limited.<sup>76</sup>

If time in the prelapsarian world is a function of existence which is governed by the principle of hierarchical order, and if God himself stands at the top of the hierarchy and is the consummate origin and end of order, then it is essentially divine time which we see in the eight books of the poem which portray the unfallen world: but divine time seen by analogy, almost in a Neoplatonic sense, in the various levels of time of the creatures-angelic, diabolic, human, creaturely and so on.<sup>77</sup>

Then, things change. The Fall takes place, and because of that, Milton dedicates Books XI and XII to the restoration of order that this time takes place in a historical context, so language also needs to change<sup>78</sup>. This is why Adam needs to be educated in terms of time about what God know about eternity<sup>79</sup> – it is an entirely new system for him. This, however, is where Satan’s and Adam’s stories diverge: the former is constrained in Hell for eternity because his anxiety to move brought him to his final shrinking (metaphorical and not), the transformation into a snake; the latter can still have hope to regain what was lost with the passing of time. Satan, in short, is forced to a treatment that adds insult to his injury; not only was he not free (despite his claims to have been so) when he rebelled, but actually forced unknowingly to do so, he worsened his position with his urge to get rid of the pain.

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<sup>76</sup> Carnes, p. 519.

<sup>77</sup> Carnes, p. 520.

<sup>78</sup> Carnes, pp. 520–21.

<sup>79</sup> Gerald J. Schiffhorst, ‘Patience and the Education of Adam in “Paradise Lost”’, *South Atlantic Review*, 49.4 (1984), 55–63 (p. 58) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3199588>>.

### 3.4 Satan the Anti-hero

Satan is, therefore, an anti-hero because of his morally questionable aims and means. He also retains the qualities of a tragic hero since he suffers so much and ends up having a tragic ending, where he is constrained in Hell for eternity and in constant pain. He is endowed with extraordinary rhetorical ability, round characterisation, and psychological depth, which in turn allows Milton to convey his pain and grief for his loss and us to establish a connection through the aesthetic experience of negative empathy. In particular, his having Hell within himself casts a shadow coming from within onto everything he gets close to, proving that setting and character constitute a strong binomial influencing each other. His anxiety for the future and his need to get away from his pain induce him to act before thinking, which proves fatal in terms of consequences.

## Conclusions

In this dissertation, I have analysed two important works of English literature, William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, under the light of the presence of the anti-hero, a particular type of protagonist belonging to the hero's archetype.

We have seen how the character moves from an initial point in the narrative where they are esteemed by others or in a position of great prestige to one where they are despised and where their value decreases by means of a metaphorical or literal transformation. We have also seen that this transformation comes together with a mirroring between the setting and protagonist in order to provide us with greater detail about the character himself and his state. Lastly, the anti-heroes's projection into the future has provided examples of poor thinking and bad decision-making processes, which, in turn, have brought the characters to meet their final demise in the narrative. In both cases, the anti-heroes followed this path as predicted and confirmed the initial stands.

The empathic connection with the reader has also been addressed to understand what kind of aesthetic experience arises from such characters; we have thus established that we can identify with these characters because of negative empathy. We feel repelled and attracted simultaneously because of their actions; this attraction, though, morally challenges us, so that the reader is never passive in this experience. Both characters from the case studies are perfect candidates for this type of experience since they are endowed with round characterisation, psychological depth, and rhetorical ability, and the story is told from their point of view.

In *Macbeth's* case, the confrontation with *Hamlet* proved to be particularly functional for the argumentation, as the two tragedies are similar, yet diverge in the fact that Macbeth also embodies the archetype tragic hero, whereas Hamlet does not to the same extent. When discussing *Paradise Lost*, I used Blake's *Songs* as instances of representation of the loss of innocence and also in terms of experience gained. This proved to be particularly interesting as an author from Romanticism produced poems that resonated with this aspect of Milton's poem from two centuries before.

Future research should also take into account Blake's great love of Milton with a study of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, too. In terms of the Shakespearian tragedies, further confrontations with other tragedies should be made to gain better knowledge of the Shakespearian conception and evolution of the anti-hero and of the use of poetic contagion throughout the narratives; whereas for Milton, Satan's role in *Paradise Regained* should also be addressed to analyse whether the characterisation of the character changes or remains coherent with *Paradise Lost*.



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