Macbeth and the tragic flaw

In classical tragedy the protagonist always had a tragic flaw—some character trait that ultimately led to their destruction. A good person is destroyed because of an evil characteristic in his otherwise heroic makeup. In Ancient Greek drama the flaw was always hubris—pride—the loss of understanding of the true identity of man and his relationship to the gods.

By the Renaissance the concept of the tragic flaw remained (and would continue to this day), but was no longer limited to pride. In the case of Macbeth, most folks agree that his tragic flaw was ambition—which sewed the seeds of his fall. Consider all of the manly qualities possessed by the Thane of Glamis. Why was he so admired by both his king and his peers? Surely here was a great man. Consider the play as an archetype of what Elder Oaks discussed in this fireside address reprinted in the Ensign.

Our Strengths Can Become Our Downfall

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Satan uses every possible device to degrade and enslave every soul. He attempts to distort and corrupt everything created for the good of man, sometimes by diluting that which is good, sometimes by camouflaging that which is evil. We generally think of Satan attacking us at our weakest spot. Elder Spencer W. Kimball of the Quorum of the Twelve described this technique when he said: “Lucifer and his followers know the habits, weaknesses, and vulnerable spots of everyone and take advantage of them to lead us to spiritual destruction” (The Miracle of Forgiveness, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969, pp. 218–19).

Like the fabled Achilles, who was immune to every lethal blow except to his heel, many of us have a special weakness that can be exploited to our spiritual downfall. For some, that weakness may be a taste for liquor, an unusual vulnerability to sexual temptation, or a susceptibility to compulsive gambling or reckless speculation. For others, it may be a craving for money or power. If we are wise, we will know our weaknesses, our spiritual Achilles’ heels, and fortify ourselves against temptations in those areas.

But weakness is not our only vulnerability. Satan can also attack us where we think we are strong—in the very areas where we are proud of our strengths. He will approach us through the greatest talents and spiritual gifts we possess. If we are not wary, Satan can cause our spiritual downfall by corrupting us through our strengths as well as by exploiting our weaknesses.

Honors Can Sometimes Turn to Our Detriment

The honors we sometimes receive from our peers are potentially a strength, but we need to remember that Satan can turn these to our detriment also. We must be careful that we do not become like the prophet Balaam. The Apostle Peter said that Balaam “loved the wages of unrighteousness” (2 Pet. 2:15), which Elder Bruce R. McConkie of the Quorum of the Twelve interpreted as “the honors of men and the wealth of the world” (Doctrinal New Testament Commentary, 3 vols., Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973, 3:361). Honors may come, but we should beware that they not deflect our priorities and commitments away from the things of God.
Accomplishment and Pride

Other illustrations of how our strengths can become our downfall concern the activity of learning. A desire to know is surely a great strength. A hunger to learn is laudable, but the fruits of learning make a person particularly susceptible to the sin of pride. So do the fruits of other talents and accomplishments, such as in the fields of athletics or the arts. It is easy for the learned and the accomplished to forget their own limitations and their total dependence upon God. Accomplishments in higher education bring persons much recognition and real feelings of self-sufficiency. But we should remember the Book of Mormon’s frequent cautions not to boast of our own strength or wisdom lest we be left to our own strength or wisdom (see Alma 38:11; Alma 39:2; Hel. 4:13; Hel. 16:15).

Similarly, in referring to “that cunning plan of the evil one,” the prophet Jacob remarked that when persons are “learned,” which means they have knowledge, “they think they are wise,” which means they think they have the capacity for the wise application of knowledge. Persons who think they are wise in this way “hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves.” In that circumstance, the prophet said, “their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish. But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God” (2 Ne. 9:28–29).

Questions to ponder?

1. How does this tale of human evil teach gospel principles?
2. Are there personal lessons for me in Macbeth—even though it’s highly unlikely I’ll become a Scottish thane?
3. How does the art— the language of Shakespeare cause us to reflect? Give specific examples of how the language usage in Macbeth has provided greater clarity or insight.
4. What parts of the human condition does Shakespeare seem to explore most effectively?