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## CHARACTERS

## MACBETH



## WHO IS MACBETH?

- Macbeth begins the play as a soldier and Thane of Glamis.
- He is given the title Thane of Cawdor as a reward for his loyalty to Duncan, but following the Witches' prophecy he murders Duncan and takes his crown.
- He hires assassins to kill Banquo and Macduff's wife and children.
- He is killed by Macduff in a hand to hand fight.

## MACBETH: A 'PEERLESS KINSMAN'?

In the reports of Macbeth's courage in battle, in the second scene of the play, he is 'brave Macbeth' and 'valour's minion' (I.2.16 and I.2.19). Duncan, acknowledging his champion, calls him 'valiant cousin' and 'noble Macbeth' (I.2.24 and I.2.70). In Act I there is only one reservation expressed about Macbeth's character, and in different circumstances it could be considered a compliment. This 'peerless kinsman' to King Duncan (I.4.59) is judged by his wife to have a nature 'too full o'the milk of human-kindness' (I.5.15) to allow him to kill Duncan. She recognises his ambition to be 'great' but feels that he would prefer to be given the throne by someone else, whatever methods were used, rather than grab it himself.

The second part of her analysis (I.7.47–53) points to a basic dishonesty in Macbeth and it is this aspect of his character that she ruthlessly attacks, hoping to overcome his doubts. His qualms and repulsion, before and after Duncan's murder, are denounced as cowardice and foolishness by his wife; and later, in Act III, she feels he has not improved.

## STUDY FOCUS: UNSOLDIERLY BEHAVIOUR

Macbeth is a soldier in armour at his first appearance in the play and at his final exit. In between, we witness some very unsoldierly behaviour when he is frequently out of rational control. He is described as 'rapt' and 'brain-sickly' earlier on, 'sick at heart' and 'cowed' towards the end. In situation after situation he is preoccupied with speculations rather than facts. His awareness of this tendency leads him to observe:

Strange things I have in head, that will to hand;  
Which must be acted ere they may be scanned. (III.4.138–9)

This comes at the end of the supper scene where he has undergone excruciating tortures in his mind at the appearance of Banquo's ghost. He can act only when he does not allow himself to think and, as a result, his actions become more frenzied as the play continues. Only in Duncan's murder does he participate directly and here he acts under pressure from his wife.

## MACBETH AS A TYRANT

At the end of Act II, Macduff appears to anticipate Banquo's suspicions that he 'playedst most foully' to gain the throne. By the end of Act III the decline in Macbeth's reputation is obvious; his title of the second half of the play, 'tyrant', has been introduced (III.6.22). From now on there is not a good word uttered about Macbeth. Macduff claims that:

Not in the legions  
Of horrid hell can come a devil more damned  
In evils to top Macbeth (IV.3.55–7)

## CHECK THE BOOK

A03

Read the account of Macbeth in Shakespeare's source, Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (first published in 1587, and reprinted in an expanded edition in 1587), in order to evaluate exactly how much of Shakespeare's character is his own creation, and how much is 'historical'. Many texts of the play include the relevant passages from this source, but it is also available online.

At the end of the play, the 'cursèd head' of the 'dead butcher' is displayed (V.6.94 and 108), leaving no doubt of Macbeth's terrible decline.

## SUPERNATURAL ISOLATION

After Duncan's and Banquo's murders come the scenes where Macbeth's horror and conscience force themselves into his conscious mind to the neglect of everything else. In the case of the murder of Macduff's family, we do not see Macbeth again for over four hundred lines after he says, 'To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done' (IV.1.148). The terrifying callousness of the crime seems beyond Macbeth's own comprehension. Each murder he commits, or commissions, is expected by him to end the 'restless ecstasy' he suffers but even before Duncan's murder he sees something of the futility of such an effort when he realises:

that we but teach  
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return  
To plague the inventor. (I.7.8–10)

Macbeth lays bare his thoughts in *asides* throughout the play and his confusion is apparent from very early on: 'This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good' (I.3.129–30) and 'That function is smothered in surmise / And nothing is but what is not' (I.3.140–1). The Witches' prophecy appears clear and yet asks more questions than it answers, while the supernatural element causes Macbeth further concern.

We are presented with a man motivated to kill Duncan only because of ambition but who, having yielded to this desire, steps so far into blood that there is no turning back. As the play progresses, we are made aware of his peculiar isolation – as all escape routes are blocked off. Before Banquo's murder, Macbeth tells only a certain amount of his plans to his wife, who had been his 'dearest partner of greatness' (I.5.9–10), and without her his reliance on the Witches becomes greater. He recognises in Act V Scene 3 that:

that which should accompany old age,  
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,  
I must not look to have. (lines 24–6)

## AN INTOXICATING VILLAIN

Macbeth associates himself with darkness and evil and he has to be seen as a villain. How is it, then, that we retain an interest in Macbeth and may even feel some sympathy for him? The answer must lie in the weight of evidence about him presented from the inside. We hear from his own heart of his ambition, his weakness – the wrongness of his behaviour and his deceptions. We are made aware of the intoxication he feels at his own evil. Macbeth, as a man, is weak and he finds a misplaced strength in his viciousness. In his dialogue we notice a shift from a diplomatic, hollow ornateness to a blustering, bullying language full of exclamations, questions and commands. However, these are all equally hollow. In the final act, Macbeth concedes to himself that his strutting and fretting are empty gestures but, chained as he is like a bear, he will not surrender. We cannot but admire his affirmation that he 'will try the last' (V.6.71).

## KEY QUOTATION: MACBETH

A01

**Key quotation:** 'Life's but ... a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing' (V.5.24–8).

- Macbeth is saying that life is like a story told by a fool. Life is full of noise and disturbance but devoid of meaning.
- In the Christian world of the play, this is a shocking expression of nihilism and atheism.
- To a modern audience, Macbeth's despair is seen by some as no more than the poetic expression of how humans are insignificant.

## CRITICAL VIEWPOINT

A03

The Ancient Greeks' idea of a tragic hero was someone who was a hero but had a character flaw which brought about his destruction. Tragic heroes were commonly born of noble birth and, therefore, their descent evoked more pity. Macbeth qualifies as a tragic hero (under the Greek definition) and some commentators have seen ambition as his fateful character flaw. Other commentators believe that Macbeth has very few redeeming features, however, and does not qualify as a tragic hero in the same way that Othello and Hamlet do.

## HOW TO WRITE HIGH-QUALITY RESPONSES

The quality of your writing – how you express your ideas – is vital for getting a higher grade, and **AO1** and **AO2** are specifically about **how** you respond.

### FIVE KEY AREAS

The quality of your responses can be broken down into **five** key areas.

#### 1. THE STRUCTURE OF YOUR ANSWER/ESSAY

- First, get **straight to the point or focus in your opening paragraph**. Use a sharp, direct first sentence that deals with a key aspect and then follows up with evidence or detailed reference.
- **Put forward an argument or point of view** (you won't **always** be able to challenge or take issue with the essay question, but generally, where you can, you are more likely to write in an interesting way).
- **Signpost your ideas** with connectives and references which help the essay flow.
- **Don't repeat points already made**, not even in the conclusion, unless you have something new to add.

#### TARGETING A HIGH GRADE

Here's an example of an opening paragraph that gets straight to the point, addressing the following question: **A revolt against the natural order. To what extent is this an accurate description of Macbeth?**

*A revolt against the natural order can be seen in the murder of Duncan, who is God's choice as king, and Macbeth's words in Act 1 Scene 7 when he talks about how he'd 'jump the life to come'. To murder God's chosen king is to revolt against God's natural order – with dire consequences for this life and the next.*

Immediate focus on task and key words and example from text

A01

#### 2. USE OF TITLES, NAMES, ETC.

This is a simple, but important, tip to stay on the right side of the examiners.

- Make sure that you spell correctly the titles of the texts, chapters, authors and so on. Present them correctly too, with double quotation marks and capitals as appropriate. For example, *'In Act 1 of "Macbeth" ...'*.
- Use the **full title**, unless there is a good reason not to (e.g. it's very long).
- Use the term 'text' rather than 'book' or 'story'. If you use the word 'story', the examiner may think you mean the plot/action rather than the 'text' as a whole.

#### EXAMINER'S TIP

Answer the question set, not the question you'd like to have been asked. Examiners say that often students will be set a question on one character (for example, Lady Macbeth) but end up writing almost as much about another (such as Macbeth himself). Or they write about one aspect from the question (for example, 'nightmarish terrors') but ignore another (such as 'moral behaviour'). **Stick to the question**, and answer **all parts of it**.

### 3. EFFECTIVE QUOTATIONS

Do not 'bolt on' quotations to the points you make. You will get some marks for including them, but examiners will not find your writing very fluent.

The best quotations are:

- Relevant
- Not too long
- Integrated into your argument/sentence.

#### TARGETING A HIGH GRADE

Here is an example of a quotation successfully embedded in a sentence:

*Macbeth is concerned that, by murdering Duncan, he will 'but teach bloody instructors' and might become the subject of an assassination attempt in the future.*

Remember – quotations can be a well-selected set of three or four single words or phrases embedded in a sentence to build a picture or explanation, or they can be longer ones that are explored and picked apart.

A01

#### 4. TECHNIQUES AND TERMINOLOGY

By all means mention literary terms, techniques, conventions or people (for example, 'paradox' or 'archetype' or 'James I') **but** make sure that you:

- Understand what they mean
- Are able to link them to what you're saying
- Spell them correctly.

#### 5. GENERAL WRITING SKILLS

Try to write in a way that sounds professional and uses standard English. This does not mean that your writing will lack personality – just that it will be authoritative.

- Avoid colloquial or everyday expressions such as 'got', 'alright', 'ok' and so on.
- Use terms such as 'convey', 'suggest', 'imply', 'infer' to explain the writer's methods.
- Refer to 'we' when discussing the audience/reader.
- Avoid assertions and generalisations; don't just state a general point of view (*Macbeth is a typical Gothic villain because he's evil*), but analyse closely with clear evidence and textual detail.

#### TARGETING A HIGH GRADE

For example, note the professional approach here:

*As an audience, we might feel that the unruly night implies that the natural order is disturbed due to the regicide that has just occurred.*

A01

#### GRADE BOOSTER

It's important to remember that *Macbeth* is a text created by Shakespeare – thinking about the choices Shakespeare makes with language and plotting will not only alert you to his methods as a playwright but also his intentions, i.e. the effect he seeks to create.

A02