

Composition Assignments for *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare

Act One:

1. Describe the opening scene. Consider all aspects – sound, weather, appearance of the witches, mood, atmosphere, etc.
2. Write a paragraph or more in support of the following topic sentence: “The contrast in the reaction of Macbeth and Banquo to the interview with the Weird Sisters is deeply significant if we wish to understand the characters of the two men.”
3. Write a paragraph or more contrasting Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as they seem in this act. Do not allow other knowledge you may have of the play to influence your perceptions of them.
4. Write a paragraph or more analyzing the character of King Duncan. Concern yourself with his personal and leadership qualities – both strengths and weaknesses.
5. Trace the reasoning by which Macbeth talks himself out of murder and Lady Macbeth talks him back into committing murder.
6. Macbeth is clearly faced with an internal conflict between his desires and his duty. Look back over this act and locate evidence to support the following topic sentence: “Through soliloquies and asides, Macbeth reveals a true character at odds with his public role as a loyal, valued follower of the king.”

Act Two:

7. In a short paragraph, discuss the part the porter scene plays dramatically to relieve the emotional tension, and technically to give certain characters time to prepare for the discovery of the murder. Be specific.
8. Enumerate and then discuss some of the means Shakespeare uses in Act Two to create the impression of impending evil. Note comments by characters and events in nature.
9. Write a paragraph showing, on the basis of events in Act Two, the truth of the maxim, “Conscience doth make cowards of us all.” Show how the maxim applies especially to Macbeth.
10. One critic has said, “The murder that unites Macbeth and Lady Macbeth also serves to part them.” Support this statement in a paragraph by noting their reactions both before and after the murder.
11. In a paragraph, contrast Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in their respective responses to the blood on their hands. Support your remarks by citing specific lines from the play.
12. Explain the significance of the knocking at the gate, and what it may symbolize.
13. Some critics regard it as a significant mistake for Macbeth to have killed the grooms. Others say it was an inevitable proceeding and good judgment on his part. In a paragraph set forth your opinion.

Act Three:

14. In a paragraph, discuss Macbeth’s motives for wanting Banquo killed.
15. The climax in a Shakespearean tragedy occurs at the point at which the protagonist’s fortunes change. Up to the climax, things go along well; then an event occurs that begins the protagonist’s downfall. In a composition, explain where you think the climax occurs in Act Three. Support your opinion with evidence from the play.
16. The critic Frederick Henry Sykes has said that the banquet scene reveals that Macbeth’s “imagination is stronger than his courage. Not present fears but horrible imaginings unman him.” Comment on this view in a paragraph or more.
17. “Blood will have blood.” Prove the truth of this statement by citing the experience of Macbeth.
18. In a paragraph or more, trace the arguments Macbeth uses to convince the murderers to kill Banquo. How do Macbeth’s methods resemble Lady Macbeth’s?

Act Four:

19. Explain how the prophecies in scene one are related to earlier prophecies made by the witches.
20. Why is the reappearance of the witches in Act Four dramatically necessary? Discuss this in a paragraph or more.
21. Why is the murder of Lady Macduff and her son dramatically necessary? Consider what the murder reveals about Macbeth and the effect the murder will have on Macduff and other noblemen.
22. Malcolm tests Macduff. Explain the various elements of this test and the reasons Malcolm feels he must test Macduff.
23. Since darkness imagery is so important in the play, what should a discerning reader find in the last line of the act: "The night is long that never finds the day." Explain how this line introduces the resolution in Act Five.
24. Discuss the maxim: "Adversity, not good fortune, is the true test of character." In a paragraph, prove the truth of this statement in the light of the action that takes place in Act Four.

Act Five:

25. In the sleepwalking scene, Lady Macbeth relives many of the most dramatic moments of the play. As she talks in what may appear to strangers an incoherent manner, she relives a number of scenes and events which have disturbed her. In a sense, she reviews the play for the alert reader. Analyze this scene.
26. Why is Macbeth's reaction to Lady Macbeth's illness and later death made so inhuman? What dramatic effect does this treatment of the husband/wife relationship have on the reader? Comment.
27. What effect does Macbeth's success in slaying young Siward have upon him? Explain in a paragraph why this killing is so important to Macbeth's motivation in the remainder of the act.
28. Was Lady Macbeth murdered or did she commit suicide? Use the play as your evidence, even though no direct answer is given.
29. If we accept Malcolm's dismissal of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as "this dead butcher and his fiendlike queen," Macbeth cannot be a tragedy in the classical sense. Explain why not.
30. Demonstrate how Act Five brings the entire play to its resolution, tying up all loose ends, and, in a sense, bringing us full circle, back to the beginning of the play. If there are any loose ends left, what are they?

Special Choices:

1. Choose what you consider to be the clearest, most effective image that Shakespeare uses in *Macbeth*. Try to choose the image that helped you most concretely grasp a character trait or any difficult concept. Write a paragraph defending your choice.
2. Shakespeare uses the soliloquy technique extensively in *Macbeth*. Choose the one soliloquy that you think most successfully defines a particular character in the play. Why did Shakespeare choose to have the character use a soliloquy here? Write a paragraph defending your choice.
3. Since *Macbeth* is so rich in theatrical possibilities, the director must choose the most effective staging possible. Putting yourself in the director's shoes, state what you consider to be the most challenging scene to stage and why. Write a paragraph defending your choice.
4. *Macbeth*, like many of Shakespeare's plays, abounds with quotable passages. Select the passage which is most meaningful for you personally. It should have relevance for you outside the play's context. Write a paragraph explaining your choice.