

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet
Teaching Unit

Macbeth

by: William Shakespeare

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Macbeth

Objectives

By the end of this unit, the student will be able to:

1. analyze the characters of Macbeth, Banquo, and Lady Macbeth and their relationships to each other.
2. trace the development of Macbeth's character from his first mention in the play until his last, noting how and why he changes.
3. trace the mental and emotional make-up of Lady Macbeth from the first time she appears until her death.
4. discuss the techniques Shakespeare uses to convey character and character relationships to his audience.
5. discuss the dramatic development of the play in terms of exposition, conflict, climax, resolution.
6. analyze the importance of literary elements like dramatic irony and foreshadowing on the development of the play.
7. discuss the frequent references to children in the play as characters, symbols, and elements of a metaphor.
8. analyze Shakespeare's use of language (verse, prose, rhythm, rhyme) and its importance in setting mood and establishing character.
9. identify and analyze the use of comic relief.
10. define by example the terms *tragedy*, and *tragic hero*.
11. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
12. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
13. offer a close reading of *Macbeth* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the play.

Macbeth

Lecture

I. Shakespeare and His Times

When William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was born in Stratford-on-Avon, England, Queen Elizabeth I was the ruling monarch. It was a time of national strength and wealth, and the prevailing attitude was that life was exciting. It was an age of exploration, not only of the world but also of man's nature and the English language. Shakespeare's time was also considered the English Renaissance of 1500-1650. Some ideas that characterized this period that are important to this play are:

1. Humans had potential for development.
2. The idea of medieval Christianity, that this world is a preparation for eternal life, was questioned. Instead, people began to see everyday life as meaningful and an opportunity for noble activity.
3. This was a time for heroes. The ideal Elizabethan man was a talented courtier, adventurer, fencer, poet, and conversationalist. He was a witty and eloquent gentleman who examined his own nature and the causes of his actions.
4. Marriages were arranged, usually for wealth.
5. Women had a lower social status than men.
6. People were concerned over the order of things. They felt there was "a great chain of being." This concept originated with Plato and expressed the idea that there is a proper order within all things, and among all things, based on complexity, from the tiniest grains of sand to heaven and God. When everything was in its proper position, there was harmony. When the order was broken, everything was upset and everyone suffered.
7. People felt that their rulers were God's agents. To kill a King was a heinous crime; the heavens would show ominous signs when such evil was present.

II. Features of Shakespeare's Use of Language

1. blank verse

Shakespeare's essential pattern in his plays is **BLANK VERSE** (unrhymed iambic pentameter).

Therefore, whenever a reader notices a change in this pattern (a change in rhythm from iambic to trochaic; a shift in meter from pentameter to tetrameter; a shift from poetry to prose) there is a reason for the change.

With the change, Shakespeare is creating a mood, establishing character ... something.

Be aware of shifts in language like this. For example:

1. the witches speak in rhymed couplets of irregular iambic tetrameter;
2. the Porter (Act II, scene iii) speaks in prose;
3. Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene (Act V, scene i) is in prose.

2. use of figurative language (especially **SIMILE** and **METAPHOR**)

Shakespeare's characters *often* speak in similes and metaphors – to expand ideas and amplify **IMAGERY**.

Be certain not to miss the “like” or “as” or the text will indeed seem incomprehensible.

For example, in Act I, scene ii, the bloody sergeant describes the battle against Macdonwald:

Doubtful it stood;
As two spent swimmers, that do cling together
And choke their art. The merciless Macdonwald--
Worthy to be a rebel, for to that
The multiplying villainies of nature
Do swarm upon him--from the western isles
Of kerns and gallowglasses is supplied;
And fortune, on his damned quarrel smiling,
Show'd **like a rebel's whore:** but all's too weak:
For brave Macbeth--well he deserves that name--
Disdaining fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
Which smoked with bloody execution,
Like valour's minion carved out his passage
Till he faced the slave;
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps,
And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

There are three similes in this brief, 17-line passage:

- Macbeth and Banquo are not swimming. Neither is drowning. The sergeant is explaining that the two sides of the battle were both exhausted yet each impeding the other's victory ... **as two spent swimmers.**

If students start imagining Macbeth and Banquo swimming, fully armed, in the middle of a battle, they will be confused indeed.

- There's also no whore on the battlefield. But fortune (the mythical figure, blindfolded and spinning her wheel) is smiling – **like** a woman who gets paid to convince men she loves them – on the rebel's, Macdonwald's, cause.
- This is a pretty clear one. Macbeth fights his way to Macdonwald **like** the special favorite or “pet” of valour (bravery, fortitude, etc.).

Notice the *nature* or *quality* of the simile/metaphor. Often this will be a clue to how one character feels about another, or how we are to feel about the character.

For example, in the passage above, notice how Fortune smiles on the rebel's cause *like a whore*, but Macbeth fights *like a favored one of valour*.

Also, consider the example below from Act II, scene iii:

Here lay Duncan,
His silver skin laced with his golden blood;
And his gash'd stabs look'd **like a breach in nature**
For ruin's wasteful entrance:

Here Macbeth is describing the appearance of Duncan's body. The skin is not literally silver, nor the blood gold, but Shakespeare is giving us information about how much Macbeth valued Duncan and thus regrets killing him – and how conflicted (noble yet evilly ambitious) Macbeth is. We are to feel ambivalent toward Macbeth: appalled at his deed, yet wanting to admire the person.

Likewise, notice who speaks the similes and metaphors ...

1. Throughout the play Lady Macbeth uses very few similes, and these are comparatively straightforward:
 - “Your face ... is as a book ...” (I,v)
 - “Look like the innocent flower
But be the serpent under't.” (I,v)
 - “The sleeping and the dead are but as pictures ...” (II,ii)

2. Macbeth, on the other hand, utters many, many more similes and these are much more complex and “poetic”:

... his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued ...
And pity, **like a naked new-born babe,**
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind. (I, vii)

... and who is described metaphorically. In the beginning of the play, Macbeth is “Bellona’s bridegroom” (I,ii).

By the end of the play he is a “dead butcher” and Lady Macbeth is his “fiend-like queen” (V, viii).

Watch also for **PERSONIFICATION**:

- valour’s minion
- pity, like a naked newborn babe
- I think our country sinks beneath the yoke;
- It weeps, it bleeds; and each new day a gash
- Is added to her wounds. (IV, iii)

HYPERBOLE :

- Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood
- Clean from my hand? No, this hand will rather
- The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
- Making the green one red. (II,ii)
- ... all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand (V,i)

UNDERSTATEMENT:

- This is a sorry sight. (II,ii).

3. motifs

Notice how Shakespeare repeats (or repeats and develops) certain themes or phrases:

- Fair is foul, foul is fair;
- Cleaning Duncan’s blood from their hands;
- The witches’ abuse of words – ambiguities and hidden meanings;
- Guilt, repression, and madness;
- Sleep and sleeplessness.

III. Dramatic Conventions and Author's Techniques

dramatic devices

- A **SOLILOQUY** is a monologue. The character is alone onstage. It is a **DEVICE** the playwright uses to give the audience insight into the character's thoughts and emotions.

Shakespeare uses soliloquies to allow the reader to witness the conflict between Macbeth's honorable nature and his ambition combined with his desire to please his wife.

- The **ASIDE** is another **DEVICE** used by the playwright to give the audience insight into the character. Here the character is speaking either to himself or directly to the audience. There are other characters onstage who by convention do not hear the aside.
- A **FOIL** is a character who highlights or emphasizes certain traits of the main character by contrasting them (see Practice Free Response Question 6).

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare uses both Banquo and Lady Macbeth as foils for Macbeth.

Banquo's staunch integrity and Lady Macbeth's unmitigated ambition heighten the inner conflict between Macbeth's own wavering integrity and ambition.

- An **ALLUSION** is an indirect reference to another event, person or work with which the writer assumes the reader is familiar.

Shakespeare uses **ALLUSIONS** as techniques for establishing character, building theme, setting mood.

In *Macbeth*, there are allusions to Greek and Roman mythology, Roman history, and the Bible.

- Use of **THE SUPERNATURAL** is another **DEVICE**
- **MADNESS**, either real or pretended, was another popular **DEVICE** in Elizabethan drama
- One also cannot discuss Elizabethan tragedy without a discussion of the **TRAGIC HERO**
- Finally, there can be no drama at all without **CONFLICT**, ... In *Macbeth*, the primary conflict is **INTERNAL** between Macbeth's strong sense of Right and his strong desire both to be king and to please his wife.

IV. Dynamic and Static Characters

- **MACBETH** is a strong example of a **DYNAMIC CHARACTER**. At the beginning of the play he is a courageous general, a man of honor with a strong sense of duty and responsibility. These traits are what cause him to anguish over whether or not to kill his king and cousin. In the middle of the play, he is guilt-ridden and paranoid. By the end of the play he is a brooding tyrant who laments the meaninglessness of his life.
- **LADY MACBETH**, on the other hand is a **STATIC CHARACTER**. From the beginning of the play she is set – Duncan must be killed. To doubt or to speak of guilt is foolish. Ironically, it is her inability to change that ultimately leads to her insanity and suicide.

V. The Weird Sisters and the Tragic Hero

Notice that the Weird Sisters are referred to as “witches” only in the stage directions. No one sitting in the audience seeing the play will hear the word “witch” even once.

Rather, in the text Banquo and Macbeth call them the “Weird Sisters,” Indeed, this is what they call themselves.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “weird” is derived from the Old English *wyrd* meaning fate or destiny. Later uses of the word refer to the three Fates of classical mythology. These will be discussed later.

Still later uses refer to one who *pretends* or *is supposed* to have the power to foresee and control future events. Still later the uses include persons who *have* the power to control the destinies of others.

So exactly how much control does Shakespeare intend his Weird Sisters to wield over Macbeth’s destiny? Keep in mind that the Elizabethan tragic hero’s downfall was the result of his own choices and actions. Therefore, if the Weird Sisters *cause* the action of the play and *control* Macbeth’s destiny, where’s the tragedy in that?

What, then, *is* their role?

We won’t spend any time on their identity as witches. After all, Shakespeare used that term only in his stage directions – a sort of short hand for his actors as it were. As far as his audience was concerned (and remember that he was not writing for *readers*) they are the Weird Sisters.

If *weird* refers to fate or the Fates, we should then examine the three sisters, spinners, who spun the fabric of human existence. First there was *Klotho*, who spun the metaphoric thread, thus determining the nature and quality of the individual human life. Sister *Lachesis* measured the thread for length, and *Atropos* cut the thread, thus determining the end of the human's earthly existence.

So these were pretty powerful women. But not necessarily. Many classical scholars argue that the Fates themselves were governed by the pattern of the tapestry they were weaving. Thus, if *Klotho* wove coarse yarn indicating a harsh life, while *Lachesis* measured it and *Atropos* cut it short, indicating an early death, it was because the tapestry called for a piece of short, coarse yarn. So, while even Zeus could not control the Fates, even they were essentially merely working the will of a higher power – representing the broad picture of human history.

Be careful, therefore, not to ascribe too much power or control to the witches.

The **tragic hero**, according to Aristotle, was a man (god, demi-god, hero, high-ranking official) who rose to a high position and then fell from that high position – usually to utter death and desolation. Two forces seem equally powerful in classical tragedy, the tragic hero's tragic flaw (or hamartia), and fate.

Some tragic heroes clearly bring about their own downfall, as in the case of Creon in *Antigone* whose downfall is due to his hubris (excessive pride) – he believes his Law holds precedence over the gods' sense of Right.

Other tragic heroes seem to be more a pawn of Fate, like Oedipus who has done everything in his power (as had his parents before him) to prevent the fatal prophesy from coming to pass that Oedipus would murder his father and marry his mother. It is in the very act of trying to avoid destiny that the prophesy is fulfilled.

By the Renaissance, however, people generally felt themselves to be less pawns of fate and more in control of their own destinies. The Elizabethan tragic hero, therefore, is much more often responsible for his own downfall. This "waste of human potential" as it were seems to be much more tragic to the Elizabethans than the vagaries of fate.

VI. Historical References

- According to *Holinshed's Chronicles*, **MACBETH** ruled Scotland for 17 years, the first 10 of which were peaceful and prosperous for Scotland. As a king, Macbeth united the three semi-sovereign provinces of Alba, Caithness, and Orkney. He enacted laws protecting the rights of widows and orphans, and introduced stone construction to a people who often destroyed their enemies by burning down their houses while they slept.

The final seven years of Macbeth's reign were riddled by doubt and suspicion as Duncan's exiled sons had grown to adulthood and were plotting to invade Scotland and oust Macbeth. Holinshed, however, says that Macbeth's paranoia sprang from his sense of guilt at having killed Duncan.

However, Holinshed also records that Macbeth's killing of Duncan was not in cold blood while the king slept. Rather, Macbeth raised an army and revolted against a king whom many considered incompetent (note that even Shakespeare's play begins with both an internal rebellion against Duncan and a foreign invasion). Duncan was killed on the battlefield.

Historical fact, however, will not serve Shakespeare's dramatic purposes.

- Shakespeare's **DUNCAN** is Duncan I who became king in 1034. Prior to this, Scotland had been a loosely confederated collection of tribes and clans. With the Viking raids in the 9th century, the "Scots" began to band together for mutual protection. The vague office of "king" passed frequently and violently between rival clans until Duncan I. Except for the 17 years of Macbeth's reign, all subsequent rulers of Scotland were descended from Duncan – including James I (James VI of Scotland) who was England's ruler when Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*.

Duncan was not the old man Shakespeare presents. He was approximately 36 at the time of his death in 1040, and his oldest son, Malcolm was only 9.

A quiet, gentle man, Duncan was an incompetent ruler, and his six-year reign was riddled with rebellions and threats of rebellion.

- **LADY MACBETH** was the granddaughter of Kenneth IV, a Scottish king of a rival family to Duncan's. Kenneth IV died in a battle against Malcolm II, Duncan's grandfather.

Thus, Lady Macbeth would have grown up believing she had a blood feud with Duncan. This would explain Lady Macbeth's unswerving desire to see Duncan killed and her own husband king.

After the historical Macbeth died, his stepson, Lulach, tried to continue the dynasty but failed. Presumably Macbeth's stepson was Lady Macbeth's son by a previous marriage – which would explain how Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth has apparently been a mother (“I have given suck and know/How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me...” I, vii) while Macbeth himself apparently has no children.

- The **BANQUO** legend had long been established as accepted “truth” by the time Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*. The king of England was James I, who was also King James VI of Scotland, a descendent of the Stuart dynasty. James was the eighth Stuart monarch (ninth if you count Mary Stuart, but Shakespeare had his reasons for not counting her).

According to legend, the Stuarts of Scotland traced their ancestry back to Duncan I on the female side and to Banquo on the male.

Banquo's being the “founder” of the Stuart Dynasty, and James's being the eighth Stuart monarch sheds light on the parade of kings the Weird Sisters show Macbeth (Act IV, scene i). Shakespeare's king – James I – is the eighth king. He is carrying the mirror to show a long line of future Stuarts (Shakespeare would have no idea how long the dynasty would continue). Some of these kings are carrying “two-fold balls”, indicating England and Scotland; and “treble scepters” indicating England, Scotland, and Ireland (or possibly even predicting a successful American empire). *Macbeth* was probably written in 1606 – the same year that James I founded the London Company and the Plymouth Company, charging them to find gold, find a route to the South Seas, and find the Lost Colony of Roanoke.

- **DUNSINANE** seems to appear out of nowhere. In the beginning of the play, Duncan lives at Forres and Macbeth at Inverness. Act III all takes place in and around Forres. In fact, the first mention of Dunsinane isn't until Act IV, scene i when the third apparition reports, “Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until/ Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill/ Shall come against him” that we hear of Dunsinane.

Dunsinane is the stone hilltop fortress Macbeth built during his seventeen-year reign, apparently one of the first such fortresses constructed of stone. While the historical Macbeth was indeed defeated at a Battle of Dunsinane (Dunsinnan), he remained king and was not finally defeated and killed until three years later at the battle of Lumphanan.

Free-Response (Essay) Items

PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 1:

The passage below, from the beginning of Act I, scene v, is the audience's first introduction to Lady Macbeth. Read the passage carefully and then write a well-organized essay in which you compare Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's characters and explain how the contrast established here foreshadows later action in the play.

LADY MACBETH:

They met me in the day of success; and I have learned by the perfectest report, they have more in them than mortal knowledge. When I burned in desire to question them further, they made themselves air, into which they vanished. Whiles I stood rapt in the wonder of it, came missives from the king, who all-hailed me, Thane of Cawdor; by which title, before, these weird sisters saluted me, and referred me to the coming on of time, with Hail, king that shalt be! This have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness, that thou mightst not lose the dues of rejoicing, by being ignorant of what greatness is promised thee. Lay it to thy heart, and farewell.

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be What thou art promised:—yet do I fear thy nature; It is too full o' the milk of human kindness, To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great; Art not without ambition; but without The illness should attend it: what thou wouldst highly, That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false, And yet wouldst wrongly win: thou'dst have, great Glamis, That which cries, Thus thou must do, if thou have it; And that which rather thou dost fear to do Than wishest should be undone. Hie thee hither, That I may pour my spirits in thine ear; And chastise with the valour of my tongue All that impedes thee from the golden round, Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem To have thee crown'd withal.

PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 2:

The passage below, from Act I, scene v, is one of Lady Macbeth's most famous speeches. Read the passage carefully and then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze Lady Macbeth's character as revealed in this speech and explain how the sentiment expressed foreshadows later actions and events in the play. Avoid plot summary.

LADY MACBETH:

The raven himself is hoarse
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood;
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry Hold, hold!

PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 3:

The following passage is from Act I, scene vii. In it, Macbeth contemplates the consequences of killing Duncan. Read the passage carefully and then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the two sides of Macbeth's inner conflict and explain how this conflict contributes to the overall meaning of the play.

MACBETH:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 't were well
It were done quickly: if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,—
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases
We still have judgment here; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague the inventor: this even-handed justice
Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice
To our own lips. He's here in double trust;
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.—I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on the other.—

PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 4:

Read the following passage from Act II, scene i and write a well-organized essay in which you explain how Shakespeare uses language and imagery to establish Macbeth's frame of mind.

MACBETH

Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee:—
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw.
Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going;
And such an instrument I was to use.—
Mine eyes are made the fools o' the other senses,
Or else worth all the rest:—I see thee still;
And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,
Which was not so before.—There's no such thing;
It is the bloody business which informs
Thus to mine eyes.—Now o'er the one-half world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep; Witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's offerings, and wither'd Murder,
Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
With Tarquin's¹ ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost.—Thou sure and firm-set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts,
And take the present horror from the time,
Which now suits with it.—Whiles I threat, he lives:
Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.

[A bell rings]

I go, and it is done; the bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell!

¹ Sextus Tarquinius, son of a tyrant king of Rome. After Tarquin raped Lucretia, wife of Roman nobleman Lucius Tarquinius Collatinus, the Tarquins were driven out of Rome in 509 B.C.E. and the Roman Republic was established. The allusion here calls to mind the issue of tyranny, the tyrant's violently taking what is not rightfully his own, and the establishment of a better rule and order after the expulsion of the tyrant.

PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 5:

Fully-developed, well-rounded characters are rarely completely good or completely evil. In a well-organized essay, explain how Shakespeare uses poetic and dramatic elements to establish Macbeth as such a character.

PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 6:

A foil is a character in literature who highlights certain traits of the main character by contrasting them. For example, a coward helps to show the hero's bravery in a stronger light. Choose either Banquo, Lady Macbeth, or Malcolm and write a well-organized essay in which you show how he or she serves in the play as a foil for Macbeth.

Do not merely summarize the plot.

PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 7:

A confidant (male) or a confidante (female) is a character in whom the main character trusts. The author uses the confidant/confidante as a vehicle for revealing the main character's inner thoughts and motivation. In a well-organized essay, explain how Shakespeare uses the witches as ironic confidantes for Macbeth and why their role is significant to the work as a whole.

Do not merely summarize the plot.

Discussion Topics/Questions

1. What do the witches represent? In answering this, be sure to mention their prophecies and the ways in which the prophecies come to be fulfilled.
2. Do a detailed character analysis for each of the following characters. Indicate both their actions and their motives. Also, point out their state of mind and what significant actions of their own, or others, affected them.

Macbeth
Lady Macbeth
Macduff
Banquo
Malcolm

3. Prove or disprove the following statement by referring to incidents in the play: “Macbeth is not a monster; rather, he is a man, perhaps more inclined toward evil than most men, but still a man who is tempted, succumbs to temptation, and pays the price for his weakness.”
4. The phrase, “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” is first used by the witches in Act I, scene i. Then Macbeth uses it in Act I, Scene iii. That line, or variations of it, appears numerous other times in the play. Trace the appearance of the “fair is foul” motif and what it comes to mean as a theme of the play.
5. Another motif is the idea that the killing of Duncan by Macbeth was an “unnatural” act. State why the Elizabethans would have considered regicide an unnatural act and point out how this idea is reinforced by comments and incidents from the play.
6. Babies and children are mentioned in this play so frequently that we must conclude there was a reason for it. Identify as many of those incidents as you can, state the context, and attempt to draw some generalizations.
7. To what extent is Macbeth a good example of Aristotle’s tragic hero? Try to see both sides of the question.
8. How does Shakespeare allow the audience to witness the disintegration of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth? How does their disintegration parallel the disintegration of the state of Scotland? Why would Shakespeare establish this parallel?

Multiple Choice Questions

PRACTICE MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS 1 – 10:

1. Read the following passage carefully before you choose your answers:

MACBETH:

To be thus is nothing;
But to be safely thus.—Our fears in Banquo
Stick deep; and in his royalty of nature
Reigns that which would be fear'd: 'tis much he dares;
And, to that dauntless temper of his mind, 5
He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour
To act in safety. There is none but he
Whose being I do fear: and, under him,
My Genius¹ is rebuked; as, it is said,
Mark Antony's was by Caesar. He chid the sisters 10
When first they put the name of king upon me,
And bade them speak to him: then prophet-like
They hail'd him father to a line of kings:
Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown,
And put a barren sceptre in my gripe, 15
Thence to be wrench'd with an unlineal hand,
No son of mine succeeding. If 't be so,
For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murder'd;
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace 20
Only for them; and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common enemy of man,
To make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings!
Rather than so, come fate into the list.
And champion me to the utterance! 25

1. In the context of the passage, the word “filed” (line 18) most likely means
- (A) sharpened.
 - (B) sorted.
 - (C) submitted.
 - (D) troubled.
 - (E) controlled.

¹ From the Latin *genius*: the guardian or protective spirit assigned to each person at his birth to govern his fortunes, determine his character, and finally to conduct him out of the world at the time of his death. The reference here is that Banquo's genius is better serving Banquo (in terms of future hope and present character) than Macbeth's is serving him.

2. The word “list” (line 24) is a reference to
 - (A) Medieval jousting tournaments.
 - (B) the book of judgement.
 - (C) a census of Scottish subjects.
 - (D) the act of counting suspects.
 - (E) the record of the Scottish royal family.

3. The pronoun “them” (lines 19, 21, 23) refers to
 - (A) Banquo’s descendents.
 - (B) Banquo and Fleance.
 - (C) Macbeth’s children.
 - (D) the Weird Sisters.
 - (E) Malcolm and Donalbain.

4. “There is none but he whose being I do fear” (lines 7 – 8) is an example of
 - (A) pathetic fallacy.
 - (B) dramatic irony.
 - (C) tragic flaw.
 - (D) hyperbole.
 - (E) understatement.

5. The mention of Mark Antony and Caesar (line 10) is an example of an
 - (A) understatement.
 - (B) illusion.
 - (C) allusion.
 - (D) epitaph.
 - (E) enigma.

6. Which of the following is true of the first line of the soliloquy?
 - (A) It is a heroic couplet.
 - (B) It is a dependent clause.
 - (C) It introduces an extended metaphor.
 - (D) It is rhythmically shorter for emphasis.
 - (E) It is syntactically altered for emphasis.

7. Macbeth states that the reasons he fears Banquo are Banquo’s
 - (A) fierce loyalty and fiery temper.
 - (B) courage and common sense.
 - (C) ambition and ruthlessness.
 - (D) lineage and social position.
 - (E) curiosity and cunning.

8. In addition to fearing Banquo, Macbeth resents him because
- (A) Macbeth will not establish a dynasty.
 - (B) Banquo “stole” Macbeth’s prophesy from the witches.
 - (C) Banquo wouldn’t participate in Duncan’s assassination.
 - (D) Macbeth suspects Banquo will assassinate him.
 - (E) Banquo rebuked Macbeth.
9. In lines 4 – 7, Macbeth admits that Banquo
- (A) has more courage than Macbeth.
 - (B) is more like a king than Macbeth.
 - (C) has more discretion than Macbeth.
 - (D) is stronger than Macbeth.
 - (E) has children while Macbeth does not.
10. Lines 16 and 17 are ironic because
- (A) Banquo is not of the royal family.
 - (B) this is what the witches said would happen.
 - (C) Banquo suspects Macbeth of the assassination.
 - (D) Fleance is too young to be king.
 - (E) this is what Macbeth has done to Duncan.

11. Between lines 2 and 3 there is a shift from
- (A) iambic pentameter to blank verse.
 - (B) iambic pentameter to heroic couplets.
 - (C) iambic pentameter to iambic tetrameter.
 - (D) iambic pentameter to trochaic tetrameter.
 - (E) iambic pentameter to trochaic pentameter.
12. Between lines 12 and 13 there is a shift from
- (A) regretful to anticipatory.
 - (B) dissatisfaction to reconciliation.
 - (C) anger to exuberance.
 - (D) plotting to remorse.
 - (E) chastising to conspiring.
13. Hecate's basic complaint in lines 1 – 8 is that the witches have
- (A) meddled with Macbeth and not Banquo.
 - (B) not invited Hecate to take part in the dealings with Macbeth.
 - (C) wasted their time with an insignificant person like Macbeth.
 - (D) gone too far with what they have caused Macbeth to do.
 - (E) caused Macbeth to question his destiny.
14. Which basic poetic elements does Shakespeare use to indicate Hecate's other-worldliness?
- (A) rhythm and rhyme
 - (B) rhyme and stanza form
 - (C) metaphor and symbolism
 - (D) simile and hyperbole
 - (E) onomatopoeia and alliteration
15. In lines 29 and 30, Hecate predicts that Macbeth will
- (A) come to ask the witches his destiny.
 - (B) grow overconfident and careless.
 - (C) reign securely in Scotland for years.
 - (D) become a formidable spirit.
 - (E) travel to the underworld like an epic hero.
16. Lines 31 and 32 mean that
- (A) mortal humans crave security.
 - (B) the witches should fear Macbeth's security.
 - (C) the witches should help Macbeth secure his throne.
 - (D) mortal humans feel secure when their enemy is defeated.
 - (E) mortal humans grow careless when they feel secure.

17. The “vaporous drop profound” (line 23) most likely refers to
- (A) a shaft of moonlight on the ground.
 - (B) a drop of rain at night.
 - (C) ground fog rising from the moonlit heath.
 - (D) a veil of mist over the moon.
 - (E) the drug Lady Macbeth used to put Duncan’s grooms to sleep.
18. The “dismal and fatal end” (line 20) that Hecate is working toward is
- (A) Lady Macbeth’s suicide.
 - (B) Macbeth’s downfall.
 - (C) Banquo’s murder.
 - (D) Macduff’s family’s slaughter.
 - (E) Duncan’s assassination.
19. According to line 13, conjuring the spirits for Macbeth is the witches’ means of
- (A) making up for their earlier slight of Hecate.
 - (B) finally finishing the business with Macbeth.
 - (C) showing Hecate how powerful they are.
 - (D) establishing themselves as Hecate’s partners.
 - (E) making Macbeth their disciple.
20. In the context of the passage, the word “artificial” (line 26) means
- (A) synthetic.
 - (B) unreal.
 - (C) crafty.
 - (D) fake.
 - (E) deceitful.

PRACTICE MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS 21 – 25:

3. Read the following passage carefully before you choose your answers:

MACBETH:

She should have died hereafter;

There would have been a time for such a word.

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,

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.

5

10

21. The word “it” in line 10 refers to

- (A) Lady Macbeth's death.
- (B) life.
- (C) the poor player.
- (D) the walking shadow.
- (E) the stage of the Globe Theater.

22. The overall meaning of lines 8 – 12 is that

- (A) playwrights understand life better than actors.
- (B) actors record the story of life better than historians.
- (C) the tale of life is sad and silent, but profoundly significant.
- (D) the tale of life is noisy and exciting, but ultimately meaningless.
- (E) the tale of life is dim like a candle's flame.

23. Lines 5 – 7 compare history to

- (A) a torch-bearer giving light to a traveler in the dark.
- (B) executioners preparing to burn victims at the stake.
- (C) frenzied dancers carrying torches and whirling around.
- (D) an angry, torch-carrying mob storming a castle.
- (E) marauders using torches to set a village on fire.

24. The fact that the “tale” (line 10) is told by an “idiot” (line 11) indicates that it is

- (A) difficult to figure out.
- (B) fun and nonsensical.
- (C) long and tedious.
- (D) difficult to appreciate.
- (E) especially meaningless.

25. The purpose of the repetition in line 3 is to
- (A) establish the time when Lady Macbeth “should have died”
 - (B) emphasize the “petty pace” of the passing of time
 - (C) indicate Macbeth’s increasing panic
 - (D) foreshadow the coming battle of Birnam Wood
 - (E) imitate the strutting and fretting of the poor player’s hour upon the stage

MULTIPLE CHOICE ANSWERS With Explanations

1. In the context of the passage, the word “filed” (line 18) most likely means
- (A) sharpened.
 - (B) sorted.
 - (C) submitted.
 - (D) troubled.**
 - (E) controlled.

“Troubled” is the only possibility that fits contextually into the sentence. One might also recognize the use as an abbreviated form of “defiled.”

2. The word “list” (line 24) is a reference to
- (A) Medieval jousting tournaments.**
 - (B) the book of judgement.
 - (C) a census of Scottish subjects.
 - (D) the act of counting suspects.
 - (E) the record of the Scottish royal family.

The Oxford English dictionary offers “the place or scene of combat or contest” as one definition of “list.” There is no textual support (either in the scene or the rest of the play) for any of the other selections.

3. The pronoun “them” (lines 19, 21, 23) refers to
- (A) Banquo’s descendents.**
 - (B) Banquo and Fleance.
 - (C) Macbeth’s children.
 - (D) the Weird Sisters.
 - (E) Malcolm and Donalbain.

“For Banquo’s issue ... for them ... only for them ... to make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings!” Choice A is demanded both grammatically and syntactically .

4. “There is none but he whose being I do fear” (lines 7 – 8) is an example of
- (A) pathetic fallacy.
The use of personification to attribute human emotions to nature.
 - (B) dramatic irony.**
A situation in which a character – in this case Macbeth – makes a statement that the audience (but not the speaker) recognizes is not the full truth. Here, the audience knows that Macbeth has many people – and supernatural forces – to fear.
 - (C) tragic flaw.
The character trait that ultimately causes the hero’s downfall. While the statement in question does indeed point out Macbeth’s blindness to his own situation (and perhaps his growing paranoia), the statement itself is not his tragic flaw.
 - (D) hyperbole.
If anything, it’s an understatement.
 - (E) understatement.
Certainly the statement is an understatement considering Malcolm, donalbain, Macduff (not to mention the witches themselves) could all be considered threats to Macbeth’s peace of mind, but it is only the dramatic irony that allows the audience to recognize that the statement is an understatement.
5. The mention of Mark Antony and Caesar (line 10) is an example of an
- (A) understatement.
This choice doesn’t really make sense.
 - (B) illusion.
Maybe a homophone, but not the right word.
 - (C) allusion.**
Reference to another work.
 - (D) epitaph.
A verse carved on a tombstone.
 - (E) enigma.
A puzzle.
6. Which of the following is true of the first line of the soliloquy?
- (A) It is a heroic couplet.
 - (B) It is a dependent clause.
 - (C) It introduces an extended metaphor.
 - (D) It is rhythmically shorter for emphasis.**
 - (E) It is syntactically altered for emphasis.
This is really the only possible answer. Most of Shakespeare’s lines are iambic pentameter (give or take a syllable). This line is much shorter.

7. Macbeth states that the reasons he fears Banquo are Banquo's
- (A) fierce loyalty and fiery temper.
 - (B) courage and common sense.**
 - (C) ambition and ruthlessness.
 - (D) lineage and social position.
 - (E) curiosity and cunning.
- "'Tis much he dares ..." (courage), "...and, to that dauntless temper of his mind [courage again], / He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour/To act in safety" (common sense).
8. In addition to fearing Banquo, Macbeth resents him because
- (A) Macbeth will not establish a dynasty.**
 - (B) Banquo "stole" Macbeth's prophesy from the witches.
 - (C) Banquo wouldn't participate in Duncan's assassination.
 - (D) Macbeth suspects Banquo will assassinate him.
 - (E) Banquo rebuked Macbeth.
- "They hail'd him father to a line of kings:/Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown, ...
No son of mine succeeding."
9. In lines 4 – 7, Macbeth admits that Banquo
- (A) has more courage than Macbeth.
The lines establish that Banquo does have courage, but nothing in these lines suggests Macbeth credits Banquo with more courage.
 - (B) is more like a king than Macbeth.
Depending on how one interprets the line "his royalty of nature," which might suggest that Banquo is like a king, again there is no comparison in these lines with Macbeth's own "royalty of nature" or lack thereof.
 - (C) has more discretion than Macbeth.**
This is the focus of the line, that Banquo has the discretion to "act in safety" while Macbeth already has failed at this.
 - (D) is stronger than Macbeth.
No mention here of either one's strength.
 - (E) has children while Macbeth does not.
Not from these lines, but later in this soliloquy, we know that Banquo's heirs are destined to rule and Macbeth's are not. But we are not told specifically that Macbeth has no children – only that they will not rule.
10. Lines 16 and 17 are ironic because
- (A) Banquo is not of the royal family.
In this soliloquy we do not know Banquo's family relations.
 - (B) this is what the witches said would happen.
This, then, is the opposite of ironic.
 - (C) Banquo suspects Macbeth of the assassination.
Irrelevant to the issue at hand. Certainly not ironic.
 - (D) Fleance is too young to be king.
We do not know how old (or young) Fleance is. Besides, his age is irrelevant.
 - (E) this is what Macbeth has done to Duncan.**
Macbeth has murdered Duncan and his "unlineal hand" (not a descendent of Duncan) has "wrench'd" the symbols of monarchy (crown and scepter) from the rightful heir, Malcolm. Now he fears Banquo's heirs will do the same to him. Earlier (I, vii) Macbeth knew this type of "even-handed justice" would haunt him if he went ahead with the assassination.

11. Between lines 2 and 3 there is a shift from

- (A) iambic pentameter to blank verse.
- (B) iambic pentameter to heroic couplets.
- (C) iambic pentameter to iambic tetrameter.**
- (D) iambic pentameter to trochaic tetrameter.
- (E) iambic pentameter to trochaic pentameter.

Scanning the lines in question reveals that the first two are indeed iambic pentameter:

Have I / not reas - / -on, bed - / -lams as / you are
Sau-cy / and o- / -ver bold? / How did / you dare

while the rest of the speech is iambic tetrameter:

to trade / and traf- / -fic with / Macbeth
In rid- / -dles and / affairs / of death ...

12. Between lines 12 and 13 there is a shift from

- (A) regretful to anticipatory.
- (B) dissatisfaction to reconciliation.
- (C) anger to exuberance.
- (D) plotting to remorse.
- (E) chastising to conspiring.**

In lines 1 – 12, Hecate is chastising the Weird Sisters for excluding her (“How did you dare ...?”). Line 13 mentions reconciliation, but throughout the rest of the speech they plot their final encounter with Macbeth.

13. Hecate’s basic complaint in lines 1 – 8 is that the witches have

- (A) meddled with Macbeth and not Banquo.
Not suggested anywhere in the passage.
- (B) not invited Hecate to take part in the dealings with Macbeth.**

“How did you dare to trade and traffic with Macbeth ... and I ... was never call’d to bear my part ...?”

- (C) wasted their time with an insignificant person like Macbeth.
Wasting time with Macbeth is suggested, but not in these lines, and not because Macbeth is “insignificant.”
- (D) gone too far with what they have caused Macbeth to do.
Not suggested anywhere in the passage.
- (E) caused Macbeth to question his destiny.
Hecate says Macbeth will come to find his destiny, but not question it.

14. Which basic poetic elements does Shakespeare use to indicate Hecate's other-worldliness?
- (A) **rhythm and rhyme**
 (B) rhyme and stanza form
 The passage is not divided into stanzas.
 (C) metaphor and symbolism
 Character is established by the nature of the metaphor or symbol, not merely their presence.
 (D) simile and hyperbole
 Again, character is established by the nature of the simile or hyperbole not necessarily the fact of there being similes or hyperboles present.
 (E) onomatopoeia and alliteration
 None in the passage.
15. In lines 29 and 30, Hecate predicts that Macbeth will
- (A) come to ask the witches his destiny.
 Line 16.
 (B) **grow overconfident and careless.**
 "He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear [his] hopes [above] wisdom ..."
 (C) reign securely in Scotland for years.
 Not suggested in passage.
 (D) become a formidable spirit.
 Not suggested in passage.
 (E) travel to the underworld like an epic hero.
 Some critics see the upcoming visit as similar to the epic hero's journey to the underworld, but Hecate does not suggest this.
16. Lines 31 and 32 mean that
- (A) mortal humans crave security.
 Not a reasonable choice given that the line says security is mortals' enemy.
 (B) the witches should fear Macbeth's security.
 Nothing in the passage suggests this.
 (C) the witches should help Macbeth secure his throne.
 Nothing in the passage suggests this.
 (D) mortal humans feel secure when their enemy is defeated.
 Lines 29 and 30 might suggest that Macbeth will feel secure, but not necessarily because of the defeat of his enemy. Likewise, this sense of security is called his "confusion" (line 28), and line 32 still states that security is the enemy of mortals.
 (E) **mortal humans grow careless when they feel secure.**
 Given that line 32 tells us that security is our chiefest enemy, this is the only logical conclusion. Beginning with line 25, Hecate is saying she will conjure spirits who will give Macbeth "confusing" information that will make him feel overly secure – and security is our chief enemy.

17. The “vaporious drop profound” (line 23) most likely refers to

- (A) a shaft of moonlight on the ground.
- (B) a drop of rain at night.
- (C) ground fog rising from the moonlit heath.
- (D) a veil of mist over the moon.**
- (E) the drug Lady Macbeth used to put Duncan’s grooms to sleep.

Given the word “vapourous,” we must assume a fog or mist (choices C and D). This vapour hangs on a corner of the moon (lines 22-23), and Hecate will catch it before it falls to the ground (line 24). Hence, C is eliminated as a possibility.

18. The “dismal and fatal end” (line 20) that Hecate is working toward is

- (A) Lady Macbeth’s suicide.

We do not yet even know of Lady Macbeth’s madness – nor will we know of her death by suicide until much closer to the end of the play. These are not even predicted yet.

- (B) Macbeth’s downfall.**

As the play is The Tragedy of Macbeth, the audience must be expecting the plot to include Macbeth’s downfall which has been slowly developing from the first time “brave Macbeth” encountered the Weird Sisters.

- (C) Banquo’s murder.

This has already been accomplished, so this cannot be the “end” Hecate is going to spend the night working toward.

- (D) Macduff’s family’s slaughter.

As with choice A, this is not predicted yet in the play. Macbeth devises the plan to attack Macduff’s castle only after being warned to “beware Macduff,” and then finding that Macduff himself has fled to England.

- (E) Duncan’s assassination.

As with choice C, this has happened in the past, so it cannot be the “end” toward which Hecate is working.

19. According to line 13, conjuring the spirits for Macbeth is the witches’ means of

- (A) making up for their earlier slight of Hecate.**
- (B) finally finishing the business with Macbeth.
- (C) showing Hecate how powerful they are.
- (D) establishing themselves as Hecate’s partners.
- (E) making Macbeth their disciple.

In lines 1 – 12 , Hecate chastises the Weird Sisters for not allowing her to participate and for wasting their time with Macbeth. Line 13 begins with “But make amends ...” which indicates that the scheme that follows will be their way of ... uh ... making amends.

20. In the context of the passage, the word “artificial” (line 26) means

- (A) synthetic.
- (B) unreal.
- (C) crafty.
- (D) fake.
- (E) deceitful.**

While A through D might be acceptable synonyms for “artificial,” they do not fit in the context in the passage.

21. The word “it” in line 10 refers to

- (A) Lady Macbeth’s death.
- (B) life.**
- (C) the poor player.
- (D) the walking shadow.
- (E) the stage of the Globe Theater.

Grammatically and syntactically, “it” must refer to life, life being the subject of the first main clause (Life is but a walking shadow ...) and it being the subject of the second main clause (It is a tale ...).

22. The overall meaning of lines 8 – 12 is that

- (A) playwrights understand life better than actors.
- (B) actors record the story of life better than historians.
- (C) the tale of life is sad and silent, but profoundly significant.
- (D) the tale of life is noisy and exciting, but ultimately meaningless.**
- (E) the tale of life is dim like a candle’s flame.

In addition to the familiar fussing and fuming sense of “fret,” the Oxford English Dictionary offers definitions of “fret” that include adorning something and preening like a peacock spreading its tail. Hence, “strut” and “fret” are both very public, very showy activities intended to impress others. Likewise, the passage says that the tale of life is full of sound and fury, indicating noise and excitement. Yet, as the passage ends, this “tale told by an idiot” ultimately has no meaning – signifies nothing.

23. Lines 5 – 7 compare history to

- (A) a torch bearer giving light to a traveler in the dark.**
- (B) executioners preparing to burn victims at the stake.
- (C) frenzied dancers carrying torches and whirling around.
- (D) an angry, torch-carrying mob storming a castle.
- (E) marauders using torches to set a village on fire.

Be careful not to allow the fact that the travelers are “fools” or the journey is “to dusty death” be confusing. The essential phrase is “to light ... the way.”

24. The fact that the “tale” (line 10) is told by an “idiot” (line 11) indicates that it is

- (A) difficult to figure out.
A tale told by an idiot might indeed be difficult to figure out, but the wording of this choice might also indicate that the tale is esoteric, not merely nonsensical.
- (B) fun and nonsensical.
Possibly nonsensical, but not necessarily fun.
- (C) long and tedious.
Possibly tedious because of its meaninglessness, but not necessarily long.
- (D) difficult to appreciate.
This choice implies an esoteric value or meaning that must be plumbed which is not likely of a tale told by an idiot.
- (E) especially meaningless.**

Not only is the tale told by an idiot, we learn at the end of the passage that it signifies nothing – has no meaning.

25. The purpose of the repetition in line 3 is to

(A) establish the time when Lady Macbeth “should have died.”

“There would have been time for such a word” ends with a period. Hence “tomorrow” begins a new sentence, not a continuation of the previous thought.

(B) emphasize the “petty pace” of the passing of time.

Syntactically and rhythmically, this choice makes the most sense.

(C) indicate Macbeth’s increasing panic.

Nothing in the passage indicates that Macbeth is panicking.

(D) foreshadow the coming battle of Birnam Wood.

Again, we know the battle is imminent, but nothing suggests the battle will take place “tomorrow.” Rarely if ever is Shakespeare that specific with time references.

(E) imitate the strutting and fretting of the poor player’s hour upon the stage.

A less careful reader might be tempted to select this choice, but it would be difficult to articulate how the slow, repetitious rhythm of the line imitates the actions of strutting and fretting.

Macbeth

ADVANCED PLACEMENT IN ENGLISH LITERATURE AND COMPOSITION

STUDY GUIDE TEACHER'S COPY

Act I, scene i

1. What effect is Shakespeare creating by beginning the play with this scene?

Shakespeare is creating suspense and mystery – appropriate for a tragedy. The first mention of the hero's name comes from the weird sisters which creates mystery and foreshadows his downfall.

2. What do you suppose is suggested by the line, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair"?

The line could suggest that things are not as they appear, or that the natural order of things is disturbed and disrupted. It also could mean that what seems good is not.

3. What poetic device is used in this scene and to what effect?

The alliteration of the "F" sound in "fair," and "Foul," and "Fog," and "Filthy" allows the actors playing the Weird Sisters to emphasize their base slovenliness.

Act I, scene ii

1. What is the purpose of this early scene?

Shakespeare offers the audience some important exposition – we learn of the Macdonwald revolt and of the (attempted) Norwegian invasion. The audience also hears Macbeth's name for the second time, this time in context with words like "brave," "valiant," and "worthy."

The audience also first hears of Banquo in similar terms.

2. What image do we have of Macbeth's bravery and ability as a warrior?

Concentrate on the image of Macbeth "carving out his passage" – hacking and hewing with battleaxe and sword through a battlefield of footsoldiers – and then essentially slicing Macdonwald in half and cutting off his head.

3. What is his relationship to King Duncan?

Duncan calls him a cousin, which suggests that they are kinsmen.

4. Whom had Macbeth and Banquo been fighting?

They have fought two battles: a rebellion led by Macdonwald (Duncan says the bloody soldier can report the “newest state” “of the revolt,” and the Sergeant says that Macdonwald is “worthy to be called a rebel”); and an attempted invasion by Norway, assisted by the Thane of Cawdor.

5. What does King Duncan tell Ross to do?

Ross is to draft a death warrant for the Thane of Cawdor and then find Macbeth and tell him that he will be the new Thane of Cawdor as a reward for his valor in battle.

Act I, scene iii

1. What does the audience learn about the Weird Sisters from their conversation at the beginning of the scene?

This early conversation shows them to be evil in a petty, mischievous sense, and that they are also vindictive.

2. When Macbeth says, “So foul and fair a day I have not seen,” to what is he referring? What could be the dramatic irony in this line?

While Macbeth is referring to the weather (foul) and his decisive victory (fair), the audience knows that although Macbeth has just fought a great battle, there is evil awaiting him in the persons of the Weird Sisters.

3. Describe the physical appearance of the Weird Sisters.

They look “wither’d and so wild” that Macbeth questions if they are human. They look like they might be women, except that they have beards.

4. What prophecies do the Weird Sisters make regarding Macbeth? How does he react?

They say that he will become King of Scotland. Later, he will tend to believe this because they also correctly identified him as Thane of Glamis (a title inherited from his father). When Macbeth hears this, he is startled and apparently frightened. Although the second witch hails him as Thane of Cawdor, this is not a prediction. Macbeth was made Thane of Cawdor in the previous scene. The audience knows this, Macbeth does not.

5. What do the Weird Sisters see in the future for Banquo?

They predict that although he won't be a king himself, he will be the father of kings.

6. How do Macbeth and Banquo react to the experience after the Weird Sisters vanish?

Banquo wonders whether the witches were real or a hallucination. Macbeth immediately tries to draw attention away from the prediction that he will be king.

7. What “terms” does Ross indicate accompany the title Thane of Cawdor?

He tells Macbeth that Thane of Cawdor is an “earnest of a greater honor” or a token of a promise of something greater in the future. In the context of the encounter with the witches, Macbeth is probably thinking that Duncan is giving him Cawdor as a token of his promise to name him heir to the throne.

8. As the others talk, what does Macbeth’s aside reveal about his thinking?

The aside reveals Macbeth’s ambivalence – the beginning of his inner conflict. On the one hand, he desires to be king and believes that the truth of Glamis and Cawdor indicate that the witches’ prediction may actually come to pass. On the other hand, he is horrified (hair standing on end, heart pounding) at the thoughts he is entertaining regarding how to become king. Finally, he decides that he need do nothing (“If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me without my stir”).

9. How does Banquo’s comment support the “Fair is foul, foul is fair” theme?

Banquo says that the instruments of darkness (the Weird Sisters) win our confidence with small truths (Thane of Cawdor), only to deceive us in some other very important way.

10. What does Macbeth mean in his aside about two truths being prologue to the act of the imperial theme?

The Weird Sisters’ two pronouncements of his being Thane of Glamis and Thane of Cawdor are true. He is thinking that the last part, about his becoming King, may also come to be.

11. What dramatic conventions does Shakespeare use to establish character and begin to lay out his tragedy?

In this scene, Shakespeare uses:

Character reaction: twice in this scene Shakespeare has Banquo point out Macbeth's reactions: when the witches first address them ("Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear ...?") and after Ross and Angus have told Macbeth he is Thane of Cawdor ("Look, how our partner's rapt"). These comments are to make certain that the audience does not miss Macbeth's strong – and questionable – reaction to the news.

Aside: For those who want to blame Lady Macbeth for everything, notice that in this scene we already see Macbeth entertaining horrifying thoughts ("Why do I yield to that suggestion that doth unfix my hair and make my seated heart knock at my ribs ...?") We also see the beginning of the inner conflict: Macbeth's desire versus his integrity (the fact that the thought of murdering Duncan horrifies him so, and his decision that "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown, me without my stir").

Character action: Notice how Macbeth twice seems to try to draw attention away from his better prophecy ("that shalt be king hereafter") to focus on Banquo's considerably lesser prophecy ("thou shalt get kings"). This fact, combined with his admission to entertaining horrifying thoughts, starts to establish a troubled mind (guilt).

Foil character: by having Banquo request a prediction from the Weird Sisters and allowing the audience to witness his reaction, or apparent lack thereof, Banquo starts to become a foil to contrast and emphasize Macbeth's reactions.

Act I, scene iv

1. Why was the former Thane of Cawdor executed?

He betrayed his King and country by assisting the Swedish king's attempted invasion.

2. What effect does Shakespeare create by having Macbeth and Banquo enter just as they are discussing the execution of the former Thane of Cawdor?

Their well-timed entrance creates dramatic and visual irony. Macbeth – having already probably contemplated murdering Duncan – enters just as Duncan is lamenting the inability to read a man's inner thoughts and see disloyalty before it is too late.

3. What announcement does the King make to everyone present and what is Macbeth's reaction?

Duncan announces that his son Malcolm is Prince of Cumberland – heir to the Scottish throne. Macbeth feels cheated. He thought (given the witches' prediction, the promise of "something greater" when he was given Cawdor, and Duncan's "promise" to make him "full of growing") that he would be named heir to the throne. Now he must somehow "o'erleap" being the legitimately named heir – or give up his ambition to be king.

4. In his last speech in this scene, what does Macbeth reveal?

Macbeth is again entertaining some evil thought ("my black and deep desires") – presumably murdering Duncan. Yet he again decides against it ("let that be, which the eye fears, when it is done, to see").

Act I, scene v

1. What is the purpose of the letter?

Macbeth does not tell his wife anything the audience does not already know so Shakespeare does not use the letter for exposition. But Lady Macbeth's reaction to the letter offers considerable insight into her character and Macbeth's, as well as their relationship.

2. What do we learn about Macbeth from Lady Macbeth's reaction to the letter?

Lady Macbeth confirms what we already know: Macbeth is a man with both aspirations and integrity. He "would (desires to) be great," is "not without ambition," but is not willing to do anything wrong to achieve his ambition.

3. What do we learn about Lady Macbeth from her reaction to the letter?

While Macbeth's initial reaction to the witches' prophecy was fear (as Banquo pointed out in I, iii), Lady Macbeth seems energized. Both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth think immediately of murdering Duncan, but as Macbeth twice decides against such an act, Lady Macbeth commits herself to this plan of action.

In this sense, Lady Macbeth is a "stronger" person than Macbeth in that he wavers between whether or not to commit the assassination. But we must not forget that the deed that Macbeth is "afraid" to do is an illegal, immoral act. Our first image of Macbeth was carving through the soldiers on the battlefield and splitting the rebel Macdonwald in half.

If Lady Macbeth is "strong," then, she is more strongly, more consistently evil.

Lady Macbeth is also shrewd enough to know her husband's "weakness," and apparently how to help him "overcome" it.

4. Does Lady Macbeth fear Macbeth will not be king if he does not murder Duncan?

No, Lady Macbeth acknowledges that he is Glamis and Cawdor, and she says, “and shalt be that which thou art promised” (king). What she fears is that he is too good a man to “catch the nearest way.”

5. How does the news about King Duncan’s expected arrival affect her? What is she planning?

She can not believe the opportunity and is already planning the King’s murder.

6. Why does Lady Macbeth pray to be unsexed?

She wishes to turn off her “feminine” conscience and be the brutal, strong male, capable of murder.

7. What does Shakespeare establish in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s first exchange when Macbeth arrives home?

Shakespeare establishes how well Macbeth knows his wife. They speak of the murder (“this night’s great business”) in vague, ambiguous terms. Lady Macbeth could simply be talking about preparing Duncan’s meal and his lodging, but Shakespeare has Lady Macbeth comment on Macbeth’s facial expressions to let the audience know that he understands exactly what she is talking about.

8. In what way does Lady Macbeth’s advice to Macbeth relate to the “fair is foul” theme?

Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth he should seem to welcome Duncan while preparing to murder him.

Act I, scene vi

1. What is the purpose of this brief scene?

We receive no new information in this scene, there is very little (if any) character revelation, and the plot is not advanced at all. The sole purpose of this scene is for Shakespeare to build dramatic irony: Duncan is pleased with how welcoming and comfortable the castle appears while the audience knows that Duncan’s murder has already been planned within the castle’s walls.

2. How does this scene contribute to the “fair is foul” theme?

The castle appears “fair” to Duncan yet is “foul” within. Lady Macbeth, who has placed herself in charge of the murder plot, appears gracious to her royal guest.

Act I, scene vii

1. What arguments does Macbeth raise for not doing it?

Macbeth recognizes that murdering Duncan would not be the end of his troubles, but the beginning. The act would be especially horrid because Macbeth is not only his subject but also a relative. Worse yet, he, as Duncan's host, should be protecting him from others, not committing harm. Duncan has been a good King and does not deserve to be murdered.

2. What does he finally conclude?

Weighing the reasons he should not do it, he realizes that his growing ambition is really the only thing that pushes him toward the evil.

3. What consequences does Macbeth fear if he commits the murder?

Macbeth fears both physical and spiritual consequences. First he knows that by killing Duncan, he'd "jump the life to come," or damn his immortal soul. Secondly he knows that his murdering Duncan to become king will set a precedent and someone may one day kill him to become king.

4. What does Lady Macbeth say in an attempt to goad her husband into the murder?

She attacks him on two fronts: his love for her and his manliness.

5. Macbeth's response to her about what a man may dare is frequently quoted. What is his meaning?

Remember our first image of Macbeth carving his way through the footsoldiers, slicing Macdonwald in half, and cutting off his head. Macbeth is no coward. The cold-blooded murder of a trusting friend, kinsman, and guest is not a "manly" act, but the act of a beast.

6. What is the point of Lady Macbeth's baby imagery? Note the many times images of babies and mothers are presented in this play.

By using the image of a baby at a mother's breast, Shakespeare arouses a picture of warmth, love, and family; Lady Macbeth then shatters this image by saying that she would knock the infant's brains out before she would go back on an oath the way Macbeth has just done.

7. What exposition does Shakespeare give the audience in this scene?

Lady Macbeth explains to her husband – and the audience – how they are going to commit the murder and on whom they are going to cast suspicion.

Act II, scene i

1. What is significant about the weather?

Banquo says there are no stars out. It must be cloudy. This was foreshadowed when Macbeth said (I, iv), "Stars hide your fires, let not light see my black and deep desires."

2. What do you suppose is keeping Banquo from sleeping?

More than likely he is troubled by the possibility that Macbeth is planning some evil deed. This is supported by Banquo's recognition that the Weird Sisters might be trying to entice Macbeth to his damnation, and by his response to Macbeth later in this scene.

3. What is significant about Macbeth's saying, "I think not of them," after Banquo had admitted to dreaming about the Weird Sisters?

He is lying, again apparently trying to draw Banquo's attention away from the predictions. As in dramatic irony, it is important to note how Shakespeare gives the audience enough information to see the whole picture – not just one character's view.

4. What does Macbeth mean when he says to Banquo, "If you shall cleave to my consent, when 'tis, / It shall make honour for you"?

Since Macbeth is not heir to the throne, he will not automatically succeed Duncan. There will have to be a time when the throne is empty with no apparent heir. The nobles will then have to name a new king from the royal family. Macbeth is saying that he will repay Banquo if Banquo will speak in support of his claim to the throne when the time comes.

5. What is significant about Banquo's reply?

He tells Macbeth that he will not do anything disloyal to his present king in order to become a favorite of the new king. This is significant for a number of reasons: it indicates that Banquo suspects that Macbeth might be considering doing something wrong. Secondly, as Macbeth's foil, Banquo shows again that he has not been affected by the Weird Sisters' predictions. His sense of integrity is intact, and he cannot be tempted to abandon his values for political advancement.

6. In his soliloquy after Banquo leaves, what does Macbeth tell us he sees? What could account for this apparition?

He sees a dagger before him. Macbeth suggests that it is a hallucination, a "false creation" from a "heat-oppressed brain."

7. Why does Shakespeare have Macbeth hallucinate?

The tragic hero must be a sympathetic character. Therefore Shakespeare is being very careful to establish for the audience that the murder of Duncan is not an easy act for Macbeth, that he is riddled with doubt prior to the act, and will be guilt-ridden afterward.

Act II, scene ii

1. Compare Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's reactions immediately after the crime.

Macbeth is immediately filled with grief and regret. He knows his nights will be troubled. The sight of Duncan's blood on his hands bothers him. He feels he is damned. Lady Macbeth refuses to acknowledge guilt. She is cold and down-to-business.

2. Why does Lady Macbeth not commit the murder when she is in the room?

Because the sleeping Duncan resembled her father, she could not kill him.

3. Macbeth, apparently troubled by the murder he has just committed, tells Lady Macbeth what he saw and heard. She tells him, "These deeds must not be thought of this way." Why?

She believes thinking about it will drive him mad. This idea may be foreshadowing and also fairly ironic, as she is the one who has mental problems later.

4. Macbeth's response is frequently quoted. What is the sense of this response?

In killing Duncan while he slept, Macbeth committed a crime against "nature's second course," i.e., sleep. For having committed this unnatural act, Macbeth expects he shall sleep no more. This is also ironic, since Lady Macbeth's sleep is unnatural later.

5. How does Lady Macbeth get Duncan's blood on her hands?

Macbeth refuses to reenter the room and replace the daggers on the drugged grooms. Lady Macbeth takes the daggers and says that she will do it, for the grooms must seem to be the murderers.

6. What does Macbeth's refusal to return to Duncan's chamber echo?

In Act I, scene iv, Macbeth has determined to "let that be, which the eye fears, when it is done, to see."

Act II, scene iii

1. The Porter's scene, or the "knocking at the gate," is a much debated scene by scholars, but many agree it is the typical comic relief scene seen in Shakespeare's plays. What do you suppose the dramatic purpose of a comic relief scene is? Why is the Porter's soliloquy in prose rather than poetry? What lines contain the bawdy humor so often found in these scenes?

After the building tension of the murder and its aftermath, it gives the audience a humorous breather before the tension begins to build again.

In all of Shakespeare's plays, the common people speak in prose; poetry is reserved for nobility and those in the upper classes of society.

The porter comments on alcohol and its relationship to sex.

2. How is the theme of "a crime against nature" reinforced in this scene?

Lennox tells of the strange night they had in which many unnatural things occurred.

3. What does Shakespeare accomplish with Macduff's allusion to "a new Gorgon"?

The Gorgons were sisters in classical Mythology, two of whom were immortal. They were monsters with wings and snake-like hair. Any mortal who looked at them was turned instantly to stone. Medusa, the one mortal Gorgon, was slain by Perseus.

With this allusion, Macduff is essentially saying that the sight of Duncan's body is so horrible as to turn a man into stone – leave him astonished and dumbfounded.

4. How does Macbeth react to the discovery of Duncan's body?

Macbeth admits immediate regret and says that he knows the best part of his life is over: "Had I but died an hour before this chance, I had lived a blessed time; for, from this instant, there is nothing serious in mortality."

This is ironic because Macbeth killed Duncan ostensibly to bring about the best portion of his life. However, Macbeth did predict that he would feel this way if he did kill Duncan.

5. How does Lady Macbeth react?

Her first reaction is that the death of Duncan brings scandal to her house. (Remember that this is a feigned reaction since she is involved in the murder.) Then she faints. We do not know whether this is an honest reaction, but it is probably a feint to cover her earlier blunder.

6. Who is the one who points out the inappropriateness of Lady Macbeth's initial response?

Banquo, who asserts that the murder of Duncan would be "too cruel anywhere." The issue is not where it happened.

7. What is the predominant image in this scene, and what effect does it create?

The dominant image is clearly the image of Duncan's "silver skin laced with his golden blood." This emphasizes Duncan's royalty and superior nature.

8. What double meaning might Shakespeare have intended for Macbeth's line, "He does: he did appoint so," in response to Lennox's asking, "Goes the King hence today?"

Macbeth's response could be a simple affirmation that, yes, the King intends to leave today. Or, the change from present to past tense could indicate Macbeth's difficulty in hiding his guilt: he does leave today; he intended to leave today.

Act II, scene iv

1. What is the purpose of this scene?

1. Exposition and passing of time – events are narrated for the audience that Shakespeare does not choose to dramatize (Duncan's burial, Macbeth's coronation, Malcolm and Donalbain's flight).
2. A "recap scene" – emphasizes the odd things that happened the night of Duncan's murder, reiterates that the grooms are considered the murderers, and adds that it is assumed Malcolm and Donalbain put them up to it.
3. Macduff's dislike/distrust of Macbeth is established by his refusal to go to Scone to attend Macbeth's coronation. As this coronation would certainly include the nobles' swearing allegiance to their new king, Macduff's refusal to attend is essentially an act of treason.

2. What additional natural, or "unnatural," events further the "crime against nature" theme?

Although it is daytime, it is as dark as night; a small owl kills a falcon; Duncan's horses turn wild and devour one another.

According to Medieval tradition, the falcon was always associated with the King and was the most prized bird in the sport of falconry. By law, only the king could own a falcon. The owl, by comparison, being a nocturnal animal, was associated with witchcraft, secrecy, and death. Also, the owl in this passage is a mere mousing owl, not a great bird of prey. The significance is to show how Macbeth's (represented by the owl) murder of Duncan (represented by the falcon) has turned the order of the universe upside-down.

Act III, scene i

1. In his soliloquy, what suspicion and hope does Banquo reveal?

He suspects Macbeth “play’dst most foully” for his position. At the same time, remembering the Weird Sisters’ predictions about himself, he hopes to become the founder of a line of Kings.

2. Macbeth seems to be very interested in Banquo’s travel plans. Why do you suppose he is so interested?

Macbeth, too, remembers the Weird Sisters’ prophecy regarding Banquo. If he sees Banquo as a threat, staging an ambush on the road would be a logical course of action for him. This is shown to be true in Macbeth’s soliloquy and his conversation with the murderers later in this scene.

3. The speech beginning “To be thus is nothing...” is another one often quoted. What is the meaning of that sentence?

To be a King is worthless if one lives in fear. To be safe, Macbeth feels he has to be rid of Banquo.

4. What is there in Banquo’s character that makes Macbeth uneasy?

Banquo is not only very brave, but also very wise. This combination can make him very dangerous. He also has a “kingly nature,” a reminder of the prophecy about Banquo’s descendants.

5. What is there in the situation with Banquo that particularly upsets Macbeth?

He has killed Duncan to become King, but the Weird Sisters said the throne would pass on to Banquo’s heirs. Essentially, Macbeth is jealous.

6. What exposition does Shakespeare offer in Macbeth’s conversation with the murderers?

The audience learns that conditions in Scotland under Macbeth are not good. Macbeth’s subjects are “bow’d ... to the grave” (worked to death) and their families and descendants are “beggar’d for ever” (turned into beggars with no hope of ever rising in status or fortune).

7. How does Macbeth convince the murderers to kill Banquo and Fleance?

He tells them that it was Banquo who was the cause of all their problems.

8. What does Macbeth tell them to do?

The plan is for them to hide on the road, ambush, and kill both Banquo and Fleance.

Act III, scene ii

1. What is the meaning of Lady Macbeth's opening speech in this scene?

It does not profit them to achieve their objective if they live in a constant state of uneasiness and worry. It's better to be dead like Duncan ("that which we destroy") than live as they have been living since the murder ("than by destruction live in doubtful joy").

2. In this scene, what is Macbeth's state of mind?

He is depressed, spends much of his time alone. Judging from Lady Macbeth's comment, he seems to have great remorse for his crime. Again she advises him to put his guilty thoughts out of mind.

3. On the other hand, how does Macbeth show that his resolve and ambition have become stronger?

Prior to the killing of Duncan, Macbeth was pushed and encouraged by Lady Macbeth. It is possible that Macbeth would not have killed Duncan without his wife's forceful ambition. Macbeth, now, however, has arranged to have Banquo and Fleance killed, with no encouragement from his wife, and he withholds this news from Lady Macbeth.

4. What is significant about Macbeth's instructions to Lady Macbeth about how to treat Banquo at the state dinner that night?

He does not even intend for Banquo to attend the feast as Banquo should be dead by then. This emphasizes how strongly Macbeth has taken control and stopped even confiding in his wife.

Act III, scene iii

1. What happens at the ambush?

Banquo is killed, but Fleance escapes.

2. Given the previous scene in which Banquo's death is planned, and the next scene in which the audience could learn with Macbeth that Fleance has escaped, why would Shakespeare choose to dramatize this seemingly insignificant event?

Fleance's escape does establish the security of the Weird Sisters' predictions – Macbeth could not thwart fate and destroy Banquo's line.

Also given King James I's descendency from Banquo, this scene would probably please the King.

Finally, the murder of Banquo affords Shakespeare with the opportunity to dramatize violence which would have been very popular with his paying audience.

Act III, scene iv

1. One characteristic of Shakespeare's style is his play on words. How is this demonstrated in Macbeth's response to the murderer's saying it's Banquo's blood on his face?

"'Tis better thee without than he within ..." It's better for you (thee) to have his blood outside of you (on your face) than for "he" to have it inside of him (and thus still be alive).

2. What wordplay is there in the murderer's reply that Banquo is "safe" now?

Macbeth asks if "Banquo's safe," meaning is he safely taken care of – dead. The murderer replies that he is "safe in a ditch ... with twenty gashes on his head." The use of the word "safe" in these instances is doubly ironic.

3. The dagger Macbeth saw in Act II, scene i was a hallucination. Banquo's ghost in this scene is not. How do we know?

When Macbeth sees the dagger, he says (for the audience's benefit), "Is this a dagger which I see before me, the handle toward my hand?" Shakespeare must have Macbeth announce what he sees because the audience does not see it – it is a hallucination. However, there is no such announcement when Banquo's ghost enters – even as an aside – so the audience must also see it. Thus it is really there.

4. What does Lady Macbeth say to Macbeth?

She needs him to calm down and stop imagining things. She claims nothing is in his seat and that the way Macbeth is acting makes him seem like a weak, old woman.

5. What is the significance of the conversation Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have immediately after the guests leave?

Macbeth is acknowledging that once one sheds blood, one cannot stop. There is always someone who poses a threat to the murderer's security. Also, such a crime as murder cannot be kept a secret: stones will move and trees will speak to reveal the murderer. Birds (magpies, crows, and rooks) have been used as omens to reveal guilty persons who have shed others' blood.

6. For what reason does Macbeth mention Macduff's name?

Macduff didn't come to the banquet to which he had been invited. Remember that Macduff also did not attend Macbeth's coronation.

7. What does Macbeth say he will do next?

The next day he will go to the Weird Sisters to find out the worst that is going to happen.

8. What is Macbeth's frame of mind?

He is resigned to violence – he has shed so much blood, that it is now just as easy to continue on the bloody path as to turn back. He is having strange thoughts that he must act on before he can put them out of mind.

Act III, scene v

1. Who is Hecate, and why is she angry?

Hecate is the goddess of witchcraft, and she is angry because the other witches did not consult with her before dealing with Macbeth.

She is also angry because their dealings with Macbeth will not profit them at all in the end.

2. What is her plan for Macbeth?

She plans on telling him things that will make him feel secure, so that he can be more easily deceived.

Act III, scene vi

1. How can we interpret Lennox's speech?

When Lennox speculates what Macbeth would do to Malcolm and Donalbain if he had them in Scotland, he interjects, "an't please heaven, he shall not" (and heaven grant that he won't [ever get his hands on them]). Likewise, when – at the end of the speech – he directly calls Macbeth a "tyrant," when explaining that Macduff did not attend the banquet; the audience knows that he is being ironic/sarcastic. He does not dare to openly criticize Macbeth, but he is not fooled by the appearance of Malcolm's, Donalbain's, and Fleance's guilt.

2. What further exposition does Shakespeare offer through the Lord?

The Lord explains that under Macbeth's reign, the Scots "pine for" meat on their tables, sleep at night, and peace and security. Further, the nobility does not feel free to serve their king, nor are they repaid for the services they do perform.

Contrast this with how quickly Duncan repaid Macbeth for his services at the beginning of the play.

Act IV, scene i

1. Compare the witches' speech pattern with Macbeth's.

Macbeth speaks in blank verse – unrhymed iambic pentameter. For the most part the witches speak in rhymed couplets of irregular trochaic tetrameter.

2. What effect is Shakespeare creating by altering the speech patterns like this?

Shakespeare is establishing that the witches are other-worldly, that they are not to be trusted. The sing-song rhythm and rhyme of their speech makes them seem almost childlike or silly which emphasizes that they are going to seduce Macbeth into a false sense of security.

3. Describe the three apparitions and the significance of each?

The first apparition is a head wearing a helmet, warning Macbeth to beware Macduff. The helmet indicates that Macduff poses a military threat to Macbeth. The fact that it is just a head and not a full warrior might foreshadow Macduff's beheading Macbeth

A bloody child appears, telling Macbeth to be bold, for "none of woman born" will harm him. This is significant in two ways: first, Shakespeare's audience would know that babies born naturally would not be bloody. In order for there to be blood, someone (either the baby or the mother) would have to be cut. Hence, the bloody child could not have been born naturally. Second, the apparition says, "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth." Many readers – and apparently Macbeth himself – understand the apparition to say "none of woman born can harm Macbeth." But the prediction is not an assurance, it is a statement of destiny. He will not be harmed by one born of woman – not that he can not be harmed ...

The third apparition is a child, wearing a crown, with a tree in his hand. It tells Macbeth that he will not be vanquished until Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane Hill. The fact that the child is carrying a tree clearly foreshadows how a forest could possibly move. The child wearing a crown is probably either Malcolm (Duncan's son and rightful heir) or Fleance (as the witches predicted). Also note that the apparition does not say Macbeth will not be vanquished unless the forest moved, the prophesy is that he won't be vanquished until the forest moves. Shakespeare's choice of words and mood (subjunctive as opposed to indicative) again supports a reading of destiny that Macbeth misunderstands as an assurance of security.

4. What, after this, does Macbeth resolve?

Macduff "can not" harm him since, obviously, a woman gave birth to him, but Macbeth decides to kill him anyway.

5. Pleased with the information, what one further thing does Macbeth desire to know and what is the answer he gets?

He wants to know whether Banquo's heirs will ever be Kings of Scotland. Eight Kings appear. Banquo points at the others as if claiming them as his heirs. The eighth King has a mirror that reflects a line of Kings.

Macbeth notes that some of the kings are carrying three scepters and two orbs. The two orbs would indicate that Banquo's descendents are kings of two countries (Scotland and England). The three scepters indicate that they are kings of three countries (Scotland, England, and Ireland or possibly even Scotland, England, and America).

6. What is the significance of this scene?

The parade of kings does not advance the plot, nor does it develop character. Likewise, it offers no new information. But James I (England's king when Shakespeare wrote Macbeth) was the eighth Stuart king of Scotland (James VI of Scotland and James I of England). The Stuart dynasty claimed descent from both Duncan I and Banquo. Therefore, this pageant is Shakespeare's attempt to flatter his king. The eighth king in the parade would represent James, and the mirror would indicate the continuation of the dynasty far into the unpredictable future. Shakespeare wrote Macbeth in 1606, the same year James founded the London Company and the Plymouth Company, charging them to find gold, find a route to the South Seas, and find the Lost Colony of Roanoke. By having some of the kings carry three scepters, Shakespeare could be broadening his attempt at flattery by predicting James's success in the New World.

7. What news does Lennox give to Macbeth?

Macduff has fled to England.

8. What is Macbeth's response?

From now on, he will not procrastinate. If a thought comes into mind, he will act on it immediately. He believes that it was his procrastination that allowed Macduff to escape.

9. What is his resolve at the end of this scene? How is this different from his previous actions?

Macbeth will murder all of Macduff's family. There is no reason for this slaughter, other than frustration, anger, and an evil nature. Previously, at least, Duncan's murder had been motivated by ambition, and Banquo's by paranoia and envy. Macbeth's character is becoming increasingly evil.

Act IV, scene ii

1. What does Shakespeare achieve with the conversation between Ross and Lady Macduff?

Unlike Lady Macbeth in Acts I and II, Lady Macduff knows nothing of her husband's affairs. She seems not to know where he has gone or for what reason. Shakespeare also emphasizes for the audience how bad the situation is in Scotland under Macbeth's reign. There is nothing but fear, doubt, insecurity – and not even the certainty of whom or what to fear.

2. What is the purpose of the exchange between Lady Macduff and her son?

This witty exchange does not offer any exposition, does not advance the plot, and develops only briefly a character who is going to die in this same scene. It is a scene of comic relief. Just as the “knocking at the gate” scene (II, iii) broke the tension of the murder of Duncan, this scene lulls the audience into a sense of humorous calm immediately before the brutal slaughter of Lady Macduff and the child.

NOTE: this same technique is still used quite often – especially in action, suspense, and horror films.

3. What effect is created by the Messenger's entering to warn Lady Macduff?

The suspense and anticipation of some impending horror, begun at the start of the scene with Ross, is intensified.

4. Why does Shakespeare show the son's murder onstage?

The “son” has been a recurrent issue in the play since the witches' prediction to Banquo. Macbeth has no son in the play, and this disturbs him deeply. Duncan named his son heir to the throne instead of Macbeth. Macbeth succeeded in killing Banquo but not Banquo's son. Thus, this onstage death of Macduff's son is something of a climax to this thread. Macbeth has succeeded in destroying someone else's lineage. Ironically it is this brutal act that will motivate and justify his own death. Also, the image of Macduff's dying, bleeding son might echo the bloody child in apparition two (not to mention Shakespeare's audience's penchant for violence).

Act IV, scene iii

1. What additional evidence does Shakespeare give his audience that Macbeth is a tyrant?

Macduff tells Malcolm that every day “new widows howl, new orphans cry,” indicating that men – presumably “traitorous” nobles – are dying or being killed every day in Scotland.

2. What suspicion of Macduff does Malcolm voice?

In effect, he asks how he can be sure that Macduff didn't come to England “To offer up a weak, poor, innocent lamb [himself] To appease an angry god [Macbeth].” In other words, Macduff might be Macbeth's agent to lure Malcolm back to Scotland and his death.

3. How do Malcolm's comments about Macbeth again bring to mind the “fair is foul” theme?

It is impossible to tell by a man's appearance whether he is good or evil. Macbeth was once thought honest – and was loved even by Macduff. Macduff now looks honest, but might not be. But Malcolm admits there are still probably honest men in Scotland even though one thought to be among the most honest turned out to be deceitful: “Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell.”

4. What literary device is Shakespeare employing when Malcolm says, “Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell”?

Allusion. Medieval and Renaissance theologians interpreted certain passages in the Old Testament books of Ezekiel and Isaiah to tell the story of Lucifer, one of the most beautiful angels of heaven (whose name meant “bearer of light”) who challenged God's authority. He and 144,000 of his followers were expelled from Heaven and became Satan and his demons.

5. What is it that makes Malcolm suspicious of Macduff's motives?

Macduff left his wife and children behind.

6. How does Malcolm test Macduff's honesty?

He lies about his character, telling Macduff that he is lecherous and greedy, possessing none of the traits of a good ruler.

7. How does Macduff nearly fail the test?

He seems too eager to bring Malcolm back to Scotland. Macduff excuses away every sin of which Malcolm accuses himself.

8. What finally convinces Malcolm?

Macduff finally despairs and announces that he will remain exiled from Scotland if their only choice of rulers is Macbeth or the vile person Malcolm is pretending to be.

9. What purpose does the brief dialogue about Edward the Confessor's alleged ability to heal serve?

This dialogue serves no dramatic purpose. Shakespeare is merely flattering his king.

10. After receiving word of his family's slaughter, what does Macduff resolve?

He vows to kill Macbeth himself.

Act V, scene i

1. Explain how this entire scene is ironic.

Lady Macbeth warned Macbeth not to dwell on his feelings of guilt "so it will make us mad" (II, ii). It is finally her repression of her guilt that has made her mad.

2. What is ironic about Lady Macbeth's constant "handwashing"?

In Act II, scene ii, after she took the bloody daggers back to Duncan's room and had blood on her hands as well, she told Macbeth, "A little water clears us of this deed: how easy is it then." Now she has a subconscious sense that she will never have her hands clean.

3. What does the Doctor's "Foul whisperings are abroad" speech echo?

Act III, scene iv in which Macbeth says that the secret of the murderer will eventually find some way to be revealed.

Act V, scenes ii – vii

1. What effect is Shakespeare creating with this sequence of short scenes which follow one another so closely?

Time is moving quickly. The pace of the action is picking up, speeding toward Macbeth's death.

2. Whose side are Lennox, Angus, Menteith, and Caithness on?

They are allied against Macbeth.

3. What do they say about the men that Macbeth commands?

They know that the soldiers act only because they are commanded, not out of any love for Macbeth.

4. What is Macbeth's lament in his "my way of life
Is fallen into the sear ..." speech?

He knows he will not have honor, love, respect, family, etc., as one would expect to have at his point of life. Instead he has curses and false honor.

5. What is Lady Macbeth's condition, and how does Macbeth believe it could be cured?

Many "thick-coming fancies" plague her and keep her from resting. Macbeth, quite accurately, believes that if her guilty memory could be purged, she would be well again.

6. What tactical strategy does Malcolm take?

His troops camouflage themselves with tree limbs from Birnam wood, so that they may get close to the castle without being observed.

7. In reaction to the news that Lady Macbeth is dead, Macbeth delivers his most famous soliloquy. What does it mean?

Macbeth is contemplating death and life. He says that people have just a short time on Earth to brag or to worry. Then they die, it is over, and life signifies nothing.

8. What does Macbeth recognize and how does it fit in with the "fair is foul" theme?

He recognizes that the prophecies the Weird Sisters made are true. But he took them as assurances when they were merely enigmatically-worded statements of destiny.

9. As bad as things look for Macbeth, why does he still scorn all his opponents?

He naively continues to believe the Weird Sisters and their promise that no man born of a woman shall hurt him.

10. What is the meaning of Siward's statement that Macbeth's men "on both sides do fight"?

Macbeth's soldiers are deserting him and fighting on the other side.

Act V, scene viii

1. What information does Macduff tell Macbeth that makes him frightened ("Cow'd my better part")?

Macduff was "untimely ripp'd" from his mother's womb. This can only mean he was delivered by a Cesarean section.

2. What is Macbeth's response?

As above, he recognizes that the prophecies the Weird Sisters made are true. But he took them as assurances when they were merely enigmatically-worded statements of destiny.

3. Why does he quickly change his mind about fighting?

He would rather die in battle than go through the humiliation of being taken prisoner and put on public display.

4. On what note does the play end?

Malcolm's speech suggests that law, justice, and stability have returned to the once-troubled country.

Macbeth

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Act I, scene i

1. What effect is Shakespeare creating by beginning the play with this scene?
2. What do you suppose is suggested by the line, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair"?
3. What poetic device is used in this scene and to what effect?

Act I, scene ii

1. What is the purpose of this early scene?
2. What image do we have of Macbeth's bravery and ability as a warrior?
3. What is his relationship to King Duncan?
4. Whom had Macbeth and Banquo been fighting?
5. What does King Duncan tell Ross to do?

Act I, scene iii

1. What does the audience learn about the Weird Sisters from their conversation at the beginning of the scene?
2. When Macbeth says, “So foul and fair a day I have not seen,” to what is he referring? What could be the dramatic irony in this line?
3. Describe the physical appearance of the Weird Sisters.
4. What prophecies do the Weird Sisters make regarding Macbeth? How does he react?
5. What do the Weird Sisters see in the future for Banquo?
6. How do Macbeth and Banquo react to the experience after the Weird Sisters vanish?

7. What “terms” does Ross indicate accompany the title Thane of Cawdor?

8. As the others talk, what does Macbeth’s aside reveal about his thinking?

9. How does Banquo’s comment support the “Fair is foul, foul is fair” theme?

10. What does Macbeth mean in his aside about two truths being prologue to the act of the imperial theme?

11. What dramatic conventions does Shakespeare use to establish character and begin to lay out his tragedy?

Act I, scene iv

1. Why was the former Thane of Cawdor executed?
2. What effect does Shakespeare create by having Macbeth and Banquo enter just as they are discussing the execution of the former Thane of Cawdor?
3. What announcement does the King make to everyone present and what is Macbeth's reaction?
4. In his last speech in this scene, what does Macbeth reveal?

Act I, scene v

1. What is the purpose of the letter?
2. What do we learn about Macbeth from Lady Macbeth's reaction to the letter?
3. What do we learn about Lady Macbeth from her reaction to the letter?
4. Does Lady Macbeth fear Macbeth will not be king if he does not murder Duncan?
5. How does the news about King Duncan's expected arrival affect her? What is she planning?
6. Why does Lady Macbeth pray to be unsexed?
7. What does Shakespeare establish in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's first exchange when Macbeth arrives home?
8. In what way does Lady Macbeth's advice to Macbeth relate to the "fair is foul" theme?

Act I, scene vi

1. What is the purpose of this brief scene?

2. How does this scene contribute to the “fair is foul” theme?

Act I, scene vii

1. What arguments does Macbeth raise for not doing it?
2. What does he finally conclude?
3. What consequences does Macbeth fear if he commits the murder?
4. What does Lady Macbeth say in an attempt to goad her husband into the murder?
5. Macbeth's response to her about what a man may dare is frequently quoted. What is his meaning?
6. What is the point of Lady Macbeth's baby imagery? Note the many times images of babies and mothers are presented in this play.
7. What exposition does Shakespeare give the audience in this scene?

Act II, scene i

1. What is significant about the weather?
2. What do you suppose is keeping Banquo from sleeping?
3. What is significant about Macbeth's saying, "I think not of them," after Banquo had admitted to dreaming about the Weird Sisters?
4. What does Macbeth mean when he says to Banquo, "If you shall cleave to my consent, when 'tis, / It shall make honour for you"?
5. What is significant about Banquo's reply?
6. In his soliloquy after Banquo leaves, what does Macbeth tell us he sees? What could account for this apparition?
7. Why does Shakespeare have Macbeth hallucinate?

Act II, scene ii

1. Compare Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's reactions immediately after the crime.
2. Why does Lady Macbeth not commit the murder when she is in the room?
3. Macbeth, apparently troubled by the murder he has just committed, tells Lady Macbeth what he saw and heard. She tells him, "These deeds must not be thought of this way." Why?
4. Macbeth's response is frequently quoted. What is the sense of this response?
5. How does Lady Macbeth get Duncan's blood on her hands?
6. What does Macbeth's refusal to return to Duncan's chamber echo?

Act II, scene iii

1. The Porter's scene, or the "knocking at the gate," is a much debated scene by scholars, but many agree it is the typical comic relief scene seen in Shakespeare's plays. What do you suppose the dramatic purpose of a comic relief scene is? Why is the Porter's soliloquy in prose rather than poetry? What lines contain the bawdy humor so often found in these scenes?
2. How is the theme of "a crime against nature" reinforced in this scene?
3. What does Shakespeare accomplish with Macduff's allusion to "a new Gorgon"?
4. How does Macbeth react to the discovery of Duncan's body?
5. How does Lady Macbeth react?

Act II, scene iv

1. What is the purpose of this scene?

2. What additional natural, or “unnatural,” events further the “crime against nature” theme?

Act III, scene i

1. In his soliloquy, what suspicion and hope does Banquo reveal?
2. Macbeth seems to be very interested in Banquo's travel plans. Why do you suppose he is so interested?
3. The speech beginning "To be thus is nothing..." is another one often quoted. What is the meaning of that sentence?
4. What is there in Banquo's character that makes Macbeth uneasy?
5. What is there in the situation with Banquo that particularly upsets Macbeth?
6. What exposition does Shakespeare offer in Macbeth's conversation with the murderers?
7. How does Macbeth convince the murderers to kill Banquo and Fleance?
8. What does Macbeth tell them to do?

Act III, scene ii

1. What is the meaning of Lady Macbeth's opening speech in this scene?
2. In this scene, what is Macbeth's state of mind?
3. On the other hand, how does Macbeth show that his resolve and ambition have become stronger?
4. What is significant about Macbeth's instructions to Lady Macbeth about how to treat Banquo at the state dinner that night?

Act III, scene iv

1. One characteristic of Shakespeare's style is his play on words. How is this demonstrated in Macbeth's response to the murderer's saying it's Banquo's blood on his face?
2. What wordplay is there in the murderer's reply that Banquo is "safe" now?
3. The dagger Macbeth saw in Act II, scene i was a hallucination. Banquo's ghost in this scene is not. How do we know?
4. What does Lady Macbeth say to Macbeth?
5. What is the significance of the conversation Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have immediately after the guests leave?
6. For what reason does Macbeth mention Macduff's name?
7. What does Macbeth say he will do next?
8. What is Macbeth's frame of mind?

Act III, scene v

1. Who is Hecate, and why is she angry?

2. What is her plan for Macbeth?

Act III, scene vi

1. How can we interpret Lennox's speech?

2. What further exposition does Shakespeare offer through the Lord?

Act IV, scene i

1. Compare the witches' speech pattern with Macbeth's.
2. What effect is Shakespeare creating by altering the speech patterns like this?
3. Describe the three apparitions and the significance of each?
4. What, after this, does Macbeth resolve?
5. Pleased with the information, what one further thing does Macbeth desire to know and what is the answer he gets?
6. What is the significance of this scene?
7. What news does Lennox give to Macbeth?
8. What is Macbeth's response?
9. What is his resolve at the end of this scene? How is this different from his previous actions?

Act IV, scene ii

1. What does Shakespeare achieve with the conversation between Ross and Lady Macduff?
2. What is the purpose of the exchange between Lady Macduff and her son?
3. What effect is created by the Messenger's entering to warn Lady Macduff?
4. Why does Shakespeare show the son's murder onstage?

Act IV, scene iii

1. What additional evidence does Shakespeare give his audience that Macbeth is a tyrant?
2. What suspicion of Macduff does Malcolm voice?
3. How do Malcolm's comments about Macbeth again bring to mind the “fair is foul” theme?
4. What literary device is Shakespeare employing when Malcolm says, “Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell”?
5. What is it that makes Malcolm suspicious of Macduff’s motives?
6. How does Malcolm test Macduff’s honesty?

7. How does Macduff nearly fail the test?

8. What finally convinces Malcolm?

9. What purpose does the brief dialogue about Edward the Confessor's alleged ability to heal serve?

10. After receiving word of his family's slaughter, what does Macduff resolve?

Act V, scenes ii – vii

1. What effect is Shakespeare creating with this sequence of short scenes which follow one another so closely?
2. Whose side are Lennox, Angus, Menteith, and Caithness on?
3. What do they say about the men that Macbeth commands?
4. What is Macbeth's lament in his "my way of life
Is fallen into the sear ..." speech?
5. What is Lady Macbeth's condition, and how does Macbeth believe it could be cured?
6. What tactical strategy does Malcolm take?

7. In reaction to the news that Lady Macbeth is dead, Macbeth delivers his most famous soliloquy. What does it mean?

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Act V, scene viii

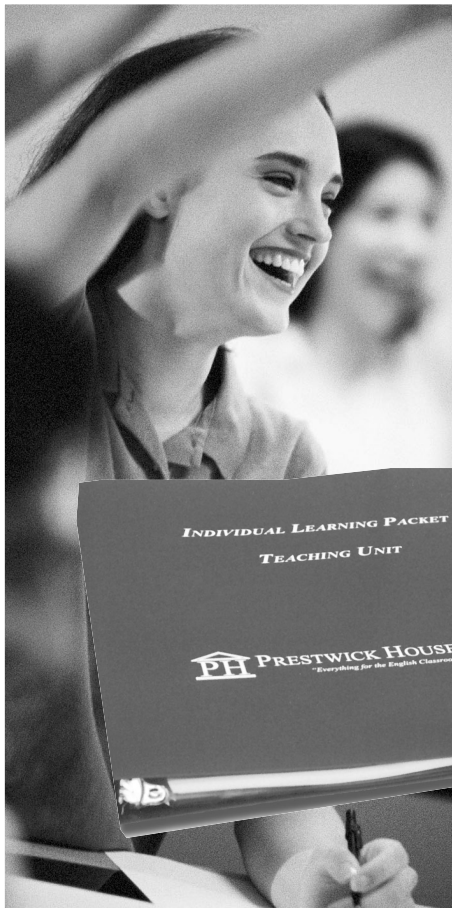
1. What information does Macduff tell Macbeth that makes him frightened (“Cow’d my better part”)?
2. What is Macbeth’s response?
3. Why does he quickly change his mind about fighting?
4. On what note does the play end?



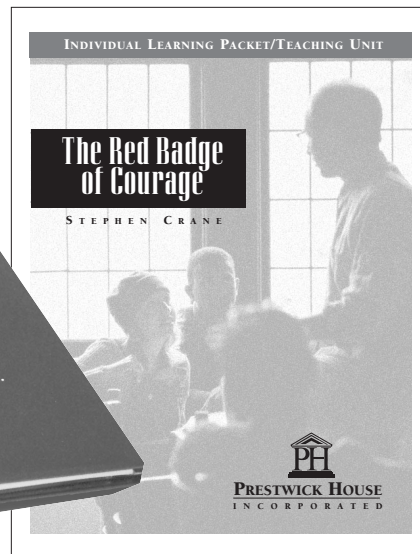
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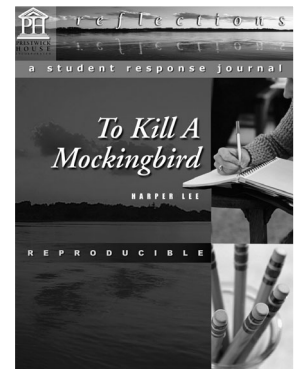
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