Macbeth

Study Guide Questions—answer as we read the play in class.

Act I

1. The first scene in the play is brief, but rich in its hints about the kind of world we shall encounter as the play unfolds. What effect would the initial setting and lighting have on the viewing audience?

2. Where and at what time of day will the witches meet again? Whom will they meet at that time and place?

3. What 2 captains are especially praised in scene ii? Why do they deserve this praise? What impressions of Macbeth’s character are created (before his actual appearance in the play) by the details of the battle accounts of the sergeant and Ross?

4. Who is exposed as a traitor in scene ii? What decision is made regarding this traitor and by whom?

5. The first words Macbeth utters in the play echo a line already spoken (I.iii.38). What significant effect does Shakespeare create through this device?

6. Observing Macbeth’s immediate reactions to the prophecies, Banquo says, “Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear/Things that do sound fair?” What reasons can you think of to explain why Macbeth is startled and apparently fearful when he hears the prophecies?

7. What predictions or prophecies do the witches make regarding Macbeth? Regarding Banquo?

8. Before the witches vanish, what is Banquo’s reaction to the witches and their prophecies?
9. Before the entrance of Ross and Angus, what is the difference between the reactions of Banquo and Macbeth to the disappearance of the witches?

10. Summarize briefly Banquo’s words of caution to Macbeth (I.iii.120-126) as both men marvel over the news Ross and Angus have brought with them.

11. What considerations or thoughts occupy Macbeth’s mind from Banquo’s words of caution until the end of the scene?

12. The most significant inkling of Macbeth’s secret thoughts comes in the soliloquy beginning, “This supernatural soliciting…” (I.iii.130-142).
   a. What is the suggestion “whose horrid image doth unfix my hair”?

   b. What moral conflict appears to exist in Macbeth’s mind? Quote and explain the lines in which this conflict is expressed.

   c. What conclusions about Macbeth’s character can you draw from this soliloquy? Consider especially the question: why does the thought of killing Duncan affect in this way the man who has killed so many others on the battlefield, notably Macdonwald?

13. To whom is Duncan referring in his speech in I.iv.12-14 before Macbeth, Banquo, Ross and Angus enter?

14. After expressing his gratitude and joy to Macbeth and Banquo, what announcement does Duncan make regarding his own heir?
15. Review Macbeth’s thinking about his future course of action as it is revealed in the 2 speeches noted below and answer the questions that follow.
   a. “If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me,/ Without my stir” (I.iii.143-144)
   b. The speech beginning, “The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step…” (I.iv.48-53)
   a. Has Macbeth’s mind remained steadfast, or has it changed? What significant event affected Macbeth’s decision in the second speech?

b. How does Macbeth seem to feel about the decision he expresses in the second soliloquy above? What words indicate that feeling?

16. As the play proceeds, the reader will find repeated imagery based on clothing, the significance of which gradually emerges more clearly.
   a. Explain the clothing metaphor in the following statement of Macbeth: “The thane of Cawdor lives; why do you dress me/In borrow’d robes?” (I.iii.108-109)

b. Explain the clothing metaphor in this statement of Banquo: “New honors come upon him/Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mold/But with the aid of use” (I.iii.144-146).

17. Knowing Macbeth’s secret hopes and thoughts, the alert audience and reader will appreciate the dramatic irony in many of Duncan’s utterances.
   a. Note Duncan’s statement about the traitor Cawdor: “There’s no art/To find the mind’s construction in the face” (I.iv.11-12). Then note the greeting to Macbeth, which immediately follows. What dramatic irony does Shakespeare provide here?

b. What further examples of dramatic irony can you find in Duncan’s remarks about Macbeth in subsequent parts of scene iv?
18. A key soliloquy in our understanding of Lady Macbeth is that which begins, “The raven himself is hoarse...” (I.v.36-52). Does the content of the soliloquy support the interpretation of Lady Macbeth as a thoroughly and unnaturally cruel, bloodthirsty woman? Do you find evidence for a different interpretation?

19. What quality of her husband does Lady Macbeth hope to use to their advantage?

20. How do Lady Macbeth’s greeting to her husband and her conversation with him (I.v.52-71) demonstrate further the differences in their characters?

21. Lady Macbeth has told Macbeth in I.v.63-64 to “look like the innocent flower,/But be the serpent under’t.” How does she carry out this role in the following scene when Duncan arrives?

22. Macbeth’s soliloquy at the start of scene vii, in which he considers again the question of murder, provides an important insight into his character, especially as it compares with Lady Macbeth’s character.
   a. What difference in his character is suggested by the fact that he engages in these thoughts?

   b. What argument for or against the murder does Macbeth consider in the first part, lines 1-12?

   c. What argument does Macbeth advance in the next section, lines 12-16?

   d. What final argument is presented in his imaginative depiction of the general effect of the crime (lines 16-25)? In what way are his fundamental feelings revealed in these lines?
e. What do the last four lines of the soliloquy tell us about Macbeth’s view of his own ambition to be king?

f. At this point in the play, what is Macbeth’s decision on the question of murder?

23. What plan has Lady Macbeth devised for the murder?

Act II
1. How would you explain the appearance of the dagger apparition in terms of Macbeth’s psychology as you know it? Comment on such specific details of that apparition as seem especially significant and revealing.

2. How would you describe Lady Macbeth’s state of mind as she awaits the outcome of the murder attempt? What is revealing in her statement, “Had he not resembled/My father as he slept, I had done’t” (II.ii.12-13).

3. Compare the attitudes of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth when he returns from the murder chamber and explains what happened. Consider these questions:
   a. What is significant about Macbeth’s preoccupation with the word “amen”?

   b. What is Macbeth implying about himself in his remarks about sleep? (II.ii.34-39)

   c. What part of the murder plan did Macbeth fail to carry out? Why does he refuse to remedy the omission?
4. At four points near the end of scene ii, the audience is made aware of a loud knocking somewhere outside the court where Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are absorbed in their crime.

a. What is the dramatic effect of the knocking at this point in the play?

b. What is the dramatic effect of Macbeth’s last words of the scene? “Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!”

5. Irony contributes to the mounting dramatic effect of the murder scene in Act II. Explain what irony may be found in each of these passages:

a. Lady Macbeth’s statement: “A little water clears us of this deed: How easy is it, then!” (II.ii.66-67)

b. Macbeth’s speech expressing to the other lords his pretended regret at the murder of Duncan (II.iii.85-90)

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**Act III**

1. Up to this point in the play, Banquo has been a man of the utmost integrity. In light of his soliloquy at the opening of Act III, would you say there is evidence of change, or does he seem to continue in his original role? Support and explain your answer.

2. In scenes i and ii we can see significant changes in Macbeth’s character and in his relationship with Lady Macbeth. What evidence of these changes do you see in each of the following instances?

   a. The decision Macbeth has come to about Banquo.

   b. Lady Macbeth”s disturbed question to Macbeth, “Why do you keep alone/Of sorriest fancies your companions making?” (III.ii.8-9)
3. Compare Lady Macbeth’s secret thoughts when she is alone (III.ii.4-7) with her remarks that immediately follow when Macbeth enters (III.ii.8-12). What do these 2 passages reveal about Lady Macbeth’s actual state of mind now that she is queen and the role she feels she must play in her relationship to her husband?

4. In scene iii the plan of Macbeth is carried out by the murderers. In what respect is it successful? Unsuccessful?

5. The pervading sense of a dark and anguished world of horror is sustained in these scenes, particularly in Macbeth’s speeches to Lady Macbeth in where he describes his own state of mind and his sense of the world he inhabits. Find 1 or 2 such passages in scene ii and comment on the key images in each passage that strike you as particularly vivid and effective.

6. One of the types of significant recurrent imagery in the play is that which deals with false appearances. Earlier examples: “Look like the innocent flower,/But be the serpent under’t” and “false face must hide what the false heart doth know.” Find and explain another example of such imagery in Macbeth’s instructions to Lady Macbeth in scene ii.

7. How do you account for the fact that Lady Macbeth seems to have so little to say in the dialogue with Macbeth after the departure of the guests?

8. Does Lennox’s first speech in scene vi show him to be a supporter or enemy of Macbeth? Support your answer by specific references to the content of his speech.

9. In general, what do we learn from the dialogue between Lennox and the lord in scene vi?
10. Compare the opening statement of Macbeth in scene iv, in which the guests are told how they are to be seated, with the lines Lady Macbeth speaks telling them how they are to depart (118-119). How does the contrast epitomize and symbolize the kind of world Macbeth has created in his kingdom?

11. Note the 2 references to the recurring image of blood at the conclusion of scene iv: “It will have blood: they say blood will have blood” (122) and “For mine own good/All causes shall give way: I am in blood/Stepp’d in so far that, should I wade no more,/Returning were as tedious as go o’er” (135-138). Explain the significance of the blood references in both passages.

Act IV

1. In what ways does Macbeth’s speech to the other witches (calling on them to respond to his questions) show the extent to which he has been driven to monomania (complete obsession with his own evil goals)?

2. What news does Lennox bring to Macbeth?

3. Note Macbeth’s soliloquy on hearing the news (IV.i.144-156)
   a. What change from Macbeth’s earlier character is indicated in the lines, “The very firstlings of my heart shall be/The firstlings of my hand”?

   b. How does the intention he expresses in the next lines about Macduff’s family indicate the extent of the change in his character?

4. In scene iii Macduff and Malcolm begin clearly to assume central roles in the play.
   a. What is the purpose of Macduff’s visit to Malcolm in England?
b. Why does Malcolm hesitate to accept Macduff’s offer of assistance?

c. How does Malcolm test Macduff’s honesty and integrity?

5. From the very first scene of the play, Shakespeare has artfully introduced a kind of juggling of opposites and contradictions to create a general sense of a world of disorder and confusion. Careful consideration of the first 3 apparitions Macbeth sees, together with consideration of the effects their speeches have on him, will reveal to the reader how this sense of confusion is sustained further at this point in the play. What possible contradictions or confusions do you find in the apparitions, their speeches, and their effects on Macbeth?

6. How does the appearance of the fourth apparition (the appearance of Banquo’s descendants) further create this effect of contradictions?

7. Scene ii contains considerable dialogue spoken by Lady Macduff and her son, much of which may not be essential to the developing action of the play. What dramatic purpose is served by the inclusion of this dialogue?

Act V

1. In the case of Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking scene, Shakespeare seems to have anticipated, centuries ago, some of the most important psychological findings and insights of our own time which deal with the symbolic interpretations of dreams and the effects of suppression of deeply buried feelings. Modern psychology holds that mental breakdown is often due to long-suppressed or repressed feelings, and that clues to the causes of such breakdowns can be found in dreams. Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking can be viewed as such a dream – a dream in motion, a nightmare being acted out. Consider the following actions of Lady Macbeth in her sleepwalking scene as described in the words of those who watch her and explain in terms of modern psychological theory why you think she performs these acts.

a. “She has light by her continually; ’tis her command” (V.i.19-20).

b. “Look, how she rubs her hands” (V.i.24).
2. There is a subtle and deeply touching dramatic irony in the content of many of the utterances of Lady Macbeth which alludes to actual statements she must have made earlier to her husband. Keeping in mind her original intention, explain the ultimate irony in her repeating the following statements during her sleepwalking scene:

   a. “Fie, my lord, a soldier and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?” (V.i.32-34)

   b. “Wash your hands; put on your nightgown; look not so pale” (V.i.53-54).

3. The first scenes of the last act have indicated that the nightmare world created by Macbeth’s first evil act is drawing to a close. The striking shifts of mood of Macbeth’s speeches are prompted by the rapid succession of events in the last scenes. Note the alternations of mood as they appear in the following speeches of Macbeth and explain these shifts in the light of the events as they occur.

   a. The speech beginning, “She should have died hereafter...” (V.v.17-29)

   b. The speech beginning, “If thou speak’st false...” (V.v.38-52)

   c. Macbeth’s successive remarks to Macduff when they finally encounter one another. (V.viii.)

4. Despite Macbeth’s manifest villainy, many readers at the close of the play retain some measure of sympathy for him. How does Shakespeare’s presentation of his thoughts and actions in the last scenes serve to make the reader retain such a measure of sympathy and respect? Refer specifically to the lines that have this effect.

5. Who is most responsible for the outcome of this play: the witches, Macbeth, or Lady Macbeth? Why?