



MACBETH DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION

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MACBETH DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION

Read the following extract from Act 1 Scene 1 of Macbeth and then answer the question that follows.

At this point in the play, the Witches about meeting Macbeth after the battle has concluded.

THE TRAGEDY OF MACBETH

1.1 Thunder and lightning. Enter three WITCHES.

1 WITCH

When shall we three meet again?

In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

2 WITCH

When the hurly-burly's done,

When the battle's lost, and won.

3 WITCH

That will be ere the set of sun. 5

1 WITCH

Where the place?

2 WITCH Upon the heath.

3 WITCH

There to meet with Macbeth.

1 WITCH

I come, Gray-Malkin.

2 WITCH Paddock calls.

3 WITCH Anon.

ALL

Fair is foul, and foul is fair, 9





Hover through the fog and filthy air. *Exeunt.*

Starting with this speech, explore how Shakespeare presents the theme of appearance versus reality.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents the theme of appearance versus reality in this extract
- how far Shakespeare presents the theme of appearance versus reality in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]
AO4 [4 marks]





MACBETH DIAGNOSTIC MODEL ESSAY

We live in a world where it seems to be increasingly difficult to distinguish truth from falsehood, especially in the political sphere. Yet, the struggle for truth is not a new one; the Early Modern Period, the era when Shakespeare was writing, was one in which the debate about appearance and reality was raging. One of the most controversial personalities at the centre of this debate was political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli who expounded the idea that the most important good to aim for was honour and glory, and that if one had to commit immoral acts to achieve it, then so be it. In the play, it could be argued that Shakespeare uses language, structure and form to reflect the topic of appearance versus reality with the purpose of encouraging us to question our values.

By constructing the opening scene with brevity and a foreboding supernatural atmosphere, Shakespeare draws our attention to the concluding paradoxical rhyming couplet: 'fair is foul and foul is fair / Hover through the fog and filthy air'. He commonly concludes scenes with rhyming couplets to emphasise key points, thus asking the audience to take notice of its meaning; in this case, Shakespeare may have used this rhyming couplet as a frame through which he wants us to view the rest of the play, encouraging us to question carefully everything we see; the Witches' rhyming couplet also suggests that this play is set in a world of antithetical values, where what seems to be good (fair), may actually be bad (foul) and vice versa. This language of equivocation also becomes a hallmark of the text. For example, when Macbeth meets the Witches, he addresses them as "imperfect Speakers", while Duncan remarks that 'There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face'. Additionally, the iambic pentameter rhythm that the thanes and king speak in often breaks down, hinting or completely revealing the characters' true intentions, such as when Lady Macbeth – completely unconscious - sleepwalks and speaks entirely in prose, while exposing all key circumstances surrounding their Machiavellian plot to kill Duncan: "tis time to do't... What need we fear?' The contrast between her fractured prose in her final scene to her usual iambic pentameter rhythm exposes the artificial nature of language, that often acts as a mask, until it 'slips' and reveals a person's true nature.

Another method Shakespeare uses to reflect the theme of appearance versus reality is by building the play on an antithetical structure which shines a light on conflicting ideas and concepts. Examples include The Witches' 'when the battle is lost and won', as well as 'fair is foul and foul is fair', hinting at a world where it is difficult to distinguish between what is morally right or wrong. For example, Macbeth is 'lauded' for his barbery in the battlefield but is hunted when he allows those same powers to manifest themselves in domestic life; he is honourable but he murders. Additionally, Macbeth is a tyrant but we sympathise with him because he is a victim of temptation, equivocal language and extreme gender expectations. This world of antithetical values is captured poignantly in act 4, scene 2 by Lady Macduff, who says: 'Whither should I fly? / I have done no harm. But I remember now / I am in this earthly world, where to do harm is often laudable, to do good sometime / Accounted dangerous folly.'

In conclusion, it should be noted that despite the mistakes the protagonists make, historically, the tragic plot structure does not simply lay all the blame at the feet of the protagonists. For example, in Renaissance England, Sir Philip Sidney suggested that tragedy is a didactic form that lays bare the corruption that rulers and statesmen may attempt to conceal, while the tragic plot structure has also often been used to criticise the values of the societies in which the protagonists live, such as violence, war (civil war in this case), kingship, extreme masculine ideals and honour. Therefore, although the protagonists must take responsibility for the decisions they make, tragedies encourage us to pity these fallen heroes because they are essentially trapped in a society whose values are almost impossible to attain or live up to. The plot of Macbeth reflects the values of Early Modern Society in which, in the words of Niccolo Machiavelli, 'the highest good to aim for was honour and glory'. This incessant pursuit of honour, which appears to be the root of Macbeth's faults, was reflected in many of the tragedies of the period, where the male characters struggle to live up to their society's standards of masculinity or carried them to the extreme, and so destroy





themselves as well as others. Yet, it is these very same extreme masculine values that Duncan and the other thanes praise in Macbeth at the beginning of the play as 'worthy', 'good' and 'valiant', because he defeats the rebel Macdonwald as well as the invading Norwegian army. Duncan's valourising of violence brings us back full circle to the Witches' concluding couplet in act 1, scene 1: 'fair is foul and foul is fair / hover though the fog and filthy air'; the play appears to be a warning not only to individuals but to entire societies to be careful of the values we expound, and to be weary of what we wish for, because the very things we think are worthy, 'good' and 'valiant' may well be the very same things that destroy us. Perhaps Shakespeare is implying that, instead, we should fight against corruption and aim for higher ideals such as truth.

