



MACBETH DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT MODEL ANSWER

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MACBETH DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT QUESTION

Read the following passage and, in a separate document such as Google Docs, answer the questions that follow.

SCENE III. Dunsinane. A room in the castle.

Enter MACBETH, Doctor, and Attendants

MACBETH

Bring me no more reports; let them fly all:
Till Birnam wood remove to Dunsinane,
I cannot taint with fear. What's the boy Malcolm?
Was he not born of woman? The spirits that know
All mortal consequences have pronounced me thus:
'Fear not, Macbeth; no man that's born of woman
Shall e'er have power upon thee.' Then fly,
false thanes,
And mingle with the English epicures:
The mind I sway by and the heart I bear
Shall never sag with doubt nor shake with fear.

Enter a Servant

The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon!
Where got'st thou that goose look?





Starting with this speech, explain how far you think Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a hero.

Write about the following:

- How Shakespeare presents Macbeth in this speech.
- How Shakespeare presents Macbeth in the play as a whole.





MACBETH DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT MODEL ANSWER

Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle (1841) once opined that “society is founded on hero worship”. The implication behind this statement is that the social climate of a time and its associated values and norms will determine which characteristics are seen as heroic and which are not. Therefore, what a modern audience in London will deem heroic may very well be different to a modern audience in Japan, for example. Likewise, a modern London audience’s views on heroism will likely be different to those of an audience in London during the Jacobean period. Consequently, the question as to how far Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a hero is extremely complex because it depends largely on how an audience watching Macbeth defines the concept of ‘heroism’. Nevertheless, there are some universal heroic characteristics, such as bravery, fierceness, high performance, hardiness, self-sacrifice, self-actualisation and strength of opinion that provide points of comparison between different times and cultures. Moreover, what Shakespeare appears to demonstrate throughout the story of Macbeth is that although many Renaissance values of heroic masculinity are applicable to all times and places, when these very same values are taken to extremes, the results can be very much the opposite of what we desire.

Thomas Elyot (c. 1490 - 1546), an English diplomat and scholar, wrote during the Renaissance that one of the qualities of ‘a man in his natural perfection is....’ that he is ‘strong in opinion’ and, at first glance of Macbeth’s speech in Act 5, Scene 3, this appears to be how Shakespeare presents him. For example, Macbeth’s first two lines, spoken in regular iambic pentameter, reflect a sense of order and stability, which is complemented by his imperatives, ‘Bring me no more reports, let them fly all’. In the first line, especially, Macbeth exhibits, perhaps, an appearance of self-assurance, which a Renaissance/Jacobean audience may have seen as admirable. However, in the second line, there is a subtle change from apparent assuredness to a more conditional state where Macbeth declares that he ‘cannot’ not fear unless (‘until’) ‘Birnam Wood removes to Dunsinane’. Additionally, the modal verb ‘cannot’ is ambiguous; Shakespeare could have used it as an equivalent to ‘will not’, thus demonstrating Macbeth’s stern resolve, however, by using the modal verb ‘cannot’ instead of ‘will not’, it appears as though Macbeth is actually trying to convince himself that he must not ‘taint with fear’, and, therefore, it seems as though he is attempting to overcome insecurities. Consequently, in the first two lines of Act 5, Scene 3, we see a fairly rapid devolution of Macbeth’s apparent sense of confidence, which makes him seem more like an average person, than a hero.

However, the most prominent indication of Macbeth’s mental fragility comes in the middle of the third line via the caesura that comes after the noun ‘fear’. The placement of the caesura could have been intended by Shakespeare as a way of indicating a disruption in Macbeth’s train of thought, triggered by the thought of ‘fear’ itself. Additionally, from the regular iambic pentameter rhythm of the first two lines, the third line breaks away from that regularity and features 11 syllables rather than 10; this also means that the third line concludes on a feminine ending, another indication of a weakness in the line and in particular, because the word ‘Malcolm’ comes at the end, it suggests that Malcolm could be a source of Macbeth’s fear. From this point onwards, we see fluctuations in the metre of the lines, some featuring 10, 11, 12 and 13 syllables, with the speech finally ending on a half rhyming couplet (‘bear / fear’) as Macbeth grapples with his conscience and fear.

In many ways, however, the fluctuations and instability of the verse in Act 5, Scene 3 can be seen as reflective of the conflicting qualities we see in Macbeth from the time we are introduced to him in Act 1, Scene 2, right up until his death in Act 5, Scene 8. His murderous journey to the throne and then his subsequent death is a torturous one, full of contradictions between his conscience as he ‘dare do all’ to ‘become a man’ in the eyes of his wife and society, while battling the ‘daggers’ of his ‘mind’ in order to do what is morally right. The strongest image we get of Macbeth is the first one, the third-person reports by the captain in Act 1, who refers to him as ‘brave Macbeth’ and glorifies





his 'bloody' feats in battle, perhaps a symbol of ideal Renaissance masculinity. However, as soon as we are introduced to Macbeth in Act 1, Scene 3, we see a man who is full of contradictions; in fact, his very first line, 'So fair and foul a day I have not seen' echoes the Witches' line in the concluding couplet of Act 1, Scene 1: 'Fair is foul and foul is fair', thus reflects the antithetical structure of the play. From this point, Shakespeare takes us deep into the mind of a man who is divided by his desire to do what is right and his desire to live up to society's standards of masculinity. Shakespeare gives us access to his internal thoughts through his various interactions with his wife, as well as his asides and soliloquies, such as his 'If it were done, when t'is done', soliloquy, his 'is this a dagger' soliloquy, his hallucinations at the banquet scene and finally, his nihilistic 'tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow' soliloquy.

In conclusion, despite the fact we are initially told by 'the bloody captain' in Act 1, Scene 2 that he is 'brave Macbeth' and 'well he deserves that name', what we see for ourselves is a man who aspires to live up to his society's extreme standards of masculinity and heroism, but can only do so through the very same violence he was 'lauded' for by the 'bleeding captain', Duncan and the other thanes. When the Witches utter their infamous line, 'fair is foul and foul is fair' near the end of Act 1, Scene 1, Shakespeare is not only introducing the antithetical structure of the play, but he also appears to be introducing to us the core concept of the play; the things we often glorify can be foul and the things we often dislike may actually be praiseworthy or in the words of Lady Macduff just before she is murdered, 'to do harm / Is often laudable, to do good sometime / Accounted dangerous folly'. Although we can see Macbeth as being entirely responsible for his own downfall, by building the play on a tragic structure, however, it seems as though Shakespeare is also placing the blame of his demise on the society he lives in. In particular, it appears that Shakespeare is pointing the finger at the extreme standards of masculine heroism and honour of the Renaissance as one of the main driving forces behind Macbeth's extreme ambitions and violence. Consequently, it is difficult to see Macbeth as a hero, despite the fact that he possesses many heroic qualities, such as bravery and self-sacrifice because his fatal flaw is that he takes these qualities to destructive extremes. As professor Brinda Charry wrote, in Renaissance drama, 'manhood was often portrayed as a complicated affair – insecure, fragile, extreme, but also admirable'. What Shakespeare appears to be demonstrating to his audience is that although we want heroes to look up to in society, we have to be careful how we define heroism and which sort of values we see as heroic, because the very same values we hold could end up being the means of destruction not only for the ones we put on a pedestal, but for the very societies we hold dear as well.

ALTERNATIVE CONCLUSION:

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 or fate, such as being controlled by supernatural powers. 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 (not supernatural soliciting), 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 less of a focus on the powers of the supernatural and more of a warning to individuals as well as 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 see past appearances and personal desire, and learn to value higher ideals such as truth.

