

Tragedy and Comedy
Instructor: Paul Hawkins

Essay #2: Macbeth

THE TASK:

Defend, refute, or rephrase ONE of the following theses about the play (of course, if you rephrase, your essay should defend your rephrasing).

1. “The Contrast between Grey and Red in the play is the contrast between a wasteland world* of death (Grey) and a world of passionate life and death (Red) that is present both within the world of the play and its central character.”
2. “Macbeth is a strange combination of killing machine and innocent; he suffers so much from killing Duncan because it’s a loss of innocence; but as well, he tries to murder innocence wherever he can.”
3. “At first, Lady Macbeth is in charge, while perhaps being ‘all talk no action,’ needing Macbeth to do the killing; Macbeth takes charge once he’s king, and they start to separate; in the end, Lady Macbeth tries to forget and goes mad, while Macbeth remembers and stays sane*.”

FORM:

- You could write it as an academic essay like Essay #1 (intro + 3-4 body paragraphs)
- You could write it as a letter, and here are some further choices
 - from you to Shakespeare (or to me)
 - from you to Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, or other character in the play
 - from _____ (character) to _____ (character) – from Lady M to M shortly before her suicide? M to Lady M, after her death?

HOW TO PROCEED:

--look at your freewrites, and see if any of the ideas you’ve already developed might be an argument for or against one of these theses; look at the freewrite questions, to remind yourself of places in the play relevant to the different theses

--3-4 arguments (each developed in a body paragraph, with **minimum 3 quotations**) are quite sufficient
--your aim should be to integrate a **minimum 9 well-chosen quotations** from different parts of the play within the essay

--your aim should be **authentically** to tell me **what you think**--not what I think, or what Sparks notes or Northrop Frye thinks--**within the context of our discussion of the play**. If you really didn’t think while we were discussing the play, you can start now by reviewing the freewrite questions, because they review most of the major points we discussed.

--Use an * to identify any idea that you draw from a secondary source, with a note telling what the asterisk means (e.g., “* = Sparks notes). **My * above:** wasteland world; Lady M mad, M sane = Harold Bloom.

Acts 1-2

1. You heard what I had to say about the importance of “rapt” as a description of Macbeth. Recognizing that our book defines the word as “transported,” and that we have said things like “transfixed,” “obsessed,” as possible connotations, what does your imagination tell you the word means in the context of the character and play? (n.b., the word comes from the Latin *rapere*, to seize; hence, it would literally mean “to be seized by something,” e.g., an idea or suggestion) Do you agree that it’s a significant key to the character of Macbeth? Why or why not?
2. On the basis of the impression she creates in Act 1, is Lady Macbeth the kind of woman you’d like to marry OR that you’d like someone you love to marry? Why or why not? (please answer based on the impression you get of her in Acts 1 & 2)
3. The last question about 1.7 on the study questions for Act 1 scenes 4-7 is a damn good free-write question.
4. Do you agree with the “colour scheme” of Grey, Red, and Black that we saw emerge in our discussion of Act 1? Do you see other colours? How do you interpret the colour scheme of the play?
5. Would Macbeth have done the deed without Lady Macbeth’s encouragement? Why or why not, based on the impression created by Acts 1 & 2?
6. Is Lady Macbeth all talk and no action?
7. We had a neat contrast of the two on the board:

What does this make you think about this couple? (“Co-dependent” was suggested in at least one class; there’s also the at-least-partial reversal of gender role – I hope that the contrast is striking enough that you’ll be inspired to make some response of your own.)

8. We’d explored the significance of Macbeth not being able to say “Amen,” and how this then launches him into the “sleep no more” section. Offer your own interpretation of what is going on in his head through this section.
9. How do Macbeth and Lady Macbeth compare with Orestes after the killing of Clytemnestra (or possibly Clytemnestra after killing Agamemnon)?
10. Why does Lady Macbeth faint in 2.3? (we explored some possibilities in class – weigh in on this for yourself) Perhaps expand this into a general reflection on what is going on in her head in 2.2 and 2.3, since some of the above questions do the same for Macbeth.
11. In 1.5, Lady Macbeth reveals that she has had a child (“I have given suck”), but it doesn’t seem to have been Macbeth’s. This has led at least some commentators to speculate that Macbeth is her second husband, and perhaps even that they married past her childbearing years (suggesting that they are both older – late 40s or even 50s). If they are an older, childless couple –does

this in some way explain why they might be motivated to become murderers (e.g., they hate life because they don’t have kids themselves)? What do you think of these speculations? Feel free to offer your own speculations, while indicating what in the play might support them.

12. Closely related to this is the question of Macbeth’s relationship to innocence: in 2.2, he refers to sleep as innocence; in the soliloquy that opens 1.7, he refers to pity as a “naked new-born babe” and as something that could hold him back from murdering Duncan. Can you think of any other references to innocence in the play? Does Macbeth speak of innocence because he is in the act of losing his innocence as the play unfolds; or is he faking it, since he’s been a killing machine for a long time and so is hardly innocent at the start of the play?

Acts 3-5

1. Who is the third murderer of Banquo (in your view), OR what is the effect of adding the mysterious third murderer? (3.3)
2. How does Macbeth use some of the same tactics to persuade the murderers to kill Banquo that Lady Macbeth used with him to kill Duncan? (3.1)
3. Is Macbeth a hesitator (to kill Banquo, specifically), or is that a false idea? Does Macbeth have any goodness left at this point in the play? (3.1)
4. “Macbeth corrupts the world by first corrupting himself.” Do you agree or disagree, based on your reading of the play, especially Acts 3-5? If you agree, what particular actions (or lines) really show his corruption of himself?
5. How do Macbeth and Lady Macbeth change in Acts 3-5? (Macbeth takes charge, keeps Lady M out of the loop; Lady M goes mad; Macbeth becomes zombie-like – these are some of the possible answers we discussed in class.)
6. “I am in blood / Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o’er” (3.4. 168-70). We discussed these lines in class, and the note of lifelessness conveyed by “tedious.” Do you agree or disagree? In what way do you see this line as key? (Interpret it for yourself; you might find it an example of M’s being corrupt that relates to question #4 above; I certainly see it as a key line that more or less determines M’s path through the rest of the play.)
7. Given that Macbeth is a super-violent person, why is he so bothered (e.g., by Duncan’s and now Banquo’s murder such that he sees Banquo’s ghost)? (This question could be key to M’s whole character.)
8. How do Banquo (at opening of 2.1 and 3.1) and Malcolm (in 4.3) contrast with Macbeth?
9. What is Macbeth’s attitude towards the witches in 4.1, and how is this a change from his earlier attitude toward them?
10. “Lady Macbeth tries to forget and goes mad; Macbeth remembers his actions, and while he suffers, he stays sane.” Do you agree or disagree? (Act 5)
11. “Tragedy is being in time.” “Tragedy is a collision of heroic human energy with death, of the infinite and the finite.” How and where do you see any of these Northrop Frye ideas in Act 5?
12. Given Macbeth’s reaction to Lady Macbeth’s death (5.5), did he really love her? Is he grieving, or is he already spiritually dead? How does what Macbeth says in the “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow” soliloquy fit its context at this moment in the play?