

GOOD AND EVIL IN MACBETH



UNIT 2

Spiritual and Moral

Evil and its development in the Macbeths is a major theme of the play. It has three distinct sources...

- other people (Lady Macbeth)
- Macbeth's own uncontrolled desires (ambition)
- the supernatural element (the Witches)

There is a Christian tradition that describes these as 'the world, the flesh and the devil'. The 'good' element is less clearly defined. The 'good' characters seem to be losing ground halfway through the play but right is seen to triumph in the end, when Malcolm is made king.

A study of contrasts in the play reveals that they often overlap or become confused. One approach to good and evil – explored here – is that evil can be a perversion or distortion of good.

2.1 The Hated Criminal

This can be done as an oral exercise before studying the play.

Activities 2.2-4

These are designed primarily as oral exercises. They take an overall view of good/evil. While they assume some knowledge, they can be used before the play has been studied in detail.

2.5-8 The 'Good' Characters

A major oral activity, this really needs to be done as a whole. It also offers opportunities for oral assessment. If pupils are to attempt the written assignment in 2.17, they will need to keep notes of the findings of all the groups. For suggested responses, see the next page.

2.9 Good and Evil – Not So Easy to Separate?

This could be used as a self-contained homework. Pupils may write or draw on the sheet.

2.10 The Structure of the Play

The selective summary may be useful in the early stages of study. It could be done as a sequencing exercise on a word-processor.

2.11 Macbeth: the Death of a Conscience

This will help with the written assignment 2.18.

Aims

- To examine why the characters behave as they do.
- To evaluate what we mean by the terms 'good' and 'evil'.



PLEASE NOTE!

This unit inevitably overlaps with others, especially Unit 5, *Supernatural Influences*, Unit 6, *Macbeth's Moral Decline*, and Unit 8, *The Imagery in Macbeth*.

2.5-8 The 'Good' Characters

Details that could come out of pupils' assignments...

Duncan

Duncan's weak points are largely to do with not being quite the man for the job...

- He is fair and gracious, but too trusting, and not a man of action. He has to rely on others to lead his army.
- His fulsome gratitude to Macbeth and Banquo for doing this seems over-emotional (Act I scene 3, lines 14-38).
- His timing, when announcing that his son is to succeed him, is unfortunate.
- He is not a reliable judge of character: he had complete trust in the Thane of Cawdor.
- He shows the same weakness when he visits Macbeth's castle.

His actions reveal the weaknesses as well as the strengths of his character. What others say about him, just before and after his death, emphasises his virtues to contrast with Macbeth's villainies.

Banquo

Consider the following characteristics of Banquo...

- He is brave (Act I scene 2, line 37; Act III scene 1, line 52).
- He is not seeking personal glory (Act I scene 4, lines 29-33).
- He seems to have been praising Macbeth to Duncan (Act I scene 4, lines 54ff).
- He recognises the evil represented by the witches, and successfully struggles to resist the thoughts that they arouse in him (see Unit 5, *Supernatural Influences*). But this is not the whole story.
- He seems to be partly blinded by the possibility that he, too, might gain something of what the witches promise (Act III scene 1, lines 3-10).
- He twice tries to talk to Macbeth about the 'instruments of darkness', but he allows

Macbeth to close down the conversation.

- He says he suspects Macbeth (Act III scene 1, lines 1-3), yet he does nothing about it.

Is it fair to read anything into his low-key response to the news of Duncan's death (Act II scene 3, lines 81-83)? He had earlier met Macbeth in the courtyard late at night: was he expecting something to happen?

Malcolm

He and his brother flee for their own safety. His positive points develop considerably during the play...

- He has learnt not to be too trusting. Macduff has to convince him of his sincerity in Act IV scene 3.
- He has a clear idea of what a good king should and should not be. His own account of himself is in Act IV scene 3, lines 125-137.
- He leads the combined army to victory, thus – unlike Duncan – taking an active part in fighting against evil.
- At the end, he mentions putting right specific wrongs, and depending on the 'grace of Grace'.

Macduff praises both his parents in Act IV scene 3, lines 108-112. Edward the Confessor, who shown to be able to heal political and social diseases as well as physical infirmities, is Malcolm's uncle.

Macduff

- He is a loyal and reliable subject of Duncan, entrusted to call him early.
- He recognises Macbeth's guilt from the start and does something about it. He refuses to go to Macbeth's coronation and instead flees to England to help Malcolm.
- When Ross joins him and Malcolm in Act IV scene 3, he asks about Scotland before he asks about his family. What can we read into this?
- His loyalty to his country means that he can't protect his family. They pay the price, and thus Macduff becomes more personally involved, and the direct instrument of justice.

2.12 Euphemism Spotting

This is a short exercise designed to show how Macbeth uses language to disguise the enormity of what he is contemplating. The euphemisms are:

Passage a)

- 'that suggestion'
- 'horrid image'
- 'horrible imaginings'
- 'my thought'
- 'surmise'
- 'what is not'

Passage b)

- 'it'
- 'tis'
- 'assassination'
- 'his surcease'
- 'this blow'
- 'these cases'
- 'ingredience'
- 'the deed'
- 'bear the knife'
- 'taking-off'
- 'horrid deed'
- 'my intent'

2.13-14 Conscience as a Guide

These are more general oral tasks best attempted after reading the play. They need definite teacher input.

2.16 Choosing Evil

This written task assumes that the pupil has studied more widely than just this unit. Further help on the Macbeths and Banquo can be found in Units 3 and 5.

GOOD AND EVIL IN MACBETH



UNIT 2

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY

2.1 The Hated Criminal

In small groups, work out a story in which a famous national figure becomes a hated criminal. Improvise one or more play scenes from this story. (Be prepared to briefly tell the class the rest of the story.) To help you:

- Why, exactly, is your central character famous?
- Can their talents be misused or exploited?
- What are their weak points? Is there any chance that some weakness of character may let them down?
- What does your main character really want out of life? How far will they go to get it?
- What are the chief influences on them?
- How much resistance do they put up when they are tempted to do what is wrong? How soon do they recognise it is wrong?
- On the downward slope, what is the effect on their personal life?
- How is their relationship with their friends affected?
- How does it all end?

2.2 Degrees of Badness

In this section, we look at the question of how bad is 'bad'? We pay particular attention to words and their meanings.

a) In pairs, consider the list of words at the top of the next column. They all mean 'bad' – more or less. Try to put them in some sort of order of badness, starting with the least bad.



- b) Make a list of words that mean 'good' – more or less. A thesaurus will be useful here. Put them in order, as before.
- c) Decide which two or three words best describe Macbeth at the beginning of the play. Then decide which two or three words best describe him at the end. Refer to the text to support your answers.
- d) Think of some other examples of actions which deserve to be called by the adjectives in both your groups for a) and b) above. Be prepared to defend your choices to the rest of the class.

2.3 Goodness in *Macbeth*

- a) What 'good' characters can you identify in *Macbeth*? Look for those whose conduct is good, or who are definitely on the side of good.
- b) Can you identify any 'good' characteristics in the 'evil' characters?

2.4 Sources of Evil

a) Consider the possible sources of evil in the play under the following headings. The references give a starting point.

- from outside: supernatural (I.3.129-141)

- from outside : human (I.5.38-52, I.7.35ff)
- from within: (I.7.25-28)

b) Are there also sources of good in the play? How much space is given to them? What does this show about the emphasis of *Macbeth*?

The 'Good' Characters

In small groups, work on one of the following. Take notes and be prepared to share your findings with the rest of the class. Remember that you need to look at what your character says and does, and also consider what others say about him.

2.5 Duncan

(See I.2; I.4.1-58; I.6. also I.7.16-20; IV.3.109.)

- How do we know that he is good? Mention everything possible.
- What are his weak points? (If stuck, start with I.4.9-12)
- Look again at what others say about him just before and after his death. Why do you think that we are left with this final view of him?

2.6 Banquo

(See I.2.34-38; I.3; I.4; II.1.1-30; III.1.1-41, 50-58)

- What good characteristics does Banquo possess?
- What weak points does he have?

2.7 Malcolm

- Why does he flee to England instead of taking action against Macbeth? (II.3.138-136)
- Re-read IV.3. What good things do we learn about him?
- How is he different from Duncan in the rest of the play?

- Re-read his speech at the end. What things mentioned here indicate that better times are in store for Scotland?

2.8 Macduff

- Look at the little we learn about him at the start of the play, in his reaction to Duncan's death (II.3.59-62), and his response when Macbeth says he killed the guards (II.3.100). What do we learn about him?
- What shows that he was suspicious of Macbeth from the start? (II.4.35-36, III.4.128-29, III.6.24-44) Banquo is suspicious too – how is Macduff different?
- Consider the balance he appears to hold between the needs of his country and the need of his family (for example, IV.1.161ff).
- How and why does he become more personally involved? Consider the language of his reaction to the death of his family (IV.3.227-30).

2.9 Good and Evil – Not So Easy to Separate?

Fill in the spaces below with appropriate words or sketches. You may wish to include more than one incident.

a) Macbeth wants to defend his country against vicious, mercenary invaders. But....

b) Macbeth wants to please his wife (or possibly just a quiet life). But...

c) Macbeth is ambitious. But...

d) Lady Macbeth wants her husband to do well, but...

e) Banquo is suspicious of Macbeth, but...

f) Macduff wants to defend his country from oppression and evil, but...

2.10 The Structure of the Play

At the start of the play, Duncan is a good king who rules without oppression. In his final speech, Malcolm promises to restore order and justice. But most of the play is about Macbeth.

Put the following statements in the right order. Treat each act separately. Then find a quotation to support each statement marked *.

Act I

Macbeth is rewarded.

Scotland is ruled by a good man.*

Macbeth takes a leading role in defeating the enemy.

The enemy are vicious marauders.

Act I / II

Macbeth admits that Duncan is a good king. There is no good reason to kill him.

His conscience is most uneasy.*

The Witches meet Macbeth and stir up evil desires in him.

Macbeth decides to wait and see how things turn out.

He is finally pushed into killing Duncan by his wife.

Macbeth regrets what he has done.*

He starts to think about killing the king.

Act III

Macbeth acknowledges that Banquo is a good and brave man.*

His conscience is most uneasy.*

He can't trust the Scottish lords.

Macbeth starts to fear that Banquo knows too much.

He doesn't tell his wife, but knows that she will approve.

He feels that he has nothing to lose by further evil deeds.*

Macbeth has Banquo murdered.

Act IV

Lady Macduff and her children are killed.

Macbeth's fears about Macduff are reinforced.

He decides to kill Macduff's family, since he can't reach Macduff himself.*

Macbeth visits the Witches.*

He gets the idea that no ordinary person can kill him.

He decides that in future he will act without thinking.

Act V

Macbeth continues to trust in false promises.*

He hears of his wife's death, and decides that life is not worth living.*

Macbeth is determined to fight to the end.

Malcolm promises to restore peace and justice to Scotland.*

He finally realises that the Witches have misled him.

Macbeth is killed by Macduff.

Lady Macbeth takes her own life.

Macbeth cannot enjoy his position. No one honours or trusts him.*

2.11 Macbeth: the Death of a Conscience

The quotations given here tell a story. Your task is to fill in some of the gaps, by explaining what is happening in each case.

'valour's minion'
'noble Macbeth' (I.2)

'Let not light see my black and deep desires (I.4.51)

'I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition...' (I.7.25-27)
'We will proceed no further in this business' (I.7.31)

'I am settled, and bend up
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.' (I.7.79-80)

'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand?' (II.2.63-64)

'There is none but he
'Whose being I do fear...' (III.1.56)
'Banquo, thy soul's flight
If it find heaven, must find it out tonight.'
(III.1.140-41)

'Better be with the dead...
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy' (III.2.19-21)

'I am in blood
Stepped in so far that should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er' (III.4.136-38)

'From this moment
The very firstlings of my heart shall be
The firstlings of my hand' (IV.1.145-47)

'I will not yield...'
'...I will try the last.' (V.8.27-32)

2.12 Euphemism Spotting

Macbeth uses a number of euphemisms when he is contemplating murder. Identify the euphemisms in the following passages. In passage b), replace them with something more definite, such as 'killing Duncan'.

a) Look for up to six euphemisms in this passage...

I am Thane of Cawdor.

If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is,
But what is not. (I.3.132-41)

b) Look for twelve euphemisms in this passage...

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly. If th'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 judgement here that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which being taught, return
To plague th'inventor. This even-handed justice
Commends th'ingredience of our poisoned 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 newborn 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 th'other – (I.7.1-25)



2.13 Conscience as a Guide

Consider how far your conscience can be a guide to what is right. Where do we get our ideas of what is right and wrong from?

a) Is your conscience always right? Even if it isn't, is it likely to indicate the 'best' course of action for you? What reasons might you have for doing what your conscience tells you is not right? Are some reasons better than others?

b) How reliable was Macbeth's conscience at the start of the play? Can you identify stages in its deterioration? What happens in the end?

2.14 To Think About...

a) In the play, evil is always present. Is this true in our lives?

b) Why do you think the Witches target Macbeth? Are some people more vulnerable than others?

c) At the end of the Polanski film *Macbeth*, Donald Bain appears to be visiting the Witches' cave. What point is being made here? How is this different from the ending of the play as Shakespeare wrote it?

See Unit 7 for more detail.

ASSIGNMENT LIST

2.15 Scriptwriting

Write up your script for Activity 2.4. Remember to include stage directions.



2.16 Choosing Evil

Macbeth is the only one of Shakespeare's tragic heroes who deliberately chooses evil. Show how he resists what he knows is right, and the effect that this has on him and other people. Compare him in this respect with Lady Macbeth, and contrast him with Banquo. Unit 3 will help you with this question.

2.17 Failure of Goodness Leads to Evil

The eighteenth-century politician Edmund Burke is reputed to have said:

It is necessary only for the good man to do nothing for evil to triumph.

How far is this true in *Macbeth*?

Alternatively: the weaknesses of the 'good' characters in the play make possible the temporary triumph of evil. Illustrate this statement with detailed reference to the play.

2.18 Killing the Conscience

Trace the steps by which Macbeth opposes and destroys his conscience.

2.19 Macbeth's Greatness?

Is there any sense in which Macbeth is a greater man than the 'good' characters?



Question 2.13:

Unit 6 will help you with this question.