

QUESTIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY



UNIT 3

The aim of this unit is to explore the theme of responsibility in *Macbeth* by examining the related issues of temptation, guilt and blame. Students are encouraged to let the text do the work in determining how to apportion responsibility and, in particular, to consider the moral questions raised.

Spiritual and Moral

To be tempted is not to be at fault; to yield to that temptation is. It may be helpful to point students to the statement in the Bible (in James chapter 1 verses 12-15), concerning the nature and source of temptation.

Shakespeare may also have had in mind the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. See Matthew chapter 4 verses 1-11, or Luke chapter 4 verses 1-13. Just over half a century after Shakespeare, Milton made this biblical encounter the subject of his *Paradise Regained*.

As Macbeth contemplates the full horror of what he has done he can find no balm for his guilt-ridden conscience:

But wherefore could I not pronounce 'Amen'?
I had most need of blessing and 'Amen'
Stuck in my throat. (II.2.34-36)

An interesting comparison can be made with Psalm 51, where King David, also full of horror at murder (and adultery) that he has committed, nevertheless finds forgiveness as he confesses to God and begs him for mercy. David obtains the blessing that eludes Macbeth, who moves inexorably towards his fate like the hero of a Greek tragedy.

Banquo's response to temptation

Students are often asked to contrast Macbeth and Banquo. This section seeks to address an aspect of the question that is often neglected: their differing response to temptation. Banquo's warnings to Macbeth regarding the Witches are all the more telling as Banquo has himself felt the pull of evil.

Macbeth Considers His Responsibilities

In assessing degrees of responsibility and blame it is always helpful to see what Macbeth himself has to say on the subject. Like Dr Faustus in Marlowe's play, who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for twenty-four years of knowledge and power, Macbeth is in no doubt that what he is doing is wrong and that it has placed him under the judgement of God (for example, see Act III scene 1, lines 66-70).

Aims

- To assess who is to blame for the wrong-doing in the play.
- To explore the themes of temptation, guilt and accountability.

A Note on Ambiguity

Responsibility is, of course, an ambiguous concept in the play – as Macbeth considers in Act I scene 7. He is both aware of his responsibilities towards Duncan and aware that to agree to murder Duncan is to accept responsibility for the crime. This ambiguity is explored elsewhere in the play – for example, Macduff, Malcolm, Donaldbain.

QUESTIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY



UNIT 3

TEMPTATION

Macbeth and the Witches – is Macbeth responsible for his own actions or is he just a pawn in their hands? From the time when he first meets the Witches (I.3) Macbeth is wrestling with the temptation that they place in front of him.

3.1 The Meeting

Act I scene 3, lines 1-35. Look carefully at these lines. The Witches are preparing a charm in readiness for their encounter with Macbeth.

a) In what ways does the First Witch's treatment of the sailor and his wife prepare us for the events to follow? Note the references to loss of sleep and being under a curse ('a man forbid').

Lines 36-86: they meet Macbeth and Banquo.

b) What train of thought do the greetings of the Witches set off in Macbeth?

c) How has the audience been prepared for this in the previous scene? Note: We have to examine Macbeth's immediate response, as reported by Banquo (lines 49 -55), and his comments as he asks the Witches 'Tell me more' (lines 68 -76) to understand what is taking place here.

Lines 87-125: 'Can the devil speak true?' Ross and Angus bring Macbeth the news that he has been given the title Thane of Cawdor – the first

'prophecy' made by the Witches is immediately fulfilled.

d) How does Banquo react? Note: What Banquo says in lines 121-125 is very significant:

But 'tis strange,
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths;
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence.

e) Of what is he warning Macbeth? Explain in your own words.

Lines 126-155: Macbeth struggles with temptation.

f) What temptation forms in his mind? Note down all the references that suggest what he is thinking. Note: Macbeth has done nothing wrong at this stage.

g) How does he seek to overcome the temptation? Does he succeed? See lines 141-146 but look on to I.4.48-53 before you answer.

BANQUO'S RESPONSE TO TEMPTATION

One 'explanation' of the Witches is that they are visual representations of evil thoughts in the minds of those to whom they appear – as Macbeth himself puts it, speaking of the 'air-drawn dagger' that shows him the way to the room in which he is to murder Duncan:



Question 3.1: See Unit 5 for a more detailed consideration of the Witches.

a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppress'd brain. (II.1.38-39)

While we may consider that this doesn't entirely account for the 'Weird Sisters', the link between what they say and the evil thoughts in the minds of those who see them is surely intentional on Shakespeare's part.

3.2 Banquo and the Witches

In Act II scene 1, lines 7-9, Banquo confesses to 'cursed thoughts' and asks the heaven to protect him from them. He also has been tempted by the prophecies of the Witches.

- What sort of temptations might have gone through Banquo's mind? Note: the main evidence is in I.3 – especially lines 52-60, 81-84, 116-119.
- But see also I.4.29-30*ff*. What might Banquo be thinking here?
- In II.1.1-30, what 'cursed thoughts' does Banquo want restrained?
- III.1.1-10: Banquo is still facing temptation – to do what? Yet from the outset, he is in no doubt as to the source of these temptations.
- What is Banquo's assessment of the Witches and their messages? This does not mean they are any the less true. Look back over the references above, and additionally: I.3.105, 119-125.
- How does Banquo's reaction to temptation differ from Macbeth's?

MACBETH CONSIDERS HIS RESPONSIBILITIES

Act I scene 7. Macbeth is very aware of his responsibilities towards Duncan:

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. (I.7.12-16)

Here Macbeth thinks about his responsibilities towards Duncan:

- as his cousin
- as his subject
- as his host

3.3 Why is it Wrong?

For each of these, explain why Macbeth thinks it would be wrong to harm the king.

3.4 The Soliloquy

Now read the whole soliloquy from which these lines are taken (I.7 1-28).

- Make a list of all the reasons Macbeth gives why it would be wrong to kill Duncan.
- Which do you think is the strongest?
- Can you think of any other reasons he might have considered?
- Macbeth himself can think of only one reason why he might nevertheless commit the crime. What is that? (See lines 25-28 -one word in line 27 supplies the answer!)

3.5 Macbeth Decides

Read the rest of the scene.

- What does Macbeth decide to do as a result of his deliberations? (See line 31).
- Why does he change his mind?
- What, from his closing remarks (lines 80-83), do you consider is Macbeth's state of mind as the fatal hour of the murder approaches? How does he regard the action he is about to take? Sum up his feelings at this point.

3.6 Persuading Macbeth

Suppose you had been there, overhearing all that has been said (and thought) in this scene. How would you persuade Macbeth not to proceed with the murder of Duncan?

3.7 Macbeth is Persuaded

In pairs, one taking the part of Macbeth, act out a conversation in which he is persuaded to follow the advice of his conscience after all.

GUILT

Act II scene 2. As Macbeth assesses what he has done he is in no doubt that he is responsible for Duncan’s murder. In this scene he struggles to give expression to his feelings of guilt

3.8 Admissions of Guilt

How many admissions of guilt can you find in Macbeth’s lines in this scene?

- a) How does he refer to ‘the deed’?
- b) How does he refer to himself?
- c) Why could he not say ‘Amen’?
- d) Why has he most need of God’s blessing? What would that obtain for him?
- e) He mentions ‘sleep’ ten times between line 23 (‘This is a sorry sight’), and line 53 (‘I’ll go no more’). Of what exactly does he feel he has been deprived? Why?
- f) How does Lady Macbeth respond to her husband’s guilty feelings?
- g) Why will Macbeth ‘go no more’?
- h) Why does she say she will smear the grooms’ faces with blood?
- i) In how many ways does Macbeth express his desire that ‘What’s done could be undone’?
- j) While his wife considers that ‘A little water clears us of this deed’, how does Macbeth feel about it?

Lady Macbeth has tried to hide her guilt, to shift it on to others (note her pun on ‘gild’ and ‘guilt’ lines 59-60) and to wash it away. Yet, one day it will catch up with her!

See V.1 – where she re-enacts this very scene, V.3.39-40 – where the doctor comments on her guilty behaviour.

3.9 Lady Macbeth’s Guilt

By careful comparison of II.2 and V.1, note down all you can of the guilt that Lady Macbeth feels on behalf of her husband and herself and tries to suppress.

RESPONSIBILITY AND BLAME

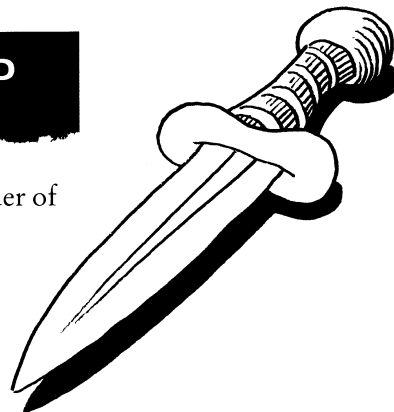
Who is responsible for the murder of Duncan? The Witches? Lady Macbeth? Macbeth?

Before you answer, consider carefully the difference between responsibility and blame.

A good example of what that difference involves can be seen in the murder of Lady Macduff and her children (IV.2). Macbeth is clearly responsible for that crime. It is precisely what he says to Macduff when they finally confront each other:

‘Of all men else I have avoided thee:
But get thee back, my soul is too much
charg’d
With blood of thine already.’ (V.8.4-6)

But Macduff, in leaving his family at the mercy of Macbeth must take some of the blame for their deaths. Indeed, when he hears the news of their murder, Macduff blames himself for what has happened to them:



Ross:

Your castle is surpris’d; your wife, and babes,
Savagely slaughter’d: to relate the manner,
Were, on the quarry of these murder’d deer,
To add the death of you...

Macduff:

My children too?

Ross:

Wife, children, servants, all
That could be found.

Macduff:

And I must be from thence?

(IV.3.204-207, 211-212)

Macduff understands too that his family has been slaughtered because of his opposition to Macbeth, which gives further reason for him to blame himself:

Sinful Macduff!
They were all struck for thee. Naught that I am,
Not for their own demerits, but for mine,
Fell slaughter on their souls. (IV.3.224-227)

Unquestionably, Macduff must take some of the blame for what has happened, but it would be wrong to hold him responsible.

3.10 Degrees of Blame

Bearing in mind the difference between blame and responsibility, draw up a chart showing the degree of blame to be attached to the following for the murder of Duncan:

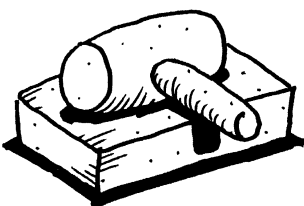
- the Witches
- Lady Macbeth
- Macbeth

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

3.11 Macbeth on trial

You will need a Prosecuting Council and a Defence Council, who will need to establish the evidence and arrange who they are going to call as witnesses. You will need someone to be Macbeth (unless you agree to try him in his absence). Appoint your teacher Judge and the rest of the class Members of the Jury.

You will need to decide on the rules. For example: Has Macbeth been presumed to survive – taken captive by Macduff perhaps; or is he being tried in his absence, after his death even – perhaps by Malcolm's order as he wants to establish clearly that it was Macbeth who was responsible for Duncan's murder and subsequent crimes?



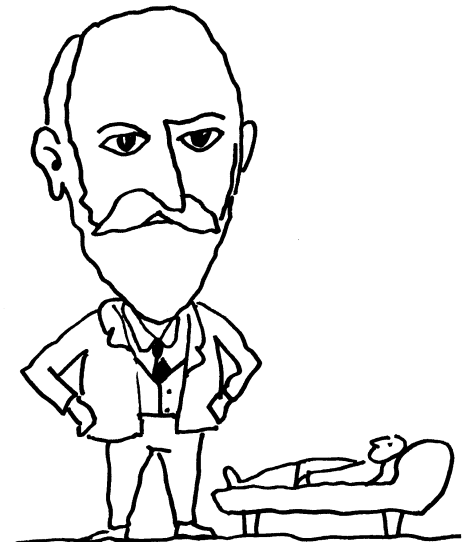
Can anyone from any point in the play be called as witness? (What about Banquo?)

One way round this is to make the whole trial a dream sequence (like that of Richard III on the night before the Battle of Bosworth Field – *Richard III* Act V scene 3).

3.12 At the Psychiatrist's

You will need someone to be Macbeth (or Lady Macbeth) and your teacher to play the part of the Psychiatrist.

Macbeth (or Lady Macbeth if you prefer) has been referred to the psychiatrist suffering from anxiety / depression. The task of the psychiatrist is by psycho-therapy to draw out the guilt feelings from the patient as he makes a full confession.



Note: the point of this exercise is to establish that Macbeth is guilty and no amount of covering up or excusing, whether by Macbeth himself, Lady Macbeth or by a psychiatrist, will remove that.

You will find Macbeth's soliloquies, those in Act V especially, provide ample evidence of his state of mind, as does Act V scene 1 of Lady Macbeth's.

3.13 Detective Work

You are a detective investigating the murder of Duncan. Using the text as much as possible, piece together the evidence against each suspect in turn.

FURTHER WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

3.14 Weighing it Up

Re-read Act I scene 3, lines 129-140.

Either: write a story which begins with someone who is tempted to do wrong weighing up the arguments for and against.

This must be a reasonable length. You may want to go back and make clear how it all started. Remember that you need to create a central character who is believable. The end of the story is up to you.

Or: write a monologue showing in detail the thoughts that go through the mind of a person who is weighing up whether or not to do something that he or she knows to be wrong.

You will need to have a clear idea of the situation in your own mind. You need not tell the reader about it directly but something of it is likely to come out in what you say.

3.15 Story-Writing

Write a story which includes the first two items in the list below, and at least two of the others:

- a person with a weakness
- a strong person who influences this person where he/she is weakest
- a ghost
- someone who walks in his/her sleep
- strange happenings in the night
- a murder

3.16 Business Rivals

Write a modern version of the play up to the murder of Duncan in which Macbeth and Banquo are business rivals. You must decide what you will do about the Witches but need to ensure that your story involves temptation and suitably contrasts the two characters.

3.17 Macbeth's Obituary

Write an obituary for Macbeth stressing his character as it is presented at the beginning of the play and the changes that take place to it during the action.



Question 3.16:

Unit 7 will help you with this question.



Question 3.17:

Unit 6 will give you some ideas for this question.