

# MACBETH'S MORAL DECLINE



## UNIT 6

### Spiritual and Moral

This unit looks at the moral questions raised by the portrayal of the character of Macbeth. Its aim is to guide students to an understanding of these issues by looking at an involvement with evil that develops from sensitive aversion, through horrified awareness of what has been perpetrated and its moral consequences, to hardened commitment to what has become inevitable.

### Using This Unit

The intention is to encourage students to think through the issues, first by a thorough examination of the text and then by a close analysis of the moral issues themselves.

Many of the suggested activities and assignments contained within the body of the unit can be approached at more than one level, although faithfulness to the text has always been the first consideration.

### The Contrast

In the space of 'the two hours traffic of our stage', Macbeth changes from feted hero to execrated villain. The *Before / After* exercise is one frequently undertaken, but is an important preface to the rest of the unit.

### Moral Sensitivity

The key exercise on this page is the concluding one. Macbeth's state of mind immediately after the murder of Duncan is such that he is nearer confession and repentance than at any other point in the play.

See Unit 3, *Questions of Responsibility*, for further suggestions on this.

### The Point of No Return

Whether this is properly the point of no return is something to discuss with students. Shakespeare, it should be stressed, is following the pagan view of Classical Greek Tragedy of the operation of a cruel and indifferent Fate, which once activated is unstoppable, rather than a specifically Christian account.

However, an interesting comparison is with Pharaoh in the biblical account of the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt in Exodus chapters 7 to 11. At first, it is recorded that 'his heart became hard and he would not listen' (Exodus chapter 7 verse 13) as he declined to let the captives go.

Later as he still refuses, we read 'he hardened his heart and would not listen' (Exodus chapter 8 verse 15) and this is followed by a yet more entrenched position described graphically as 'the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not listen' (Exodus chapter 9 verse 12).

### Aims

- To trace the degeneration of Macbeth from hero to villain.
- To examine the moral questions raised by Macbeth's example.

**Deep damnation**

One of the most telling lines in the whole play, so far as the dilemma of mankind is concerned is the Doctor's...

More needs she the divine than the physician.

Yet it is an option that is never explored.

The 'bleak fatalism' of Macbeth's despairing soliloquy needs to be countered by examples from literature of optimism and hope. These abound and you will probably have your favourites. Examples might include Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Ted

Hughes, or even some of Shakespeare's sonnets (for example, 18, 29, 116).

**The Tragedy**

What do we mean by salvation? The Christian teaching that humans can be saved is the background to references to Macbeth's feeling in 'most need of blessing' (Act II scene 3, line 35) and the Doctor's 'More needs she the divine than the physician'.

The blessing of forgiveness that Macbeth, briefly, longs for is, according to the Christian faith, to be found through faith in Jesus Christ. 'For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans chapter 6 verse 23).

# MACBETH'S MORAL DECLINE



## UNIT 6

### THE CONTRAST

At the beginning of the play, Macbeth is the hero of the hour. Even before we meet him we hear a great deal about him.

#### 6.1 Macbeth the Hero

In Act I scene 2 the Captain describes the victories of Macbeth and Banquo.

- a) What action of Macbeth's, according to the Captain, ensured that they won the first battle? He contrasts Macdonald and Macbeth.
- b) Copy and complete the chart below, showing the contrast between Macdonald and Macbeth. Select words and phrases in the text which show the mercilessness of Macdonald, and the bravery of Macbeth.

Macdonald	Macbeth
Merciless	Brave 'Well deserves he that name'

Ross follows the Captain with news of a final victory in which the rebel Thane of Cawdor has been captured. Duncan sentences the Thane of Cawdor to death and orders his title to be handed to Macbeth.

With his being named Thane of Cawdor ('that most disloyal traitor') Macbeth's moral decline is about to begin. It is almost as if he is given that man's treachery as well as his title.

#### 6.2 Royal Announcement

Using the evidence of this scene (I.3.87-101 and I.4), write the announcement of Macbeth's victory and the honour conferred on him as it might have appeared in The Scottish Court Circular. Begin...



#### 6.3 Royal Announcement 2

But the play ends with another King of Scotland's celebration of victory! Using your previous court circular as a pattern, write the announcement of Macduff's victory and the defeat of Macbeth. Make it as clear a contrast as you can.

#### 6.4 Before and After

Make out a 'Before and After' chart listing the qualities attributed to Macbeth at the beginning contrasted with the descriptions of him in the final act.

## MORAL SENSITIVITY

During the course of the play, Macbeth changes from being a man of moral sensitivity, who finds evil distasteful, to one who has 'supped full with horrors'.

### 6.5 Macbeth's Moral Sensitivity

Look at Act I scene 3, lines 129-141:

This supernatural soliciting  
Cannot be ill, cannot be good.

Macbeth has just heard the prophecy of the Witches that he who is Thane of Glamis will become Thane of Cawdor and 'shalt be king hereafter'.

Immediately, Ross enters with the news that the king has given the title Thane of Cawdor to Macbeth. Macbeth's response shows both his ambition that the third truth should come about and his revulsion at the evil thought of murder that has entered his mind.

Macbeth debates with himself about whether the Witches' prophecies are morally acceptable. Using the information in this speech, explain in your own words what he finds good and what evil about the prophecies.

### 6.6 Assessing Macbeth's Sensitivity

Now turn to Act I scene 5, lines 13-23:

yet do I fear thy nature...

Lady Macbeth has just read her husband's letter describing the events of I.3. As she awaits her husband's return, she leaves us in no doubt as to what she thinks of his moral sensitivity.

Is she right about this? Note down all the evidence you can find in Act I

that supports her assessment. Note: in addition to Macbeth's aside in I.3 noted above, you will find the following helpful:

- I.4.lines 48-53: What is he thinking here?
- I.5.lines 52ff: 'We will speak further' – What is he going to say to her?
- I.6: Duncan asks 'Where's the Thane of Cawdor?' – Where is he? Why might he find it convenient not to encounter the king at this point?
- I.7.lines 1-28: All Lady Macbeth's 'fears' are clearly confirmed in this soliloquy;

### 6.7 Macbeth Confesses

Now turn to Act II scene 2. The most conclusive evidence to support Lady Macbeth's claims can be found in the scene immediately after the murder of Duncan. Suppose Macbeth had written a confession at this point. What would he have said? Try writing it.

## THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

Immediately after the murder of Duncan Lady Macbeth begins the process of covering up. She takes the blood-stained daggers back to the scene of the crime and spatters the king's bodyguard with blood so that they will appear guilty. With difficulty, she persuades Macbeth to wash his hands and retire to bed, just as Macduff arrives.

### 6.8 Concealment and Suspicion

Act II scenes 3 and 4. Then, the murder is discovered and Macbeth, too, strives to cover his tracks. To do so, he commits more murder! As so many have discovered, from then on, it is all a downward path.

Macduff is the one to discover the murder. By the end of the act he appears to have his suspicions as he



#### Question 6.6:

Unit 3 gives a detailed consideration of Macbeth's feelings in Act I scene 5.

refuses to attend Macbeth's coronation.

What has aroused Macduff's suspicions? In addition to noting other evidence, look carefully at Macbeth's behaviour in II.3. Why might what he says not ring true?

Banquo, too, suspects Macbeth. Explain why.

### 6.9 Preparing for Murder

Act III scene 1, lines 49-73. Macbeth has become king. The man who had been horrified at the very suggestion of murder (see I.3.133-41) now has the blood of three murders on his hands and is preparing for more.

He who 'wouldst not play false' is fast learning how to deceive.

a) Why does Macbeth want to kill Banquo? Compare this soliloquy with that in I.7 in which Macbeth debated with himself whether or not he ought to murder Duncan.

What similarities are there between the two speeches? What differences can you detect?

b) The remainder of the scene is a conversation between Macbeth and two (other) murderers. Why do you think this has been included? What does it tell us about Macbeth's moral degeneration?

Note: in all that he says about the murderers he is surely also condemning himself!

### 6.10 Could Macbeth Have Turned Back?

Act III scene 4:

For now I am bent to know  
By the worst means, the worst; for mine own good,  
All causes shall give way. I am in blood  
Stepped in so far that should I wade no more,  
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

Soon, Macbeth will have reached the point of no return. The man of milk

has become the man of blood.

For discussion: What would 'returning' have involved? Think back to II.2 and Macbeth's 'need of blessing'. How, even at this stage might he have shown repentance?

### 6.11 Macbeth's Moral Decline

Chart Macbeth's moral decline up to the end of Act III. You will find the discussion between Lennox and an unnamed Lord in III.6 a useful guide. What else would you add to the list of moral offences mentioned?

## THE POINT OF NO RETURN

### 6.12 Macbeth Visits the Witches

Act IV scene 1. Macbeth reaches the point of no return as, knowingly and deliberately, he goes and seeks out the weird sisters.

a) Look back at I.3. What has changed? See how many differences you can detect between Macbeth's first encounter with the Witches and this second visit. What do the differences tell us about what has happened to Macbeth?

The Witches now have Macbeth in their power. He puts his trust completely in them and their equivocating riddles.

b) What do the apparitions advise him to do? Write out the lines in each case, adding for each one:

- what Macbeth thought was being said
- what he should have taken heed to in what was said
- how the 'prophecy' came true

c) How does Macbeth's attitude to himself and his actions change after this encounter?

### 6.13 A Moral Coward?

For discussion: What do you think? Is Macbeth brave but misguided, or is he a moral coward, lacking the courage to do what he knows he should?

You will need to go back over earlier scenes in which Lady Macbeth taunts her husband with cowardice and in which his anxiety to be thought brave are mentioned.

#### Points to consider:

- What does Macbeth understand by 'bravery' and 'cowardice'? – what is Lady Macbeth taunting him with, in for example, I.7.35-44?
- What do we understand by 'moral courage' and 'moral cowardice'?
- How might Macbeth have shown bravery of a different kind from that he in fact demonstrated...
  - before Duncan's murder
  - immediately after Duncan's murder
  - in the banquet scene
  - in the final stages of the play

Note: you will find it helpful to look again at the words which were spoken to him by the second and third apparitions (IV.1.78-79, 89-90), and to consider how he puts them into practice.

Note, too, the emphasis on bravery. This has been the means by which Lady Macbeth had persuaded him against his better judgment to murder Duncan. It features prominently in what the apparitions say and will be a significant part of Macbeth's final tragedy.

### DEEP DAMNATION

As Lady Macbeth's mind gives way under the weight of her guilt, the doctor can offer no cure. Macbeth slips into ever deeper despair as he clings blindly to the riddling promises of the apparitions.

### 6.14 Lady Macbeth Confesses

Act V scene 1:

More needs she the divine than  
the physician.  
God, God forgive us all.

Lady Macbeth's disclosures in her sleep, as she desperately tries to wash away the guilt on her hands, prompt the doctor's comment that while he cannot help her, perhaps a priest could.

How do you think a priest might go about this? Write the diary entries that a visiting priest might have written recording his conversations with Lady Macbeth, in the confessional perhaps.

### 6.15 Macbeth's Thoughts and Feelings

Act V scenes 3 and 5. What about Macbeth? If his wife needed 'the divine' to minister to her 'infected mind', how much more so this must be true of Macbeth himself.

What exactly is Macbeth's state of mind:

- as he hears of mass defections from his ranks to Malcolm's army (V.3. 1-28)
- as he talks with the doctor (V.3. 38-63)
- as he hears of his wife's death (V.5. 1-27)
- as he is told that Birnam Wood has indeed begun to move (V.5.30-51)?

Note down all the words and phrases that convey his thoughts and feelings in these passages.

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and  
tomorrow...

It is important to pay attention to V.5.18-27. Gibson, on page 146 of the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* edition

of the play suggests a number of ways in which their dramatic quality can be explored. Notice especially what Gibson refers to as their 'world-weary, bleak fatalism'.

**6.16 In Your Own Words**

Re-write this soliloquy in your own words, trying to convey as vividly as you can, the 'world-weary, bleak fatalism' of the lines.

**6.17 Arguing with Macbeth**

But does it have to be like that? Is life really 'but a walking shadow', 'a tale told by an idiot'? How would you counter what Macbeth is saying here?

**6.18 Soliloquy of Hope**

Try writing your own 'Tomorrow' soliloquy in which you give expression to optimism and hope.

**6.19 Soliloquy for Malcolm**

Turn to Malcolm's speech at the end of the play. Using it as a guide, write a 'Tomorrow' soliloquy for the new king, Malcolm.

**THE TRAGEDY**

Shakespeare follows the pattern of Classical Greek and Roman tragedy in portraying Macbeth as sliding inevitably to defeat and disgrace, tormented by the gods – in Macbeth's case by

th' equivocation of the fiend  
That lies like truth.

Only in defeat does the hero regain any semblance of the dignity that has been forfeited in the course of his decline and fall. By then it is too late: the tragedy has already unfurled. Fate has done its worst.

Act V scenes 7-9. The very first word used to describe Macbeth is

'brave' (I.2.16) and, as we have already seen in this unit, physical courage is the quality that he most admires and is most concerned to demonstrate. At the close of the play, as in its beginning, we find him displaying great courage in battle. But there are significant differences.

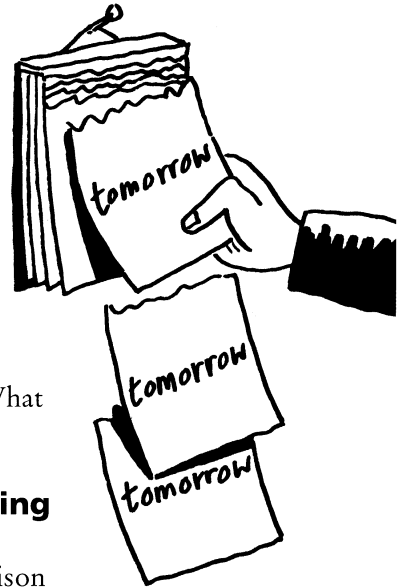
What are the similarities? What is different?

**6.20 Opening and Closing Scenes**

Write down a detailed comparison of the opening and closing scenes.

Note: what about the atmosphere; the composition of the opposing forces; the perspective Shakespeare gives us of the battle?

Most significantly, Macbeth's contribution has changed. How?



**THE TRAGIC HERO**

**6.21 Macbeth's Fearlessness**

There are numerous references in Act V to Macbeth's fearlessness.

- a) Take a moment to go through, noting each one.
- b) Of what is he now no longer afraid?
- c) What does this suggest about his moral sensitivity? A glance back at the earlier pages of this unit will help you with this.
- d) On what is this lack of fear based?

**6.22 False Prophecies**

The 'prophecies' upon which his bravery initially depends both prove false (V.3.60-61 and V.7.1-4).

- a) How does Macbeth react in each case?
- b) 'I'll not fight with thee' – What word in Macduff's reply prompts Macbeth's final display of courage?

### 6.23 Salvation for Macbeth?

In classical tragedy the hero is finally 'saved' by discovering the truth about himself as the play draws to a conclusion. Do you think this is true for Macbeth? Can there be any salvation for him without forgiveness? What do we mean by salvation?

### FURTHER ACTIVITIES

### 6.24 Strategy of Evil

At the meeting with the Witches, Banquo says:

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. (I.3.121-25)

Banquo suggests that the Witches' prophecies are part of a plot by the 'instruments of darkness' to lure Macbeth and Banquo to their destruction. But Macbeth doesn't heed his friend's warning. From the point of view of the powers of darkness, the first step in their plans for Macbeth's downfall is successful. What else have they in mind to complete the job?

Imagine you are a group of junior devils assigned by Satan, or Hecate if you prefer, to organise and carry out Macbeth's downfall. Plan your strategy:

- the means you will use
- the interests you will foster
- the weaknesses you will play on
- the characters you will involve

Of course, what you are actually doing here is going through the progress of the plot but from the point of view of the degeneration of Macbeth's character.

Work out possible lines of attack, including those that are not successful. For example, you might

well explore the possibility of Banquo's involvement as an accomplice with Macbeth. That would fit in with the fact that Banquo was also tempted by the Witches' prophecies, although you would discover that that strategy would not work.

Assign particular tasks to members of the group:

- the briefing of the weird sisters;
- the priming of Lady Macbeth;
- the organisation of 'special effects'

Decide at which points in the action you will need to assess progress: these might approximate to the end of each act.

Are there going to be any points where emergency meetings will need to be called? When Macbeth decides to 'proceed no further', or after the murder of Banquo but the escape of Fleance?

Build up a log of Macbeth's moral decline. This could be minutes of meetings; a scrap-book of related events; a series of diary entries or any other means of recording the activities of the group that you wish.

Don't forget that the object of the exercise is to chart Macbeth's moral decline, assessing in detail the gradual hardening of his attitude and noting the extent to which he steadily becomes more and more evil.

A useful source of ideas for this activity is C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*, in which Lewis imagines that a senior devil, Screwtape, writes to his nephew, a junior devil, advising him on the best way to bring about the spiritual downfall of the human being in his charge.

Like Banquo's comment, it is meant as a warning!

*The Devil strikes a deal, as imagined in an eighteenth century woodcut.*





## 6.25 Plotting Macbeth's Downfall

Plan and draw up a series of graphs charting the ups and downs of Macbeth's downfall.



This could be done Act by Act, with different colours, patterns to indicate different influences, sources of strength or whatever.

Can you think of other aspects of plot or character that could be shown in this way?

Don't forget that you need to add comments and conclusions at the end as you evaluate what the graphs show.

## 6.26 Setting the record straight



'Macbeth's character has suffered unjustly at the hands of Shakespeare' (Janet Glover, *The Story of Scotland*, Faber 1960).

What can we do about it? He did succeed Duncan, whom he defeated and killed (in battle), and he was in turn defeated by Malcolm. But there the similarities end.

See what you can find out about the real Macbeth and others mentioned in the play. Note down the differences between their portrayal by Shakespeare and what they appear to have been like historically.

Retell the story, with emphasis on the character of Macbeth.

## ADDITIONAL WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

### 6.27 The Slippery Slope

Re-read Act I scene 7. Write a story in which someone is persuaded against his or her better judgment to do something wrong but, having once started gradually gets more and more involved in wrong doing.

Think about how your story is going to end:

- is the individual going to see the error of his/her ways?
- is he/she going to be caught and punished?
- what will be the point of your story?
- What wrongdoing is going to be involved?

For the story to have any progression, the initial, perhaps trivial, crime must lead to other, more serious offences.

### 6.28 Just Deserts

Write a story in which an unscrupulous individual is successful for a time but is eventually overcome. Try to think of an effective, present-day setting for this.

### 6.29 Malcolm's Memoirs

Write Malcolm's memoirs of his campaign against Macbeth.

### 6.30 Seyton's Exclusive Story

Seyton sells his story to a Sunday newspaper. Write an episode in which he tells of life in the service of 'Scotland's butcher and his fiend-like queen'.



#### Question 6.26:

Unit 10 contains information about the real Macbeth and his history.