

Sample Essay 3 - Macbeth – SEC 2007 – Question 1

(i) 'The relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth undergoes significant change during the course of the play.'

Discuss this statement supporting your answer with the aid of suitable reference to the text. (60)

Marking Scheme:

Candidates are free to agree, disagree or partly agree with the statement.

Expect candidates to engage with the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and the change/s in that relationship during the course of the play. 'Significant' may be implied by the quality of the candidates' engagement with the change/s in this central relationship.

In outlining the change/s (or lack of change/s), candidates may employ focused narrative to illustrate the points they make.

Code CR for changing relationship.

Possible points:

- the plan to kill Duncan introduces tension into their loving/sharing relationship
- the murder alters the dynamic between them
- he acts alone, highlighting the 'death' of the partnership
- their relationship disintegrates following the banquet scene
- they become increasingly isolated from each other
- the witches replace Lady Macbeth's influence on his life
- his response to her death illustrates the significant gulf between them
- despite the apparent change/s, their love endures Etc.

Sample Answer:

The relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is both fascinating and tragic. Over the course of this relatively short play they move from a loving, united couple to virtual strangers, each isolated in their own particular hell. The tragedy is that they bring this anguish and horror on themselves. Lady Macbeth desires that her husband should be king, and abuses his love for her in order to make him murder Duncan, while Macbeth allows his desire to please his wife and prove himself a man in her eyes to cloud his judgement and force him to act against his better nature. Evil inserts itself in the little cracks in their relationship, and character flaws which would be insignificant in the normal course of events take on a dreadful significance. Both get their wish, but at a terrible price. Darkness and evil consume them as individuals and tear them apart as a couple

The introduction outlines the main points that will be developed throughout the essay.

You must ensure that every point raised in the introduction is covered in the essay.

At the start of the play it is clear that the Macbeths share an intense, passionate relationship. Macbeth is eager to confide in his wife about his encounter with the witches, calling her 'my dearest partner in greatness'. He is keen for her to share in 'the dues of rejoicing' and does not want her to remain 'ignorant of what greatness is promised' for a moment longer than is necessary. Lady Macbeth appears to be his soul mate and confidante. This happy state of affairs does not last for long, however, and from the moment that Macbeth tells his wife of the letter, the relationship slips into decline.

Lady Macbeth, for her part, is determined that her husband shall fulfil the witches' prophecy. However, she fears that he is 'too full o' the milk of human kindness' to act swiftly and decisively and worries that his ambition is not matched by the 'illness that should attend on it'. This is an interesting point, and one which points to a slight fracture in the couple's unity. If she knows her husband as well as she claims to, Lady Macbeth should be aware that this is a man who can act with savage ferocity when occasion demands. We have heard how he hacked his way through enemy lines in order to face Macdonwald and that he then 'unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps'. We also know from his aside about horrid images which make his hair stand on end and his heart race that Macbeth is already contemplating murdering Duncan. Is Lady Macbeth unaware of this side of her husband's nature? It would seem so, and this weakness plays a role in the undoing of their

You are entitled to have your own opinion on the relationship, but you must support it with quotation from and / or reference to the play.

relationship. She is determined to unleash Macbeth's violence and remove all that stands between him and 'the golden round' but she does not realise that once unleashed, this force will prove impossible to control and will destroy them both.

At this stage in the relationship, it seems that Lady Macbeth has the upper hand. There is one aspect of her husband's character that she knows well, and that is his desire to appear worthy of her love. She expertly manipulates him by playing on his sense of manliness. Macbeth has been thinking things over and has decided that he says that he will 'proceed no further in this business' but Lady Macbeth will have none of it. She goads him, calling him a coward and comparing him to 'the poor cat i' the adage'. Macbeth's spirited response, that he dares 'do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none' cuts no ice with his wife. She is set upon this task and makes good her earlier promise to 'chastise [him] with the valour of my tongue'. She judges well. Her claim that she would have snatched her nursing child from her breast and 'dash'd the brains out had I sworn to do so' moves Macbeth to prove himself even more determined than she. He subjugates his honour, morality, pity, doubts and fears and agrees to become the man she wants him to be. ***Ironically, in acceding to her demands, he is about to undertake a task that will irreparably damage their relationship.***

If you need to replace a word in the original text with a word of your own, or include a word in order to make the quote fit into your sentence, put your chosen word inside square brackets.

It is important to keep linking your points to the question.

Lady Macbeth is in control at this stage, and Macbeth's tentative 'If we should fail?' shows that he has completely accepted the necessity of trying to kill Duncan and is now just concerned with the practical details. Lady Macbeth replies with what seems to Macbeth a comprehensive and foolproof plan. He is lost in admiration of his wife's strength and says that she should 'Bring forth men children only'. Sadly, Macbeth is in thrall to a woman who is wildly ambitious on his behalf but who is divorced from reality. As we soon see, her plan is deeply flawed and her bending of Macbeth to her will is a short term success only.

Both Macbeth and his wife are now bent on killing Duncan. Over the course of a short conversation Macbeth has moved from a man who 'will proceed no further in this business' to one who is steeling himself to carry out 'this terrible feat'. Without his wife, Macbeth would not have been willing to perform the act as he felt it was morally reprehensible. As we shall see, without Macbeth Lady Macbeth would have been incapable of performing the act herself. Both need the other, yet because from this point on they are united in criminal

intent only, their relationship is doomed.

The Macbeths work together in the gory business of killing the king. Lady Macbeth needs her husband to do the deed, however, admitting that she could not bring herself to kill a man who reminded her of her father. What she can do, however, is provide much-needed practical support to her husband who is highly-agitated before and after the murder. Macbeth is deeply distressed and on the brink of collapse, saying he is 'afraid to think what I have done'. Lady Macbeth remains superficially strong, urging him to 'Consider it not so deeply' and to return to plant the daggers on the grooms. He cannot do so, but she rises to the occasion, returning the daggers and smearing the grooms with blood while ordering Macbeth to 'Get on your nightgown, lest occasion call us / And show us to be watchers.' At this stage, Macbeth is still dependent on his wife's strength and ability to keep her head in a crisis. She is the dominant figure, but that is about to change.

One of the most interesting moments in the Macbeths' relationship occurs when Duncan's murder is discovered. Macduff is suspicious when he learns that Macbeth has killed the grooms: 'Wherefore did you so?' and at that moment Lady Macbeth faints. Some critics see this as her attempt to deflect attention from Macbeth while others see it as a genuine, shocked reaction to her husband's brutal, unplanned slaying of the servants. The confusion over the reason for Lady Macbeth's faint echoes the confusion and disharmony in the Macbeths' relationship. They are no longer acting as one.

From this moment on, Lady Macbeth is no longer the initiator of events. The balance of power has shifted. Lady Macbeth has succeeded in one way in that she has effectively persuaded her husband to remove that moral boundary which determined that he should kill enemies only.

However, she is now a broken woman who has no control over the monster she has unleashed. Chaos has triumphed over order. Lady Macbeth is soon to be tormented by both this reversal of the normal order of things and by her husband's turning into a merciless, paranoid tyrant.

Lady Macbeth and her husband spend virtually no time together after the murder. Lady Macbeth has to make appointments to see him, asking a servant to 'Say to the king I would attend his leisure for a few words.' Having embraced evil, they seem doomed never to

This is the key moment in the couple's relationship. It is the turning point. From this moment on, they are more divided than united.

Remember to keep referring back to the change in the couple's relationship.

embrace one another again. Both are locked in their own particular guilt and torment. Lady Macbeth acknowledges this when she says 'Nought's had, all's spent / Where our desire is got without content.'

Macbeth now acts independently of his wife. Where her guilt has made her nervous and more passive than before, his has made him paranoid and tyrannical. He plans to kill Banquo but does not share this intention with his wife, telling her to 'Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck'. His term of affection rings hollow when we consider that he is effectively cutting her out of his life and is acting alone from this moment on.

In the banquet scene, Lady Macbeth makes a final effort to defend her husband. She does her utmost to protect him from pointing towards his own guilt but it is obvious her efforts are fruitless. Macbeth has left her behind and when they are alone together she can scarcely summon up the energy to answer him in anything but short replies. He plans more killings, saying that he is now 'in blood / Stepp'd so far' that he might as well carry on. Lady Macbeth makes no direct answer to this but simply urges him to rest, saying that he lacks 'the season of all natures, sleep.'

Although she advises her husband to sleep, Lady Macbeth finds no solace in that act herself. The sleepwalking scene shows the extent of her suffering. Her guilt is eating at her and without her husband's support she is cracking under the strain. She knows that 'What's done / cannot be undone' and she is tormented by the murders she has precipitated. She eventually returns to her bed and is never seen alive again.

Macbeth's reaction to the news of his wife's death shows how detached from her he has become. He says 'She should have died hereafter' but shows no great sorrow. Evil has driven the couple into their own particular hells and has severed the bond between them. At the start of the play they worked together to plan Duncan's death and were determined to be pitiless. They set aside their humanity and embraced immorality and wickedness. By allowing such evil to consume them, however, they destroyed their peace of mind, their relationship and their lives.