

Sample Essay - Macbeth - SEC 2003 – Question 2

(ii) “In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare presents us with a powerful vision of evil.”

Write your response to the above statement. Textual support may include reference to a particular performance of the play you have seen.

Marking Scheme:

Expect candidates to respond by describing the impact the play has on them either as a whole or at certain key moments.

Detailed description/discussion of the nature and presence of the play’s vision of evil will be sufficient to establish the ‘powerful’ nature of this vision.

Code VE for ‘vision of evil’.

Possible points:

- visual impact of the appearance and role of the witches
 - Apparitions, ghosts, nightmares, and so on
 - revealed through the thoughts, words and actions of characters
 - the graphic violence of the play
 - specific recreations in film or on the stage
 - language, imagery
 - staging, costume, props, lighting, music, and so on
 - despite the overthrow of Macbeth the apparent absence of redemption in the world
- Etc.

Sample Answer:

In *Macbeth* we are presented with a vision of an evil so powerful that it brings death, destruction and chaos to an entire country as well as utterly ruining the lives of those who embrace it. This evil, which dominates the play from the very first scene and our meeting with the witches, is all the more terrifying because it is depicted as a force which originates within individuals rather than in the more obviously fiendish witches and their associated spirits. The supernatural forces do not instigate the evil in the play; they are agents of the

The introduction should indicate the direction the answer will take. This should be reflected again in the conclusion.

human beings who are driven by ambition and ruthlessness to commit terrible acts.

The dramatic opening scene, although it is a brief one, immediately immerses us in an atmosphere of evil. Amid crashes of thunder and peals of lightning appear the three witches. They are dreadfully ugly; Banquo comments later that they are 'withered' and 'wild' and 'look not like th'inhabitants of earth'. The witches' hideous outer appearance perfectly reflects the wickedness of their natures. Their chant 'Fair is foul and foul is fair; / Hover through the fog and filthy air', is repulsive and would have presented an even more striking vision of evil to a Jacobean audience than it does to us today.

Make sure that any example you give is clearly linked to the question.

Shakespeare was well aware of his countrymen's belief in and fear of witches and the supernatural, and he capitalises on this each time the witches appear. Their actions and their chants grow ever more dreadful; the second time they appear one is placing a curse on a sailor so that he shall live in sleepless torment and be 'a man forbid'. The third time they appear the witches are adding shockingly cruel, repellent ingredients such as 'Finger of a birth-strangled babe / Ditch-delivered by a drab' to the disgusting concoction in their cauldron. Utterly lacking in any sort of morality, these weird sisters are the very embodiment of evil. There is no purpose to their actions other than to sow the seeds of pain and death. They will not benefit in any way from the destruction of Scotland. Evil for evil's sake is their only aim.

Macbeth reflects the witches' words when he speaks his first words in the play: 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen'. Straight away, this links him with them and prepares the audience that this man, described in such glowing terms by his king and his fellow soldiers, may yet align himself with the forces of darkness. This is a terrible prospect, especially since the audience has heard the details of his savagery and ferocity on the battlefield when he 'carved out his passage'. Macbeth's physical strength and bravery is an important aspect of the vision of evil that is presented in the play. After all, we know that the witches' power is limited. They are not all-powerful: one has already spoken of her inability to sink the ship of the sailor whose wife refused her a chestnut. They need an instrument to carry out their foul work. Macbeth is the man chosen for the task, and we now know all too well how he treats those who stand in his way.

Remember, you do not have to use the same words all the time when referring back to the question. 'Forces of darkness' means evil.

There is a certain irony in Macbeth being used this way by the witches as Banquo describes

them as 'instruments of evil'. They may be, but they are unable to actually effect any lasting evil in the world. Macbeth, however, takes up the task with some alacrity and becomes in turn their instrument. The witches' greeting to him as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor and king hereafter evokes a startled response in him. They have touched a nerve and brought hidden thoughts to the surface. Banquo asks him, 'Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?' but of course the reason is that Macbeth is startled that his private longings have been voiced. He begins wrestling with his conscience, asking himself if this 'supernatural soliciting' is good or evil. He acknowledges the horror of the evil that has been stirred up within him:

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?

These words are significant in that they show us just how easily Macbeth, a man earlier described as 'Valour's minion' has been turned towards thoughts of murder. The word 'minion' is cleverly chosen here. On the one hand it means someone who is highly esteemed, but another meaning is someone servile or subordinate. Macbeth moves from one to the other in a shockingly short space of time. From this moment on, he is in thrall to the witches' prophecy, his wife's ambition and his own darkest nature. The shocking aspect of this vision of evil with which we are presented is that the witches' words were essentially neutral. They asked nothing of Macbeth. It was he who placed a moral value on the prophecy and decided it meant that he should murder the king. Somehow, the evil in the play would be easier to accept if it was entirely the fault of these supernatural creatures. However, because it actually comes about as a result of their simply prompting a man who has until this time been a loyal defender of the king and someone described by his wife as 'too full o' the milk o' human-kindness', we are forced to face the sobering reality that the potential for evil may lurk in the heart of even the most outwardly admirable of men.

The question asked you to look at the 'powerful vision of evil' presented in the play, so it is appropriate to comment on how it affects you / an audience.

Although he does succumb to evil, Macbeth initially wrestles with his conscience, saying 'Let not light see my black and deep desires.' His wife has no such qualms. She embraces evil from the moment she receives her husband's letter. In a chilling speech, she begs evil spirits to 'unsex me here / And fill me from the crown to the toe top full / Of direst cruelty!' This is

a truly appalling commitment to evil, but it pales into insignificance compared to what is to come. When she finds that Macbeth has changed his mind about the murder and ‘will proceed no further in this business’, Lady Macbeth scorns his vacillation, telling him that if she had promised to do so, she would have taken her nursing infant and ‘plucked the nipple from his boneless gums, / And dashed the brains out’.

Lady Macbeth’s reference to child abuse is one of many in the play, and it is a potent example of the way in which evil reverses the natural order of things and removes all that is humane and decent in those who give into its temptations. It also shows the way in which evil eliminates hope, as children represent the future. So images of child-slaying are doubly horrifying to an audience, and their appearance at several different stages in the play highlights the depravity and immorality of Macbeth’s rule. He orders the murder of Fleance, and of Macduff’s entire family, and the only person we see him kill in battle is Young Siward. The senselessness of the slaughter of Macduff’s children in particular highlights the idea that evil, once unleashed, will consume everything.

Under the tyranny of the ‘hell-kite’ and ‘butcher’ Macbeth, Scotland ‘weeps, it bleeds, and each new day a gash / Is added to her wounds’. The people live in terror and murder becomes so commonplace that people no longer ask for whom the death knells tolls. Speaking of the disintegration of the country, Ross says that the inhabitants ‘float upon a wild and violent sea / each way and none’. The manner in which Macbeth secured the crown is now reflected in his reign. He cannot stop the flood of evil and admits himself that he is ‘in blood / Stepp’d in *so far*, that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o’er.’

Of course, evil ultimately consumes all those who embrace it. Lady Macbeth is the first to fall. Almost immediately after the murder of Duncan, her strength begins to fail. Neither she nor Macbeth ever enjoys inner peace again. She and her husband drift apart, and she observes sadly that ‘Nought’s had, all’s spent where our desire is got without content’.

As her husband matures in evil, so she dwindles. Her life becomes a nightmare and she suffers hellish torment, haunted by the evil she has helped to unleash: ‘The thane of Fife had a wife, where is she now?’ Darkness, which she had earlier called on to hide the actions of herself and her husband, now terrifies her and she must have a light with her at all times. The image of Lady Macbeth wandering the halls of the castle in anguish until she is driven to take her own life is a frightening portrayal of the way evil cannot be controlled or contained by those who have made a conscious commitment to it.

At the end of the play, Macbeth has finally recognised that power gained through dishonour, villainy and diabolical evil brings no reward. He scarcely reacts to news of his wife's death, and muses on the futility of life which is 'but a walking shadow' and 'a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.' Too late, he begins to see the diabolical machinations of the witches' revealed for what they are: a way to spread depravity and chaos through the harnessing of a powerful and ambitious man. He starts to 'doubt th' equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth'. Despite this suspicion, however, he continues to cling to the promise that he leads 'a charmed life' and cannot be killed. It is only when Macduff reveals that he was 'from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped' that Macbeth finally sees that evil turns on those it uses to achieve its aims and has no aim but the spread of chaos and terror.

Macbeth is a powerful study of evil, showing as it does the effects on individuals and society as a whole. The destructive force of evil is incompatible with humanity and the natural order of the world, and the play serves as a salutary warning to everyone who harbours dark desires not to give in to temptation as once such forces are unleashed it is not possible to control them.

Make sure your conclusion reflects the introduction.

