Macbeth

Character Analysis
Macbeth’s character develops as the play progresses. In the beginning he is a successful general, a man of action, described as noble, valiant, and worthy. We learn that he is ambitious, and prepared to accept ill-gotten gains as long as his own conscience is clear. His fatal weakness, then, is that he thinks ends and means can be separated.
Lady Macbeth plays on his weakness and persuades him to murder Duncan. But as a villain, he has a fatal weakness— too much imagination. Fear and suspicion drive him into a tyrannous blood-bath. ‘Noble Macbeth’ becomes ‘this dead butcher’.
Questions:

• Do you feel sympathy for Macbeth at the end of the play? Give reasons for your answer.

• Do you hate Macbeth at any moment in the play? In your answer, consider Act 4, Scene 1 when he resolves to murder Macduff’s wife and children. Is it possible to feel both sympathy and hate for Macbeth at the same time?

• What is Macbeth’s finest moment in the play?

• At the end of the play, Malcolm describes Macbeth as a bloody butcher. Does this sum up how you see him in the play?
Lady Macbeth

- It is tempting to dismiss Lady Macbeth as Macbeth’s evil inspiration: Adam’s Eve, a traditional villainess.
- True, she is ambitious, single-minded and apparently unscrupulous, but one must have some pity for her ultimately damning.
- She tries to deny her own conscience, but when her suppressed feelings burst out they completely overwhelm her and she is punished with madness.
Questions:

• If Lady Macbeth is truly evil, why does she need to summon the forces of darkness to give her strength?

• Why does Lady Macbeth go mad?

• What is your response to lady Macbeth during the sleepwalking scene?

• Plot the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, scene by scene. How close are they at the start of the play compared with the end? Where does the change begin? Why do you think it occurs?
Duncan is shown as deeply appreciative of loyalty, full of dignity and virtue. Macbeth understands this well.

He is perhaps too generous; his ‘More is thy due’ to Macbeth is taken too literally by Macbeth.

He is perhaps also too trusting, but his kingly qualities show up Macbeth’s dismal pretense for what it is.
Questions:
• What traits does Duncan exhibit that show him to be a good king?
• What traits suggest that he may be a weak king?
• What is ironic about Duncan’s assessment of Cawdor and Macbeth (I. iv)?
• Explain the irony of Duncan’s use of growth images (I. iv), especially in the light of the battles and recent execution of Cawdor.
Macduff is the first character, apart from Banquo (who has better evidence), to have suspicions about Duncan’s murder and of Macbeth’s fitness to be king.

He is a shrewd man, yet he has not foreseen the web of intrigue woven by Macbeth and is perhaps too honest and chivalrous himself to imagine the possibility of the callous murder of his wife and children after he has gone to England for help.
• In his conversation with Malcolm we come to appreciate his honourable and loyal nature; the terrible anguish he feels at his family’s massacre is Macbeth’s doom, exactly as the Witches prophesied.

**Question:**

• Are there any significant flaws in Macduff’s character? Does the play show us his tragedy as well as Macbeth’s?
Malcolm

• Malcolm, like his father, values the loyalty and bravery of Banquo and Macbeth, but is much more than a mirror image of Duncan.

• He is quick to sense the danger after his father’s death, and has become shrewd and self-possessed by the time we meet him next, in conversation with Macduff in London.
Questions:

• What sort of king do you think Malcolm will make in comparison with Macbeth?

• Do you find Malcolm less interesting than Macbeth? If so, do you think Shakespeare did this deliberately, or is evil simply more fascinating than goodness?

It is he who has the intelligence to use the trees of Birnam Wood as camouflage, who organizes the final assault on Dunsinane, and whose last speech in the play, of gratitude, hope and faith, convinces the audience that Scotland once again has a virtuous king.
Banquo

• The loyal and honourable Banquo is with Macbeth when he first meets the Witches, but their reactions are entirely different.

• He is deeply suspicious of their powers, and although their prophecy to him disturbs his dreams, he looks to divine help to fight their evil.
After Duncan’s death, Macbeth cannot bear the presence of this wise and moral man; but, after his own death, Banquo haunts Macbeth for the rest of his life, with the constant reminder that the descendants of this virtuous man will eventually be rightful kings.

Questions:

Do you think Banquo knows that Macbeth killed Duncan? Do Macbeth’s fears about Banquo have any foundation?

Read Banquo’s speech in Act 3, Scene 1, lines 1–10. What does it suggest about his ambitions and temptations? Is he guilty of any wrongdoing?
• The Witches are the embodiment of disorder, darkness and chaos, in fact ‘living’ images of the evil that may tempt men’s minds.

• Banquo senses that they are evil but Macbeth is tempted because they seem to voice his own thoughts, and Lady Macbeth is only too ready to add her voice to theirs.
The Witches never lie, but in the paradoxical statements of their Apparitions, Macbeth only hears what he wants to hear. Too late he realizes that they are not interested in him but only in the triumph of evil over goodness. His final ‘confusion’ is what they wanted.
Questions:

- To what extent should the Weird Sisters be held responsible for Macbeth’s murder of Duncan?
- Can they be accused of deliberately misleading Macbeth by showing him the apparitions?
- Read Act 3, Scene 5. (a) What is Hecate’s analysis of Macbeth’s character? (b) What does she plan for Macbeth?
- Who are the witches? What similarities can you detect between the witches and Lady Macbeth? Does Shakespeare present a negative view of women in this play?
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