Macbeth - Study Questions

ACT ONE

In the first three scenes of Act One, rather than meeting Macbeth immediately, we are presented with others’ reactions to him. Scene One begins with the witches who are symbols of evil and superstition. They arrange to meet Macbeth sometime in the near future when a battle is concluded. They also introduce the central paradox of the play: fair is foul, foul is fair.

Answer the following questions:

1. Why is Macbeth first introduced through the witches?
   To establish the importance of fate and superstition in the play.

2. Explain what you think is meant by the paradoxical: “Fair is foul, foul is fair.”
   All that was good is now evil and vice versa.

Scene Two introduces us to Duncan, the King. The bloodied Captain who has just returned from battle reports on Macbeth’s victories.

3. Summarize the Captain’s description of the battle and the part Macbeth played in securing victory.
   We have discussed this at length and students should write a summary in their notes.

4. What impression do you gain of Macbeth from this description?
   Brave and heroic general. Loyal to Duncan.

5. The Thane of Cawdor was obviously a traitor. What does Duncan’s comment:
   No more that Thane of Cawdor shall deceive
   Our bosom interest:
   suggest about Duncan’s former relationship with him?
   He was a trusted member of Duncan’s inner circle.

Scene Three sees the return of the witches:

6. Carefully read their discussion of their attempt to take revenge on the sailor’s wife.
   What does this episode suggest about the extent and the limits of their powers?
   Shows how far their will take a minor grievance and that they can create great havoc on the Earth by changing the weather.

7. Macbeth’s entry is a shock because his first words echo those of the witches in scene one: “So foul and fair a day I have not seen”. Explain why Macbeth says this line?
   To comment on the bloody events of the victorious day

8. What literary purpose does it serve for Macbeth’s first line to echo the witches?
   To bring him into this paradoxical theme.
9. Macbeth and Banquo are confronted by the witches who predict both Macbeth's and Banquo's future. Analyze Banquo's reaction to their prediction about Macbeth. He wants to hear about what will happen to him too. He hopes his news will be as good as his friend's.

10. What does his challenge to the witches suggest about his character? It shows his ambition.

Immediately following the disappearance of the witches, Ross and Angus bring the news that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor (which we learned in Scene Two). This situation where the audience knows more than the characters is called dramatic irony.

11. Macbeth's reaction takes the form of a metaphor: “why do you dress me in borrowed robes”. Explain this metaphor and watch for more metaphors related to clothing throughout the play. Again, we have discussed this at length. Students should be able to discuss this and add it to their notes.

12. Why does Banquo warn Macbeth about his reaction to the prophecies? What does this warning suggest about Banquo's understanding of Macbeth's character and ambitions?
   He warns Macbeth that there may be trickery in the witches’ prediction. He wants to temper his ambition.

13. Macbeth's response comes in the form of a soliloquy. What does the soliloquy suggest about Macbeth's state of mind? What conclusion does Macbeth come to? He is conflicted by ambition and loyalty and fear. He decides to leave it up to fate – for now.

Scene Four: Macbeth and Banquo are received by Duncan.

14. Duncan greets Macbeth by saying, “There's no art Find the mind's construction in the face”. How does this reflect the fair is foul theme? He is referring to his inability to trust the Thane of Cawdor. It ties into the theme because it shows that “looks can be deceiving”.

15. How would you describe Duncan's character up to this point? He has been a noble and decisive leader who rewards loyalty.

16. How does Macbeth react to the naming of Malcolm as heir to the throne? He realizes that he will after give up his ambition to become king, or move Malcolm out of his way.

17. What does Macbeth mean when he says:
   Stars hide your fires;
   Let not light see my black and deep desires:
   The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be
   What the eye fears, when it is done, to see?
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Again, we have discussed this at length. Students will have a good answer that should be recorded in their notes.

Scene Five introduces Lady Macbeth who has just received a letter from her husband.

18. What does the tone of Macbeth's letter suggest about his relationship with her? She “wears the pants”. She holds the power in their relationship, but loves her husband.

19. Explain her assessment of Macbeth and his ambition. Find a quote to support your answer.
She is afraid that he doesn’t have the stomach for the job. “...yet I do fear...” (lines 15-18)

20. Carefully read her soliloquy. a) What is she attempting to do?, b) What do these lines suggest about her psychological state?
Come thick night,
and pall the in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry 'Hold hold!'
She is steeling herself to prepare for Duncan’s murder. It shows how deep her ambition is and that she will stop at nothing (it has made her mad).

Scene Six begins with Duncan’s arrival at Macbeth’s castle.

21. Why is Duncan’s opening line in Scene Six ironic?
He comments on the lovely, well-seated castle that will become the site of his death.

In Scene Seven, Macbeth is convinced by Lady Macbeth to proceed with the assassination.

22. What does Macbeth mean when he says,
If it were done when 'tis done ,then 'twere well
It were done quickly. If th' assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch,
With his surcease, success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and end-all-here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. ?
That the deed must be done soon, and that the reward in this life is worth the risk of judgment in the afterlife.
23. What arguments does he provide against the murder? What motive does he provide for the murder?
   There is “double trust” because he is his relative and his loyal subject; further, he is his host and is bound to protect him; finally, Duncan has given him no reason to be disloyal. However, he says it is only ambition that tempts him to proceed.

24. How does Lady Macbeth persuade Macbeth to go ahead with the plan?
   She chastises him for going back on his word and accuses him of not being a man.

25. Describe how they will carry out the plan.
   When Duncan is asleep they will get his two men very drunk. When they pass out, they will use their weapons to kill Duncan and make it appear that the men have killed the king.