

LADY MACBETH AS A POWERFUL WOMAN **by Rahul Gandotra**

The mock essay in this document was written by one of my students. When I met him, he was scoring a 3 to 4 in his mock GCSE English language and literature exams.

After intensive tuition sessions with me, his English writing skills improved such that he was writing at a 7 to 9 level. The essay below is one such example of his improved writing.

What follows is 1) the question from a mock GCSE exam, 2) his essay, and 3) my highlighted breakdown of his essay into its essential ingredients.

QUESTION

Read the following extract from Act 1 Scene 5 of Macbeth and then answer the question that follows.

At this point in the play Lady Macbeth is speaking. She has just received the news that King Duncan will be spending the night at her castle.

The raven himself is hoarse
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull
Of direst cruelty; make thick my blood,
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between
Th'effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night,
And pall thee 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!'

Starting with this speech, explain how far you think Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a powerful woman.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth in this speech
- how Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth in the play as a whole.

THE ESSAY

In 'Macbeth', Shakespeare explores many themes from betrayal and loyalty to revenge and power. Shakespeare explores the themes of power through Lady Macbeth, as she demands spirits to summon up male traits, implores them to make her remorseless, and encourages Macbeth to be manipulative and conniving.

In act 1 scene 5, Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a powerful woman who feels trapped within society's view of a female. In Shakespearian times, there were associated male and female traits with male traits associated with strength, aggression, and rationality. Female traits, on the other hand, were associated with beauty, tender thoughts, and sensitivity. Being a female herself, Lady Macbeth commands the 'sprites' to 'unsex [her] here,' so she can rid herself of her female traits so she can be more male and thus powerful enough to commit evil.

Continuing to talk to the spirits, Lady Macbeth asks to be further transformed, when she wants 'her 'milk' to be taken for 'gall'. Lady Macbeth would rather have her life-giving breast milk replaced with a vile substance that brings bitterness and death. In a sense, she would like to become death incarnate. In addition, Lady Macbeth thinks that both unsexing herself (and thus making herself more male) and transforming her fluid to poison will make her more prone to killing, thus making her a powerful threat.

Lady Macbeth, moreover, wants to make herself even more powerful by invoking the spirits to 'make thick [her] blood.' As blood, veins, arteries, and the heart make up the circulatory system, they act as a symbol of one's sensitivities and empathy for others. By asking for her blood to be thickened, Lady Macbeth asks to become less sensitive and more remorseless, thus making her more resolute in her schemes to kill.

In other parts of the play, Lady Macbeth exhibits her power by being manipulative, conniving, and persuasive. In act 1 scene 5, for example, she wants to manipulate Macbeth, when she wants to 'pour [her] spirits in [Macbeth's] ear [and] chastise with the valour of [her] tongue,' indicating that she wants to pressure Macbeth to do her tidings. This manipulation is also apparent when she convinces Macbeth that 'the sleeping and the dead are but as pictures' in attempt to dehumanise the sleeping so as to make the task of killing them that much easier. In addition, Lady Macbeth questions Macbeth's masculinity in many parts of the play, for example Act 3 scene 4, when she asks him, 'Are you a man?' She does this to taunt and belittle Macbeth, hoping that such taunts will force Macbeth to complete her evil machinations.

By asking to be more male, by asking to be filled with 'direst cruelty,' by asking to become more remorseless, and by being utterly manipulative and pushy, Lady Macbeth is presented as a multi-faceted, powerful woman capable of thinking and masterminding death and evil.

BREAKDOWN OF THE ESSAY

Each successful essay is made up of varying amounts of the following essay ingredients:

Thesis statement

Topic Sentence

Evidence Sentence / Fragment

Explanation Sentence / Fragment

Transitions

Concluding Remarks¹

What you'll see below is the same essay with each sentence (or sentence fragment) highlighted by essay ingredient with the colour key above. Hopefully, this will help you see how much of each essay ingredient is needed to construct a strong essay:

In 'Macbeth', Shakespeare explores many themes from betrayal and loyalty to revenge and power. Shakespeare explores the themes of power through Lady Macbeth, as she demands spirits to summon up male traits, implores them to make her remorseless, and encourages Macbeth to be manipulative and conniving.

In act 1 scene 5, Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a powerful woman who feels trapped within society's view of a female. In Shakespearian times, there were associated male and female traits with male traits associated with strength, aggression, and rationality. Female traits, on the other hand, were associated with beauty, tender thoughts, and sensitivity. Being a female herself, Lady Macbeth commands the 'sprints' to 'unsex [her] here,' so she can rid herself of her female traits so she can be more male and thus powerful enough to commit evil.

Continuing to talk to the spirits, Lady Macbeth asks to be further transformed, when she wants 'her 'milk' to be taken for 'gall'. Lady Macbeth would rather have her life-giving breast milk replaced with a vile substance that brings bitterness and death. In a sense, she would like to become death incarnate. In addition, Lady Macbeth thinks that both unsexing herself (and thus making herself more male) and transforming her fluid to poison will make her more prone to killing, thus making her a powerful threat.

Lady Macbeth, moreover, wants to make herself even more powerful by invoking the spirits to 'make thick [her] blood.' As blood, veins, arteries, and the heart make up the circulatory system, they act as a symbol of one's sensitivities and empathy for others. By asking for her blood to be thickened, Lady Macbeth asks to become less sensitive and more remorseless, thus making her more resolute in her schemes to kill.

¹ When tutoring a student, I not only spend a significant time going over each ingredient, I also teach them how to incorporate each ingredient into an essay.

In other parts of the play, Lady Macbeth exhibits her power by being manipulative, conniving, and persuasive. In act 1 scene 5, for example, she wants to manipulate Macbeth, when she wants to 'pour [her] spirits in [Macbeth's] ear [and] chastise with the valour of [her] tongue,' indicating that she wants to pressure Macbeth to do her tidings. This manipulation is also apparent when she convinces Macbeth that 'the sleeping and the dead are but as pictures' in attempt to dehumanise the sleeping so as to make the task of killing them that much easier. In addition, Lady Macbeth questions Macbeth's masculinity in many parts of the play, for example Act 3 scene 4, when she asks him, 'Are you a man?' She does this to taunt and belittle Macbeth, hoping that such taunts will force Macbeth to complete her evil machinations.

By asking to be more male, by asking to be filled with 'direst cruelty,' by asking to become more remorseless, and by being utterly manipulative and pushy, Lady Macbeth is presented as a multi-faceted, powerful woman capable of thinking and masterminding death and evil.