

# Macduff

Discuss the role of Macduff in the play *Macbeth*.

*Note: If the essay plan seems a little vague in places, it is because it is copied from a Keynote presentation used in a revision class in Christian Brothers College Cork in which I talked the students through each stage and point. However, I am hopeful that the essay itself will clear up any ambiguities.*

## Essay Plan:

### MACDUFF

Role in 'Macbeth'

#### INTRODUCTION

- Serves as a foil to both Macbeth and Banquo
- Moral compass showing how an honourable and patriotic should respond to events unfolding in the play

#### LOYAL AND DUTIFUL

- Has no personal ambition
- Embodies patriotism
- Takes his duties seriously
- Gives his allegiance freely and wholeheartedly

#### FIRST APPEARANCE IS SIGNIFICANT

- Appears just in time to discover Duncan's murder
- Shocked and distressed
- Views the murder as sacrilege: "Confusion now hath.../ broke ope / The Lord's anointed temple." –Macduff

#### HONEST AND STRAIGHTFORWARD

- Stark contrast between his reaction to the murder and Macbeth's
- Macbeth to Donalbain: 'The spring, the head, the fountain of your blood / Is stopped', etc. Wordy and skirting around the issue with euphemisms.

- Macduff to Donalbain: 'Your royal father's murdered.' Clear and to the point.
- Macduff immediately challenges anyone who acts suspiciously
- He, alone among those present, openly suspects Macbeth

#### ADMIRABLE

- Possesses great integrity
- Refuses to attend the coronation in Scone
- Refuses personal invitation from Macbeth
- More principled than Banquo, who feigns allegiance to Macbeth
- Too patriotic to see his 'nation miserable' and do nothing

#### FORMIDABLE ENEMY

- Brave and open
- Respected thane
- Macbeth sees this and is uneasy

#### HIS ROLE GROWS IN IMPORTANCE

- Significant that it is he who goes to England to plead with Malcolm to return
- Great integrity in his dealings with Malcolm, which Malcolm comments upon

#### SYMBOL OF HOPE AND GOODNESS

- In a time of evil, hypocrisy and equivocation, Macduff's honesty and integrity shines brightly.
- We wonder if it might be possible for one man's goodness and integrity to overcome the evil wrought by another man.
- Important that he refuses to compromise himself morally in any way, unlike Banquo and the other thanes.
- He does not want Malcolm back at any cost: Scotland is his chief concern.

#### A GROWING THREAT TO MACBETH

- Macbeth to apparition: 'Thou hast harp'd my fear aright'.
- Macbeth acts irrationally in his rage on seeing the parade of the eight kings.
- His senseless slaughter of Macduff's family sets the seal on his evil.
- Macduff now has a deeply personal reason to add to his patriotic reason for wanting to kill Macbeth

#### FLIGHT TO ENGLAND: A FLAW?

- Could be viewed as impulsive
- Does it show a certain naivety?
- Macduff's own wife thinks he has deserted his family
- On the other hand it may be a dreadful choice between family and country
- Choice of country over family shows the depth of Macduff's patriotism
- Death of Macduff's family shows how evil has spread into every aspect of life in Scotland

#### MAN OF ACTION

- Other thanes tolerate Macbeth's rule, despite their unhappiness
- 'Hold fast the mortal sword - and like good men / Bestride our downfall'n birthdom'
- Language is typically straightforward as he prays that 'this fiend of Scotland' is brought within his sword's reach

#### A TRUE EXAMPLE OF MANLINESS

- Expresses his sorrow at his family's death, but doesn't cry 'womanly' tears
- When Malcolm tells him to 'Dispute it like a man', Macduff replies that he 'must also feel it like a man'.
- Contrast between this and the Macbeths' view of manliness
- True manliness is a blend of courage and compassion

#### ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

- 'Attend the true event and put we on / Industrious censureship.'

#### REPRESENTS DIVINE RETRIBUTION

- Intent on killing Macbeth himself.
- Again shows his forthright nature: 'I have no words, / My voice is in my sword'.
- Macbeth dies at the hands of a man who embodies all the qualities he - Macbeth - lacks: honesty, integrity, loyalty, true manliness and patriotism.
- Macduff paid a high price for his country's freedom but we are left with a note of hope: one courageous, selfless and principled individual can make a difference in the face of terrible evil.

### Sample Answer:

Macduff's role in 'Macbeth' is principally to serve as a foil to both Macbeth and Banquo and to provide a moral compass for the audience by showing how an honest, innocent, upright and patriotic man should respond to the events unfolding in the play.

Macduff, like Macbeth and Banquo, is a thane and as such is one of the noblemen whose duty is to support his king. This is a duty Macduff is happy to assume. Unlike Macbeth, who challenges the natural order of the state by usurping the king, Macduff gives his allegiance freely and wholeheartedly. His devotion is clear from the outset: we see this in how seriously he takes his 'limited service' to wake the king, sounding anxious that he has 'almost slipped the hour' and politely ensuring that it is he who actually goes into the bedroom to call Duncan. Macduff has no personal ambition and thus has no desire to oust Duncan for his own advancement: he is the epitome of patriotism.

Significantly, Macduff first appears in the play just in time to discover Duncan's murder. His shock and distress are immediately apparent:

O horror, horror, horror!

Tongue cannot conceive, nor name thee

He goes on to compare the murder of Duncan to sacrilege, saying that 'Confusion now hath... / broke ope / The Lord's anointed temple'. Macduff sees the magnitude of the event and refers to it as 'The great doom's image': if the king dies unlawfully the world as Macduff knows it has come to an end.

The contrast between Macduff's honest and straightforward response to the murder and Macbeth's flowery, hypocritical speech on the same topic is not lost on the audience. When Donalbain asks what is amiss, Macbeth tells him that 'The spring, the head, the fountain of your blood / Is stopped', but Macduff simply says, 'Your royal father's murdered'. Macduff's forthright honesty means that he immediately challenges those he believes guilty of wrongdoing, regardless of who they may be.. At first he is sure that the grooms have killed Duncan, and wonders why Malcolm and Donalbain have fled if they were not responsible for ordering the murder. He says that their rapid departure 'puts upon them / Suspicion of the deed'. However, Macbeth's slaying of the grooms changes Macduff's opinion. He is shocked and asks Macbeth: 'Wherefore did you so?' Macduff's reaction here is important in that he, alone among the thanes present, openly voices his doubts and suspicions. The murder of the grooms was pointless and hindered any investigation of Duncan's murder, but the other thanes remain publicly silent on the topic.

Macduff's openness and honesty in a world that is increasingly ruled by equivocation and deception is admirable. Just as he was the only thane to openly challenge Macbeth on his reasoning in killing the grooms, so he is the only thane who refuses to pretend that all is well and attend the coronation of Macbeth in Scone. His closing remark at the end of Act 2 Scene iv shows that Macduff is aware of what Macbeth becoming king may mean for Scotland: 'Adieu! / Lest our old robes sit easier than our new'. This clothing imagery is interesting in that Macbeth's wearing of 'borrowed robes' is associated with his assuming a role to which he has no legitimate claim. Those thanes who stay with Macbeth after Duncan's murder are equally culpable of wearing 'borrowed robes' in that they accept the status handed to them by a corrupt king. Not only does Macduff refuse to attend Macbeth's coronation and will not visit him even when directly asked to do so. One of the lords tells Lennox that when Macduff was issued an invitation he said, 'Sir, not I'. Macduff is the only character in the play who is courageous and principled enough to stand up to Macbeth and openly defy him. Unlike Banquo, Macduff cannot feign allegiance to this new king, but instead sees his reign as something abominable, calling Macbeth an 'untitled tyrant, bloody-sceptered'. Macduff wonders when his 'nation miserable' shall see 'wholesome days again'.

Of course, Macduff's bravery and openness as well as the fact that he is a respected thane makes him a formidable enemy to Macbeth, and the latter is quick to see this. When he hears that Macduff has refused to attend his first banquet, Macbeth asks his wife 'How says't thou then that Macduff denies his person / At our great bidding?' It can be assumed that the increasingly paranoid and tyrannical Macbeth will set some of his many spies to watch Macduff.

When Macduff seeks out Malcolm in England and the latter is most convincing in his pretence that he possess all the qualities that would make him a bad king, Macduff is appalled and says that Malcolm is not only unfit to be a king but is unfit to live. This is brave talk, considering that Malcolm is the rightful heir and may well yet ascend the throne. However, Macduff's integrity prevents him from lying to or flattering Malcolm. In the end, his patriotism and obvious love for Scotland wins Malcolm over and convinces him that Macduff is not a spy. Macduff's role in the play is becoming more important: it is significant that he is the one to speak to Malcolm and beg him to return to Scotland and re-establish a legitimate rule.

At a time of chaos and moral ambiguity, Macduff's principled manliness and patriotism make him a symbol of the forces of good and we feel a measure of hope that order may be restored to Scotland if such a mature and respected thane is attempting to rally support for

**Malcolm.** Just as one man's evil actions can bring a country to its knees, so one man's bravery and goodness may help to save it. Macduff puts Scotland before all else and Malcolm recognises his 'noble integrity'. Macduff is blunt-spoken, principled and selfless at a time when weaker thanes than he are hypocritically paying 'mouth honour' to Macbeth despite their grave misgivings about his rule. Equivocation and deception are associated with evil, but both are wholly alien to Macduff.

Macbeth is well aware of the threat Macduff poses, and when the witches' first apparition warns him to 'beware Macduff', Macbeth responds that the vision 'hast harp'd my fear aright.' On hearing from Lennox that Macduff has fled to England, Macbeth flies into a rage, vowing that he will 'give to th' edge o' th' sword / His wife, his babes, and all the unfortunate souls / That trace him in his line.' This dreadful act sets the seal on Macbeth's descent into evil. His slaughter of innocent children is a reflection of Macbeth's desire to kill the future. The parade of eight kings has shown him that it is Banquo's issue who will rule, not Macbeth's, and he directs his fury and frustration at those who least deserve it. By so doing, of course, Macbeth makes Macduff an even deadlier enemy than before.

There are a number of ways of viewing Macduff's flight to England and his leaving his family unprotected. On the one hand, it could be argued that Macduff's most serious flaw is that he is impulsive and that he does not always consider the consequences of his actions. His flight to England was a bad idea in one way in that it left his wife and children unguarded and at the same time drew suspicion upon him. He should have known that Macbeth would act swiftly and ruthlessly to avenge this betrayal. Perhaps he was naïve in thinking that the tyrant would spare women and children, but it is hard to imagine he could be so foolish, seeing as it is he who tells Malcolm of Macbeth's reign of terror: 'Each new morn / New widows howl, new orphans cry; new sorrows / Strike heaven on the face'.

Macduff's own wife struggles to understand his flight:

Wisdom! to leave his wife, to leave his babes,  
His mansion and his titles in a place  
From whence himself does fly? He loves us not;  
He wants the natural touch: for the poor wren,  
The most diminutive of birds, will fight,  
Her young ones in her nest, against the owl.

Another way to view Macduff's flight is to consider that he may have been forced to choose

between his country and his family. That he chooses his country is proof positive of the depth of his patriotism, but it is also a reflection of the appalling situation in Scotland, where disorder and chaos have permeated family life as well as political life. As Ross remarks, 'cruel are the times when we are traitors ... / And do not know ourselves / But float upon a wild and violent sea'.

However, Macduff did at least act, unlike the thanes who remained in Scotland and tolerated the misery of Macbeth's rule. When Macduff meets Malcolm in England, the latter suggests that they take time to 'seek out some desolate shade, and there/ Weep our sad bosoms empty'. Macduff, a man of action, has no interest in doing such a thing and instead says that the pair should 'Hold fast the mortal sword – and like good men / Bestride our downfall'n birthdom'. When he hears the news of his wife and children's death, the distraught Macduff determines to avenge their deaths and the deaths of victims of Macbeth's rule. In typically straightforward language, Macduff prays that 'this fiend of Scotland' is brought before him so that he may deal with him in person.

Another aspect of Macduff's nature that comes to light in the wake of his family's slaughter is his humanity. He can scarcely believe the news, asking 'All my pretty ones? Did you say all?' His heartbreak is deeply affecting and – once again showing his forthright nature – he rebukes Malcolm for suggesting that he 'Dispute it like a man', replying that while he will do so, he 'must also feel it like a man.' This is an interesting comment on the idea of manliness. Earlier, Lady Macbeth had told her husband that to murder Duncan would be proof of his manliness, and he had told her admiringly that she should 'bring forth men-children only' when she said that she would be prepared to dash her baby's brains out rather than break a promise. Their twisted version of manliness is in stark contrast to Macduff's and his behaviour reminds us that true manliness is not a lack of feeling but is instead a blend of courage and compassion.

On arriving in Scotland, Macduff urges Malcolm to put off commenting on Macbeth and his character and advises that they instead 'Attend the true event and put we on / Industrious censureship'. Actions speak louder than words, in Macduff's estimation. His sole aim now is to kill Macbeth and avenge his family's murder.

Macduff now represents divine retribution, and he is solely bent on finding Macbeth. He refuses to engage in combat with Macbeth's 'wretched kerns' and is concerned lest another soldier should kill Macbeth: 'If thou be'st slain with no stroke of mine / My wife and children's ghosts will haunt me still'.

When Macbeth and Macduff finally meet on the battlefield, Macduff once again shows his forthright manner and his desire to let actions speak louder than words. He tells his enemy, 'I have no words, / My voice is in my sword'. Macbeth is 'unmanned' by Macduff's revelation that he was 'from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd' and finally realises that the evil powers have been toying with him and that his death is inevitable. It is fitting that he should die at the hands of a man who embodies the qualities Macbeth lacks: honesty, integrity, loyalty, true manliness and patriotism.

Macduff sacrificed everything in order to defeat Macbeth and restore order to his beloved Scotland. He paid a high price, but we are left with the message that a courageous, selfless and principled individual who is willing to stand up to the powers of evil can play a vital role in the restoration of goodness and order.

