

Sample Essay - Banquo

'While Banquo is a morally compromised character whose moral decline mirrors Macbeth's, he ultimately retains more nobility than does Macbeth.' (*This is not a quote from any critic; it's just my take on how a question on Banquo might be phrased. The closest question would be that of the 1987 LC examination: 'The Banquo Macbeth has killed is not the innocent soldier who met the witches and scorned their prophecies, nor the man who prayed to be delivered from temptation.' He is a man whose principles have been deeply compromised.*)

To what extent do you agree with this statement? Refer to the play in support of your answer.

Essay Plan:

(Note: This is a *far* more detailed plan than you would write in an exam. Its purpose is simply to show you how to structure the essay.)

THESIS

Moral decline mirrors Macbeth's, but is neither as rapid nor as serious.

Interesting character who, like Macbeth, remains enigmatic to the end. This is what makes him so interesting: he is neither wholly good nor wholly evil but is rather a man who allows himself to be tainted by the seeds of ambition planted in his mind by the witches.

FIRST POINT

- First impressions are positive.
- He and Macbeth are spoken of as equally brave and are linked from the outset.
- Key difference: Macbeth is rewarded immediately while Banquo is not, yet Macbeth is unhappy while Banquo is not.
- 'Noble Banquo, thou hast no less deserved Nor must be known no less to have done so.' –*Duncan*
- Banquo's honesty is seen in his short but heartfelt reply to Duncan's speech:

'There if I grow, / The harvest is your own.'

- Compare this to Macbeth's longer speech about the fealty he owes Duncan; a speech which is very quickly followed by dark thoughts about Malcolm's being appointed Prince of Cumberland: 'That is a step / On which I must fall down, or else o'er leap'.

SECOND POINT

- He shows himself to be perceptive and morally upright when he and Macbeth meet the witches.
- While Macbeth is eager to learn more and keen to know from where the witches have derived their information, Banquo is less than convinced by them.
- Macbeth: 'say, from whence you owe this strange allegiance'
- Banquo: 'Are you ought that man may question?'
- Macbeth is 'rapt withal' and is willing to put his trust in the witches.
- Banquo is suspicious and is wary of the witches, knowing that men can be lured into evil by such temptation: 'And oftentimes, to win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths, / Win us with honest trifles, to betray's / In deepest consequence' – *Banquo*
- Banquo is not initially tempted by the witches, nor does he show any desire for the crown.
- Macbeth is tormented from the moment he meets the witches, but Banquo is not.
- His conscience is clear at this stage.

THIRD POINT

- As the play progresses, Banquo finds it harder to resist temptation.
- Like Macbeth, he no longer sleeps soundly, admitting to Fleance that he is struggling to restrain 'cursed thoughts' and is troubled by the witches: 'I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters'.
- However, there are significant differences between Banquo and Macbeth at this

stage.

- Banquo readily admits to being tempted by the witches' prophecies; Macbeth does not.
- Banquo calls on the 'merciful powers' to help him fight these troubling thoughts, while Macbeth has called on darkness to hide his 'black and deep desires'.
- Banquo still retains his nobility.
- There is nothing wrong with being tempted; Banquo has not contemplated acting on these temptations, while Macbeth has.
- Banquo reacts honourably to Macbeth's hint that he, Macbeth, will reward Banquo if he supports him.
- 'If you do cleave to my consent, when 'tis It shall make honour for you.' – *Macbeth*
- 'So I shall lose none
In seeking to augment it, but still keep
My bosom franchised and allegiance clear,
I shall be counselled.' – *Banquo*
What Banquo means by this... 'I am not willing to sacrifice any of my honour in order to gain more honour from you. I will do what I can, but I will keep my conscience clear and my loyalty will be to the king.'

Banquo at this stage in the play:

- Honourable
- Possessed of integrity
- Uncompromising in matters of conscience
- Has not succumbed to temptation

FOURTH POINT

- Does allow himself to become morally compromised by the witches' prophecies.
- On learning of the murder, Banquo is appalled, vowing, 'against the undivulgd'

pretence I fight of treasonous malice'.

- However, although he obviously suspects Macbeth of the murder: 'I fear / Thous hast played most falsely for it', he does nothing about his suspicions.
- He does not stand up to Macbeth or flee the country, as Macduff does.
- He appears willing to accept Macbeth's reign: 'Let your highness / Command upon me'.
- He claims to be linked to Macbeth 'with a most indissoluble tie'

FIFTH POINT

- Banquo's final soliloquy seems to point to his reason for allowing himself to become morally compromised.
- We have to wonder why he does nothing when the king he loved was murdered.
- The reason seems to be that he believes his own desires may be realised too: 'May they not be my oracles as well, and set me up in hope?'
- Although his descent is nothing like as rapid or as serious as Macbeth's, Banquo does undergo a moral decline.

CONCLUSION

- Some view Banquo as a foil to Macbeth and an example of the way Macbeth should have behaved when tempted by the prophecies.
- However, I believe Banquo slides from being a noble and honourable character to becoming a morally ambiguous man possessed of some of the same flaws as Macbeth.
- Both are deceitful and both allow themselves to be tainted by the evil they encounter on the heath.
- Banquo's untimely death may have saved him from a further moral decline.
- 'While Banquo is initially contrasted with Macbeth as an innocent man with a guilty conscience, it seems to be supposed that this contrast must be continued to his death: while in reality, though it is never removed, it is gradually diminished'. *A.C. Bradley*

Sample Essay:

The character of Banquo is often seen as one-dimensional and he is viewed in an overly simplistic manner. Critics stress his loyalty, obedience and honesty; seeing him as the better part of Macbeth: the road Macbeth did not take. However, I believe Banquo is more enigmatic and perplexing than that and is, like Macbeth, a morally ambiguous character who lacks the clarity of being totally good or totally evil. After all, he – like Macbeth – is disturbed by the prophecies and entertains a guilty hope that the prophecies may be realised. He suspects Macbeth may be guilty of regicide yet he does nothing about it but instead swears an ‘indissoluble tie’ to the usurper. These are hardly the actions of a brave, loyal, noble subject but point to the fact that Banquo, like Macbeth, is morally compromised as the ideas the witches have planted in his mind take hold, albeit not to the same extent as is Macbeth.

Banquo’s importance as a foil to Macbeth is clear from the opening moments of the play. Just as our first introduction to Macbeth is from the wounded sergeant who tells of his valour on the battlefield, so we learn of Banquo’s ferocity and victory in the same speech. The pair are linked from the outset: ‘So they doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe...’ and Duncan acknowledges Banquo’s role in defeating the enemy when he says he is just as good a general as Macbeth and deserves great rewards for his actions: ‘Noble Banquo, / Thou hast no less deserved / Nor must be known no less to have done so’.

It is significant that, despite their joint exploits on the battlefield, only Macbeth is rewarded with a title, and while Duncan acknowledges that ‘noble Banquo’ is equally deserving of his gratitude, he does not reward him as he does Macbeth. Yet, although Macbeth is rewarded and Banquo is not, it is Macbeth who is so unhappy with his position that he is prepared to kill the king in order to alter it, while Banquo never shows any bitterness or discontent at the discrepancy in their treatment. Indeed, he is gracious and loyal to Duncan and tells the king, ‘There if I grow, the harvest is your own.’ His words are simple and heartfelt and he appears at this stage to be a truly admirable character. It is interesting to note the difference between Banquo’s honest simplicity here in his short reply to Duncan and Macbeth’s longer speech about the

fealty he owes Duncan; a speech which is very quickly followed by dark thoughts about Malcolm's being appointed Prince of Cumberland: 'That is a step / On which I must fall down, or else o'er leap'.

The contrast between Macbeth and his foil is more clearly established in their meeting with the witches. We see that Macbeth's physical courage is matched by a consuming ambition as he begs the witches, 'stay you imperfect speakers, tell me more'. Macbeth is impatient to know from which authority the witches have derived their information, but Banquo is calm and purposeful, more interested in what the witches are: 'Are you ought that man may question?' than of the vision of the future they offer. While Macbeth is instantly willing to put his trust in false appearances, Banquo is suspicious of the danger the witches pose, showing that he is far more perceptive than Macbeth. When Macbeth learns he has been awarded the title of Thane of Cawdor, his mind immediately flies to the witches' prophecy that he would be king. He asks Banquo if he now hopes his children will be kings, given that the prophecies are coming true. Warily, Banquo says that we can be lured into evil by such temptation:

And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray 's
In deepest consequence –

Both Macbeth and Banquo are offered tempting visions of the future by the witches, but initially at least; it is only Macbeth who succumbs. While Macbeth struggles with his guilty conscience and the conflict between what he wants and what he knows he must do to gain the crown, Banquo is free from envy, doubt or torment.

As the play progresses, Banquo finds it harder to resist temptation. Like Macbeth, he no longer sleeps soundly, admitting to Fleance that he is struggling to restrain 'cursed

thoughts' and is troubled by the witches: 'I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters'. However, there are significant differences between Banquo and Macbeth at this stage. Banquo readily admits to being tempted by the witches' prophecies; Macbeth does not. Banquo calls on the 'merciful powers' to help him fight these troubling thoughts, while Macbeth has called on darkness to hide his 'black and deep desires'. Macbeth is secretive and deceptive, telling Banquo that he does not think about the witches at all but Banquo freely admits that he is troubled by their prophecies. Banquo still retains his nobility at this stage as there is nothing wrong with being tempted; Banquo has not contemplated acting on these temptations, while Macbeth has.

Banquo reacts honourably to Macbeth's hint that he, Macbeth, will reward Banquo if he supports him: 'If you do cleave to my consent, when 'tis It shall make honour for you.' Banquo's reply shows that he is still the honourable and noble man he was at the start of the play, even if he is privately wrestling with his conscience:

So I shall lose none
In seeking to augment it, but still keep
My bosom franchised and allegiance clear,
I shall be counselled.'

Banquo's moral courage in standing up to Macbeth at this stage is admirable, but he makes the fatal mistake of on the one hand standing up to Macbeth and saying that he will betray neither the king nor his conscience, and then abstaining from any action once Macbeth murders Duncan. Macbeth knows full well that Banquo is brave and noble: saying that he 'hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour'. The other side of this combination of bravery and intelligence, of course, is that it makes Banquo a danger to Macbeth. He knows too much for Macbeth's comfort, and is more than capable of acting bravely and resourcefully if he decides to confront his comrade in arms. Macbeth admits that he fears Banquo: 'there is none but he, / Whose being I do fear'.

After the murder, we witness a significant deterioration in Banquo's morality. On learning of the murder, Banquo is appalled, vowing, 'against the undivulg'd pretence I fight of treasonous malice'. It would be reasonable to assume, from what he says here, that Banquo will stop at nothing in his efforts to bring justice to whoever has committed this dreadful murder. However, we soon learn that events are to unfold quite differently, despite Banquo's vow and his obvious suspicion of Macbeth. In his short soliloquy in Act 3, Scene 1, Banquo articulates his doubts about the newly appointed king, Macbeth and suspects that foul play has brought Macbeth to the throne: 'and I fear, thou play'd most foully for it.' Banquo has now become a morally ambiguous character. He seems to derive a guilt consolation that if Macbeth's prophecies have been realised, perhaps his will be too. After all, the witches predicted that his children will one day ascend to the throne. Banquo now appears far less inclined to dismiss the witches as mere 'instruments of darkness'.

Banquo does not stand up to Macbeth or flee the country, as Macduff does. He appears to accept Macbeth's reign, saying 'Let your highness / Command upon me'. He is willing to attend the banquet to celebrate Macbeth's coronation and appears happy to serve on the council of state. At no stage does Banquo confide his fears and doubts about Macbeth's rule to anyone but the audience. Banquo is a fundamentally good and moral person, but like Macbeth, he has been touched by the witches' evil and by their temptation.

Some view Banquo as a foil to Macbeth and an example of the way Macbeth should have behaved when tempted by the prophecies.

However, I believe Banquo slides from being a noble and honourable character to becoming a morally ambiguous man possessed of some of the same flaws as Macbeth. Both are deceitful and both allow themselves to be tainted by the evil they encounter on the heath. Horrifying though it is to see a man savagely murdered on the orders of his one-time companion in arms, Banquo's untimely death may have saved him from a further moral decline. In the words of A.C. Bradley, 'While Banquo is initially contrasted with Macbeth as an innocent man with a guilty conscience, it seems to be

supposed that this contrast must be continued to his death: while in reality, though it is never removed, it is gradually diminished'.

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