

## Sample Essay Macbeth – SEC 2004 – Question 2

(ii) 'The play, *Macbeth*, has many scenes of compelling drama.'

Choose one scene that you found compelling and say why you found it to be so. Support your answer by reference to the play. (60)

### Marking Scheme:

While candidates may interpret 'one scene' liberally, they should focus mainly on one particular part of the play, or on a group of related scenes such as the meetings with the witches, or the murder of Duncan and its immediate aftermath.

Code CD for 'compelling drama'.

Possible points:

Compelling drama because of...

- the setting and atmosphere
- the tension and conflict created in it
- its occurrence at a key moment in the drama
- the mood created by the actions and thoughts of the characters
- the dramatic impact of Shakespeare's language/imagery
- the staging, costume, lighting
- the scene's potential for special effects

Etc.

### Sample Answer:

*Macbeth* is full of moments of high drama, combining as it does mystery, suspense, the supernatural, violence and horror. One scene which I believe contains all of these compelling elements and more is Act IV Scene i when Macbeth seeks out the witches because he is 'bent to know / By the worst means the worst'.

The positioning of this scene is interesting. Macbeth has already told the audience that he

will visit the ‘Weird sisters’ and has indicated his intentions of continuing his reign of terror, telling his wife that he is ‘in blood / Stepp’d so far’ that there is little point in turning back now; these words following shortly on the astonishing and horrifying appearance of Banquo’s ghost at the feast. Any audience would be impatient to hear what Macbeth will ask the witches and what they will reply.

The scene opens in a highly dramatic fashion. Thunder rolls in an atmosphere of darkness and evil as the three witches gather around the cauldron to prepare their spell. Shakespeare’s audience would have found such a sight even more thrilling than we do today, as they believed in witches and feared their power.

The imagery used in this scene highlights the witches’ connection to the supernatural and their innate evilness. The revolting and gruesome ingredients they throw into the cauldron are carefully chosen by Shakespeare to horrify and captivate the audience in equal measure. Each one is described in dreadful detail with a sort of ghoulish relish. For example, we learn that the toad has been left under a stone for a month, which was believed to make it produce a potent poison. As the ingredients are listed, they become ever more exotic and repulsive. ‘Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf’ are fantastical, while ‘Liver of blaspheming Jew’ along with ‘Nose of Turk and Tartar’s lips’ are dually shocking because of the desecration of bodies and because of the connection with what Shakespeare’s audience would have regarded as anti-Christian, Godless people. At this stage in the list, the audience is on tenterhooks to see what will come next. The ‘Finger of birth-strangled babe / Ditch-delivered by a drab’ is an appalling image and would be repugnant to Jacobean and modern audiences alike. Shakespeare’s audience would be more likely to find the witches’ gruesome spell even more enthralling than would a modern audience, however, because they would view it as a glimpse into a very real, forbidden, terrifying ritual.

Using synonyms of ‘compelling’ helps to keep your writing from becoming too repetitive.

Into this atmosphere of deepest evil appears Macbeth. He is arrogant and impatient with the witches, demanding that they answer his questions. He wants the truth at any cost and says that even if the witches have to ‘untie the winds and let them fight / Against the churches’ in order to satisfy his demand, then so be it. This is a most dramatic moment in the play as we see just how far Macbeth is willing to go to achieve his ends. In order to get answers, he is willing to allow such havoc to be wreaked on the world that in the end destruction itself will sicken of its own excesses. Coming directly after the

Make sure to anchor any focused narrative by referring back to the question.

witches' terrible spell, the audience waits in horrified fascination to see what new terrors will be unleashed as a result of Macbeth's demand.

The answer comes almost immediately with a dramatic roll of thunder and the appearance of the first Apparition: an armed head. This, along with the second and third Apparition, would be relatively easy to create on a darkened stage lit only by the fire under the witches' cauldron. The effect of the Apparition on an audience is electrifying because it has been conjured up with dreadful spells and is thus inextricably linked with evil and the supernatural.

Each of the Apparitions causes a change in Macbeth's mood which adds to the sense of tension in the scene. The armed head says little, only warning Macbeth to 'Beware Macduff'. This comment taps into Macbeth's own fears but the Apparition vanishes before Macbeth can question it and the witches tell him that the spirit 'will not be commanded'. This alerts the audience to the danger Macbeth has placed himself in by dabbling with these occult powers. They suit themselves, not him.

The second Apparition 'More potent than the first' appears with another roll of thunder. It is a dreadful image – that of a 'bloody child'. It addresses Macbeth by name three times, and in a momentary lightening of the tension here he jokes 'Had I three ears, I'd hear thee'. This small joke gives the audience a momentary respite from the compelling horror and suspense that has dominated the scene thus far. The Apparition's next words change amusement to puzzlement, however, as the child tells Macbeth that 'none of woman born' can harm him. This is an intriguing comment, as it raises a number of questions. If Macbeth cannot be killed, then how can he ever be defeated by the forces of good? How can the first Apparition's warning have much meaning if Macbeth is invincible? The audience is now familiar enough with the witches' ways to suspect that they have no interest in helping Macbeth but are using him as an instrument of chaos and destruction. Where, therefore, is the catch? They have spoken in riddles before, saying that Banquo is not as great as Macbeth but greater and so forth, so are these Apparitions speaking in riddles also? Such questions involve the audience deeply in the plot and make this an enthralling section of the play.

Macbeth is elated by the second Apparition's prophecy but still plans to kill Macduff, just to 'make assurance double sure'. This promise of murder tells the audience that the next sections of the play will not lack excitement and violence.

The third Apparition – a crowned child holding a tree – keeps the audience transfixed. Who or what does this child represent and what has it to tell Macbeth? Why is it holding a tree? The answer, when it comes, is even more intriguing than the second Apparition's prophecy. It says that Macbeth will not be defeated until 'Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him'. Again, this is a statement designed to keep the audience involved in the plot. Where is the catch? It does not seem possible now that Macbeth will be defeated, which is a horrifying prospect. Yet these evil creatures deal in half-truths and lies, and good must somehow triumph over evil... Anyone viewing the play is now so caught up in the suspense and mystery that it would be impossible not to remain riveted to the rest of the action.

The appearance of the eight kings is a moment of high drama in this scene as they parade across the stage to Macbeth's mounting horror and dismay. All of his false security is stripped away as he sees 'the blood-boltered Banquo' smiling at him and showing him that it is his descendants – and not Macbeth's – that shall rule Scotland. Macbeth is in a frenzy of emotion as he watches the procession. He does not know what to think and the witches vanish before he can learn more.

Having been witness to the full gamut of Macbeth's emotions in this scene as he moved from arrogance and impatience to bewilderment and despair, the audience has one more shock to come. Lennox appears and tells Macbeth that Macduff has fled to England. In an aside, Macbeth announces his intention to slaughter Macduff's 'wife, his babes, and all the unfortunate souls / That trace him in his line.' This is a chilling and powerfully dramatic end to a scene that has held the audience in fascinated horror and amazement from start to finish.

