

Macbeth – SEC 2007 – Question 2

(ii) “Essentially the play Macbeth is about power, its use and abuse.”

Discuss this view of the play, supporting your answer with the aid of suitable reference to the text.

Marking Scheme:

Candidates are free to agree, disagree or partly agree with the view expressed in the question, but must focus on the use and abuse of power within the play.

“Power” may be understood to refer to political, moral, ‘divine’, emotional, physical power, etc. In response, candidates may employ focused narrative to illustrate the points they make.

Code UP for use of power and AP for abuse of power.

Possible points:

Use of power

- Macbeth’s powerful presence on the battlefield
- Duncan’s use of political power is ineffectual
- Lady Macbeth uses her influence to support her husband
- divine power “healing” the sick and curing “the Evil”
- Malcolm identifies the ideal of moral/political power
- the obsession with power dominates the story

Abuse of power

- the power of evil
- the excessive use of physical violence throughout
- the witches’ prophetic power deceives their victims
- Lady Macbeth’s emotional blackmail
- the tyranny of Macbeth’s reign

Etc.

Sample Answer:

The use and abuse of power is central to the play *Macbeth*.

It is set in a place and time where political and social stability depend on there being a firm ruler at the helm.

Scotland, when the play opens, is under threat from external and internal forces. The Norwegian king, Sweno, is

attacking the north of the country and at the same time, the rebellious thanes Macdonwald and Cawdor are fighting King Duncan's army. The country is on the brink of chaos and needs strong leadership to get it back on track and keep it there.

The introduction should indicate the direction the answer will take. This should be reflected again at the end of your answer.

Duncan is a good and virtuous king – even his murderer, Macbeth, admits that ‘his virtues / Will plead like angels trumpet tongued against / The deep damnation of his taking off,’ but Duncan's power is waning as he ages. He is not physically strong enough to lead his army into battle any longer, and must rely on Macbeth to do so in his stead. It is also difficult to believe that in his heyday a respected king like Duncan would have used such poor judgement in selecting men for favour and promotion. He laments that the rebellious Thane of Cawdor was a ‘gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust’, and yet he awards that title to Macbeth – a man who already harbours thoughts of regicide. We see now that Duncan may possess divine authority and many kingly virtues, but his judgement and military power have faded. Under his rule, Scotland is sliding into chaos. It is clear that the country needs a ruler who wields military, political and moral authority in equal measure if the country is to regain stability and peace.

Unfortunately for Scotland, the man who seizes the throne may be physically strong, but he is morally weak. Macbeth is undoubtedly powerful in the field of battle; we hear that he has ‘carv'd out his passage’ through the enemy until he faced the rebellious Macdonwald and then sliced him in two, ‘from the nave to the / chops’. Allied with this soldierly strength, however, is moral weakness. He possesses ‘valuting ambition’ but his desire to rule is based on selfishness rather than any feeling of responsibility towards his country. He wants power for its own sake, and that can only lead to disaster.

Macbeth's lust for power might have remained just that if it were not for the fact that he is married to a woman whose longing for ‘the golden round’ is greater than his own. From the moment she hears of the witches' prophecies, Lady Macbeth is determined that her husband shall fulfil them. Her power lies in her knowledge of her husband's nature. When Macbeth's conscience persuades him that to kill Duncan would be a deed so horrible and wrong that the

heavens themselves would cry out against it, Lady Macbeth bends him to her will by bombarding him with emotional blackmail. In fifty short lines, she wins Macbeth over to her point of view, using arguments that do not hold up to any scrutiny. She tells Macbeth that he should kill the king because not to do so would prove that he lacks ambition, is a coward, doesn't really love his wife, and is reneging on a promise. Far from seeing through her spurious arguments, Macbeth says admiringly that his wife should 'Bring forth men children only' and assures her that he is now determined to 'bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat'.

Getting Macbeth to this place has not been easy. Lady Macbeth has had to call not only on her powers of persuasion and her intimate knowledge of his personality, but has also felt the need to resort to the aid of supernatural. She invokes the powers of evil to 'fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty' in order to steel herself to this dreadful murder. Calling on supernatural powers to help in moments of crisis is not restricted to those bent on evil, however. Banquo begs 'Merciful powers' to hold back those 'cursed thoughts' that he is plagued with when he dwells on the witches' prophecy about his descendants becoming kings. Supernatural powers, then, are subject to use or abuse by those who seek their aid. Those bent on evil call on hellish powers and those whose aim is goodness invoke heaven for support in their moments of weakness.

It is important to ensure that each paragraph refers to the question.

After the murder of Duncan, Macbeth and his wife assume power as king and queen of Scotland. Their rule is not a lawful one; it has been achieved through treachery and slaughter, and so the power they wield is corrupt from the moment Macbeth ascends the throne. They have no divine mandate, nor do their subjects trust them. Malcolm, the lawful heir, has fled, along with his brother Donalbain. Macduff refuses to attend the coronation. Even nature itself revolts against Macbeth: the Old Man tells Ross that the dark day is 'unnatural, / Even like the deed that's done', and goes on to list aberrations such as a 'mousing owl' killing a falcon and Duncan's horses 'Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would / Make war with mankind'. These omens do not bode well for Scotland under Macbeth's rule.

Macbeth realises early on in his reign that the power he has attained through the murder of the lawfully-appointed king will bring him no contentment: 'To be thus is nothing; / But to be safely thus'. He says that the murder of Duncan has 'fil'd my mind' and has 'put rancours in the vessel of my peace'. His grip on power is tenuous and he feels insecure and paranoid. As long as Banquo lives, Macbeth holds but 'a barren sceptre' and wears 'a fruitless crown'.

His wife is similarly unhappy in her role as queen, reflecting that ‘Nought’s had, all’s spent, / Where our desire is got without content’.

Macbeth does not possess all the necessary kingly attributes to rule wisely and well. His power lies solely in his ability to eliminate those who stand in his way – as we saw in the description of him on the battlefield – and so he begins a tyrannical and bloody reign, starting with the murder of his friend, Banquo and the attempted murder of Banquo’s son. That his first act as king should be to order the slaying of his friend and an innocent child shows us clearly that Macbeth intends to abuse the power he possesses and unleash evil and terror upon his unfortunate subjects.

The appearance of Banquo’s ghost at the banquet appals Macbeth, but his reaction to it is chilling. The sight of the ‘horrible shadow’ of his slaughtered friend does not turn him from the path of evil but instead makes him even more determined to act ruthlessly against those who challenge his authority. He says that he is ‘in blood / Stepp’d so far, that should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as to go o’er’. He tells his wife that they are ‘yet but young in deed’ and we realise that his kingship will be one of unbridled bloodshed and savagery. Scotland has become a perverted version of the battlefield on which Macbeth was such a powerful and unstoppable force.

As Macbeth matures in evil, so Lady Macbeth dwindles. She had influence over Macbeth before the murder of Duncan, but now he no longer confides in her, telling her to ‘be innocent of the knowledge’ when she asks what he intends to do to Banquo. After the banquet scene, she vanishes from the action of the play. When we next see her, she is so weighed down by the terrible burden of guilt and fear that she is wandering the halls, re-enacting the various horrors for which she and Macbeth have been responsible: ‘Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?’ She is spent force by the end of the play, tormented and broken by the hellish power she has unleashed.

Macbeth, too, comes to see that nothing he does can salvage his authority. With each murder he commits, he sinks further into a nightmarish existence. Scotland suffers under his reign; Macduff tells Malcolm that each day ‘New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows / Strike heaven on the face’. Macbeth sees the futility of his life, calling it ‘A tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing’, but seems unwilling or unable to relinquish power. He clings desperately to the only thing he knows, and that is fighting. He refuses to surrender or die nobly, determined to drag as many

Weave quotes into the fabric of your sentences to illustrate your points.

people as he can into the void with him: 'Whiles I see lives / The gashes do better on them'. Having ruled by the sword, and dies by it, mourned by nobody. His reign of 'watchful tyranny' is at an end.

Malcolm, who takes his rightful place as king of Scotland at the play's end, leaves us with a hope that the country will at last achieve peace and order. He possess every sort of power that a good ruler should have. He has a divine mandate, he is his father's chosen successor, he is shrewd enough to test Macduff's loyalty when he arrives in England, and he is strong enough to lead his army into battle against the 'butcher', Macbeth. His closing speech, in which he outlines his intentions, shows that he will be a fair and wise monarch. At last, we feel, the balance of power has been restored and goodness has triumphed over evil.

Macbeth is a cautionary tale. It shows us how those who abuse their power bring nothing but corruption and destruction upon their victims and themselves.

Macbeth desired power for its own sake, and did not accept any of the duties or responsibilities that should go hand in hand with a position of authority. Once a brave warrior, he dies a hated butcher, brought low by his own 'dark desires'. In the words of Macduff, 'Not in the legions / Of horrid hell can come a devil more damned / In evils to top Macbeth.'

Do not introduce any new points in your concluding paragraph/s. Instead, refer back to the opening section of your answer and ensure that you are tying up your essay neatly by referring back to it.