

WHAT HAPPENS IN ACT II, MACBETH

Scene I It is after midnight as Banquo comes in with his young son, Fleance. Banquo is reluctant to go to bed because he fears his sleep will be troubled. Macbeth comes in, and Banquo tells him that the king has gone to bed, having enjoyed the evening. Banquo then says he dreamed the previous night of the witches. Macbeth claims he gives no thought to them, but he suggests that they talk further about the witches at another time. He implies that if Banquo cooperates with him, he will be rewarded. Banquo replies that if he can gain the reward (honour) without behaving in a dishonourable or disloyal way, he will. He and Fleance leave. Macbeth sends a servant to Lady Macbeth asking her to summon him with a bell when his "drink is ready." Alone, he hallucinates, thinking he sees a dagger in the air. Just then, the bell summons him to the evil deed.



Questions and Answers Act II Scene I

1. *In what respects does this scene give us a good atmosphere for the murder scene, and how is the atmosphere created?*

This scene has given us the appropriate atmosphere for murder, Macbeth intoxicated with excitement and ready for any unnatural deed, and Banquo troubled but loyal.

In this scene we have Macbeth's famous dagger soliloquy. The first nineteen lines reveal the near-hysterical condition of Macbeth; the next 12 create a splendid atmosphere for "midnight, murder, and mischief". Macbeth, tense as he waits for the signal of the bell, again becomes the victim of his uncontrollable imagination. He sees a dagger before him directing him to Duncan's door. He turns his mind outward to the world of nature and by a selection of the most eerie details, builds up a perfect night for murder. He prays that earth may not reveal his intentions and frustrate his plans, for this night of horror is well suited to his horrible deed.

Banquo (his son, Fleance, is with him) seems in trouble, in a mood of foreboding. His "cursed thoughts" torment him. To Macbeth, who enters, he speaks fair words and mentions generous gifts from the king. It seems that Banquo suspects Macbeth. There has been much speculation as to what Banquo knew of Macbeth's intentions, and even to what extent, if at all, he was an accomplice. It would seem from this scene that he had suspicions of Macbeth's purpose. The "cursed thoughts" may be his fears regarding Macbeth's intentions. The mention of the good old king and his generosity is an attempt to disarm or soften Macbeth. And to Macbeth's wishes regarding the witches, Banquo is firm: "I must keep my honour untarnished, my conscience free and my loyalty to the king unquestioned." Banquo then, seems honourable, free in conscience, loyal to the king and a peace-maker - if peace can be made.

2. *Why is the presence of Fleance important?*

Fleance is important because through him, Banquo's descendants will reign. It is natural that he should be seen here with his father, and there is no one else in the castle to whom the father may reveal his mind.



Scene II Lady Macbeth, alone, talks to herself about what she has done. She gave the king's grooms enough wine to make them drunk and drugged them besides. She put out their daggers for Macbeth and would have killed the king herself, had he not reminded her of her father. Macbeth comes in to tell her the deed is done. He is unnerved because when the unsuspecting grooms prayed, he could not say, "Amen." She tells him not to dwell upon the deed, but to get water and wash the blood from his hands. In his agitation, Macbeth brought the grooms' daggers out of the room. She tells him to take them back and smear the sleeping grooms with blood, but he refuses. She then replaces the daggers herself. While he is alone, Macbeth hears knocking. Lady Macbeth returns and she too has heard the knocking. She says they must retire to their bedroom and put on night clothes so that the visitors will think they have been asleep. Macbeth is regretting his deed and wishing Duncan were still alive.



Questions and Answers Act II Scene II

1. *What factors have made this scene very dramatic?*

Night, grim castle walls, the cry within, the waiting, the broken Macbeth, his fears and uncontrolled talk, the bloody daggers, conflict between husband and wife, Macbeth's gory hands, his sense of sin, his remorse, the loud knocking which breaks upon this eerie hour and this evil deed.

2. *Discuss Macbeth as a murderer.*

He is a very poor one. He has to lash himself into hysteria to commit murder (dagger scene), shouts out when all should be silent, thinks about it when he should act not think, brings back with him the evidence of his deed (bloody daggers), shows great weakness in the presence of his accomplice (wife), yields to a sense of sin, sees himself guilty for all the future, and longs to see his victim alive again.

3. *What evidence have we in this scene of a conflict in lady Macbeth?*

She has "drunk deep" in order to meet the needs of the occasion; the sight of the sleeping king reminds her of her father and restrains her from murder, and she is even for a few moments womanly - when she tries to console her husband. Her taking back the daggers to the murdered old man who looked like her father is an act of sheer necessity, no labour of love.

Scene III The porter goes grumbling to open the gate as if he were opening the gates of Hell. (His soliloquy is intended as comic relief after the great tension of the previous scene.) The visitors are Macduff and Lennox. When Macbeth appears, Macduff explains that he has an appointment with Duncan, and Macbeth takes him to the king's door. Macduff returns, horrified at the sight of his king, cruelly murdered. Macbeth and Lennox rush to Duncan's room while Macduff rouses the household. Macduff cannot bring himself to tell Lady Macbeth what has happened. When Banquo appears, Macduff tells him. Macbeth returns to make a grieving speech as Malcolm and Donalbain finally appear. When Malcolm asks who killed his father, Lennox says the grooms were apparently the villains. Macbeth "repents" that in his anger, he killed the grooms on sight. Macduff questions why Macbeth killed them, and at that moment, Lady Macbeth faints. In the confusion that follows, Malcolm and Donalbain decide to flee since they think their father's murderer may strike them next.



Meanwhile, at Banquo's suggestion, the others decide to meet to discuss what will happen.

Questions and Answers Act II Scene III

1. *What does the porter episode contribute?*

The drunken porter likes to fancy that he is porter at the gate of hell admitting the dead who have trodden "the primrose path to the everlasting bonfire". By its humour the porter scene gives relief from the grim, tense, murder scene, deepens it by contrast, and deepens, also the heavy parts that are to follow, creates a certain suspense (who will break in upon the murder?), allows the Macbeths time to be properly attired as sleepers, and provides a sort of macabre dramatic humour. (This house *is* actually a bit of hell, despite the porter's jocular fancies.)

2. *What things in Macbeth's words and actions would arouse the suspicions of those present?*

His sudden and unwarranted killing of the grooms, his over-expression of grief for Duncan and of his love for him.

3. *Did Lady Macbeth actually faint? or did she merely pretend to do so?*

It was genuine. She was not by nature a strong woman consistently evil in purpose, she had been restrained from murdering Duncan because he looked like her father; she saw on this occasion that Macbeth was by his words and actions inviting suspicion. Finally, at the end of the play, she is quite broken by events. Her fainting is the first sign of the weakness that, gradually progressing, will lead to her complete downfall.

Scene IV Ross and an old man discuss strange events that have immediately followed Duncan's death. Macduff appears and Ross questions him about the king's murder. Macduff says it is believed the grooms were the murderers, acting for someone else. Since the king's sons have fled, suspicion falls on them. Macduff also reports that Macbeth is to be the new king and that Duncan's body has been taken to the burial place of his ancestors. Macduff will not attend Macbeth's coronation; rather, he is returning home to Fife.



Questions and Answers Act II Scene IV

1. *How, in this scene, does Shakespeare foreshadow the future?*

By his use of the supernatural, and by the prominence given to Macduff.

2. *Illustrate from this scene Shakespeare's use of nature.*

Shakespeare uses nature as a comment upon past actions and to foreshadow an unnatural future. The sun is in eclipse, the animal kingdom is topsy-turvy (owl attacking a falcon and the king's horses eating each other - all this is like the deed that's done - unnatural) all suggest evil, unnatural events to follow.

3. *How is the reader made to feel that Macduff will be Macbeth's chief opponent?*

His words show him to be sceptical about the Court explanation of Duncan's murder; he will not go to the investiture of Macbeth, and with a touch of irony he expresses a wish that things may not be worse under Macbeth's reign than they were under Duncan's. His words, and his absence from the coronation, are not the words and actions of an admirer or friend.