

Academic Reading: *Macbeth*
2. Lady Macbeth – Act I, Scene v

DO IT NOW TASK: PRESENTATION OF A CHARACTER



This image shows Dame Ellen Terry (1847-1928), an actress, in the role of Lady Macbeth. At the first performance in 1888, John Singer Sargent, an American artist, was struck by Terry's appearance and persuaded her to sit for a portrait.

He invented her dramatic pose which did not occur in the production.

How is the character of Lady Macbeth presented in this image?

What can we infer about her character based on her portrayal by this actress and artist?

TODAY'S BIG QUESTION

Who is Lady Macbeth?



YOUR TASK: ACTIVATING PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

- What do you already know about Lady Macbeth as a character?
- What role does she play in the text? Consider what we have read so far and what we know will happen later in the play.



Lady Macbeth is ambitious when we first meet her, perhaps more so than her husband.

Extension: 'It could be argued that Lady Macbeth can be seen as character who embodies a fourth witch.' To what extent do you agree?

YOUR TASK: CLARIFYING VOCABULARY

Consider the following vocabulary:

Word	Definition
ratcheting	<p>Which words in this list have you heard of?</p> <p>Which words are new?</p> <p>Can you take a guess as to what any of these words mean based on how they sound or other similar terms?</p>
fleeting	
complexities	
parasitical	
benevolent	
imperatives	
malevolent	
reconstituted	
incantatory	
zeal	
reprehensible	
obscurity	

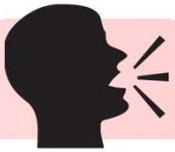
YOUR TASK: CLARIFYING VOCABULARY

Consider the following vocabulary:

Word	Definition
ratcheting	Cause something to rise or fall as part of a process
fleeting	Lasting for a very short time
complexities	The state of being complicated
parasitical	Living in or on another living thing for food or protection
benevolent	Well-meaning and kindly
imperatives	A command; something that needs to be done urgently
malevolent	Having or showing a wish to do evil to others
reconstituted	Being formed again
incantatory	A chant; use of spells that are chanted or sung
zeal	Great energy or enthusiasm in pursuit of an objective
reprehensible	Deserving blame; recognised as bad
obscurity	The state of being bad; difficult to see or understand

1. Based on these words, what ideas do you think the article is going to explore?
2. Highlight **THREE** words that you would associate with **Lady Macbeth** and explain why as annotations around your copy of the grid.
3. Choose **THREE** words you would associate with **other characters** in the play and explain why as annotations.
4. Choose **THREE** words to transform into small images.

Extra Challenge: Lady Macbeth is clearly ambitious. Why is this seen as negative quality?



ORACY TASK: CLARIFYING VOCABULARY



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Sort the following words into categories with the person sitting next to you.

You are allowed as many categories as you wish and can call your categories what you want as long as you can justify your reasons as to why each word has been placed where it has.

Every word must be categorised.

Be prepared to share your ideas.

YOUR TASK: ACADEMIC READING

Character analysis: Lady Macbeth

Article written by Michael Donkor

1/5

In this scene, Lady Macbeth's characterisation is used to continue the play's steady **ratcheting** up of tension. The suspense of this passage is enhanced by the fact that Lady Macbeth's soliloquy, after the messenger has left, is uttered in a stolen moment of stillness before action and fretful dialogue commences. It is a **fleeting** opportunity for her to consider her own feelings and responses to the unfolding events before Macbeth enters with weaknesses that will inevitably require her 'tending'. This time pressure accounts for the strikingly condensed nature of the soliloquy. In just 17 lines, the audience are offered a dense series of images that speak of Lady Macbeth's own **complexities**, contradictions and itchy anxiety about the ungodly acts she and her husband are about to commit.

YOUR TASK: ACADEMIC READING

Character analysis: Lady Macbeth

Article written by Michael Donkor

2/5

The soliloquy's opening image – a croaking raven – is a telling one. The bird not only has associations of ill omens but was also renowned for eating the decayed flesh of fallen soldiers on battlefields, closely linking to the idea of the Macbeths – and Lady Macbeth in particular – being a sinister, **parasitical** couple feeding on the lives of those more powerful and **benevolent** than themselves.

This idea recurs (but taking the argument in a different direction) when Lady Macbeth calls on 'spirits' for assistance; in some ways what she seeks is for her own body to be decomposed. She asks dark agents to 'come' and strip her of her femininity, to 'unsex' her body, using a series of listed **imperatives** that foreshadow the persuasive techniques she will subsequently use on Macbeth towards the end of the scene.

YOUR TASK: ACADEMIC READING

Character analysis: Lady Macbeth

Article written by Michael Donkor

3/5

But, having called upon **malevolent** presences to help disintegrate her body, she does not want to remain in a sexless, physically diminished state. She also wants to be **reconstituted** and refigured as a being hard and armoured like her warrior husband; as a monstrous being with unnaturally thickened blood and breasts that produce deadly poisonous 'gall'.

That Lady Macbeth calls on mystical, external forces to assist her with this transformation is worth interrogating too, for two reasons. Firstly, it clearly gives weight to the reading of the character being a fourth witch, whose speech here has **incantatory** rhythms that lend it a distinctly supernatural quality. Secondly, this request for the support of others also perhaps reveals a sense of lacking beneath the surface of Lady Macbeth's boldly assured **malevolence**: Lady Macbeth does not 'naturally' possess the **zeal** and evil required to undertake her plan, and so has to seek out the power of 'murth'ring ministers' to help her do it.

YOUR TASK: ACADEMIC READING

Character analysis: Lady Macbeth

Article written by Michael Donkor

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Alternatively, rather than interpreting Lady Macbeth's requests for dark assistance literally, we can see them as more metaphorical utterances: the speech is, in fact, a kind of 'pep talk' directed to herself and designed to undermine the merest inkling of 'remorse' she might feel. It is a moment of self-encouragement to help bolster and 'thick[en]' the most reprehensible parts of her character.

YOUR TASK: ACADEMIC READING

Character analysis: Lady Macbeth

Article written by Michael Donkor

5/5

Images of **obscurity** abound in this passage: 'dark ... sightless ... thick night ... pall ... dunnest smoke', all clearly chiming with Lady Macbeth's desire for her wrongdoing to pass unseen by prying eyes. These images serve as a counterpart to Macbeth's transparency – his open face where 'men can read strange matters' without any difficulty. These allusions, of course, carry with them the obvious associations of impure intent and evil. But, in this instance, they also reflect Lady Macbeth's need to conceal and hide her own weakness and misgivings from herself and from Macbeth. With such a reading in mind, when Macbeth enters and Lady Macbeth presents him with careful guidance about how to dissemble, her instruction about controlling appearance to ensure that guilt does not reveal itself is as much for herself as it is for Macbeth.

YOUR TASK: ANSWER THE QUESTIONS IN FULL SENTENCES

1. Why do you think Shakespeare associates Lady Macbeth with the supernatural?
2. What, according to the article, does darkness represent in this scene?
3. Using the article to help you, discuss the differences between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.
4. According to the article, how are Macbeth and Lady Macbeth parasitical?
5. Where else have we seen 'images of obscurity' in the play?

EXTRA CHALLENGE:

In what ways does Lady Macbeth recognise her own vulnerabilities in this scene?

REVISITING TODAY'S BIG QUESTION

Who is Lady Macbeth?



Resources

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CATEGORISING VOCABULARY

Write the names of your categories here



1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
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Why have you decided on these names for your categories?



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Place the words for each category here



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Why have you chosen to put these words in this category?



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