Development

Lady Macbeth tries to turn murder into a practical problem of evidence and appearances. Brief fear and remembered affection complicate her performance of total control.

Journey through the act or stave

2.2: Waits for Macbeth, encouraged by drink but alarmed by sounds.

2.2: Admits Duncan’s resemblance to her father prevented her killing him.

2.2: Returns the daggers and smears the guards with blood.

2.3: Calls for help after Duncan’s death is discovered; the reason for this collapse remains open to interpretation.

1. “That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold”

Lady Macbeth, 2.2

Method: Antithesis

The guards’ incapacity enables her confidence. Her boldness depends partly on circumstances and drink, complicating an image of effortless strength.

2. “Had he not resembled / My father as he slept”

Lady Macbeth, 2.2

Method: Conditional admission and personal memory

Affection interrupts her earlier request to stop remorse. She can imagine cruelty, yet the resemblance exposes a limit to what she can do.

3. “These deeds must not be thought”

Lady Macbeth, 2.2

Method: Modal verb and repression

She tries to regulate thought as if disturbing consequences can be excluded by command. Her warning about madness later becomes dramatically ironic.

4. “Give me the daggers”

Lady Macbeth, 2.2

Method: Imperative and stage action

She takes charge of concealing evidence when Macbeth refuses to return. The audience sees her become physically implicated in the crime.

5. “My hands are of your color”

Lady Macbeth, 2.2

Method: Blood motif and contrast

They share bloodstained hands, but she contrasts his fear with her claimed resolve. Shared physical evidence does not mean identical emotional responses.

6. “A little water clears us of this deed”

Lady Macbeth, 2.2

Method: Minimising adjective and cleansing motif

“Little” reduces the crime to a removable stain. The certainty is later reversed when imagined blood will not leave her hands.

Connections to other characters

Macbeth: his ocean imagery makes guilt overwhelming; her “little water” makes it seem manageable.

Act 5: repeated washing exposes the failure of this practical solution.

Themes: guilt, concealment, violence, conscience and the limits of control.

Develop your interpretation

Basic: she hides evidence and tells Macbeth to calm down.

Further: commands and stage action make her appear dominant.

Advanced: the father memory and anxious listening reveal cracks beneath that performance; her later collapse is prepared, not wholly unexpected.

Pair the evidence

“A little water clears us” (2.2) ↔ “What, will these hands ne’er be clean?” (5.1): washing changes from a practical act to an impossible wish.

Context

Duncan’s offstage murder makes the audience watch its consequences on the couple. Do not state as fact that Lady Macbeth’s collapse in 2.3 is either genuine or pretended: performance choices can support different readings.

Recall questions

What complicates the idea that she has removed all compassion?

Why is “little” important in the water quotation?

Writing task

How does Shakespeare present Lady Macbeth’s attempts to control the aftermath of Duncan’s murder?