Development

Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking exposes memories she once tried to suppress. Her body repeats the act of washing while fragmented speech turns hidden guilt into a witnessed spectacle.

Journey through the act or stave

5.1: Enters asleep carrying a light, observed by a doctor and gentlewoman.

5.1: Rubs her hands and relives blood, Duncan, Lady Macduff and Banquo.

5.1: Returns repeatedly to commands about washing, bed and the past.

5.5: Her death is reported offstage; the play does not stage how she dies.

1. "Yet here's a spot"

Lady Macbeth, 5.1

Method: Blood motif and deictic language

"Here" makes an imagined stain immediately present to her. A secret psychological burden becomes visible through repeated rubbing.

2. "Out, damned spot, out, I say!"

Lady Macbeth, 5.1

Method: Repeated imperative and religious diction

Commanding speech survives, but no longer achieves control. "Damned" links the stain to moral terror rather than ordinary dirt.

3. "What, will these hands ne'er be clean?"

Lady Macbeth, 5.1

Method: Rhetorical question and cleansing motif

The question reverses her earlier certainty that water could clear the deed. Guilt is presented as persistent and inward.

4. “All the perfumes of Arabia”

Lady Macbeth, 5.1

Method: Hyperbole and sensory imagery

Even imagined abundance cannot sweeten the smell of blood. The excess overturns Act 2’s claim that only “a little water” was needed.

5. “What’s done cannot be undone”

Lady Macbeth, 5.1

Method: Repetition with a changed verb

The earlier “What’s done is done” returns as helpless recognition. She cannot change the past or stop reliving it.

6. “More needs she the divine than the physician”

Doctor, 5.1

Method: Contrast and an observing voice

The doctor identifies a spiritual or moral need beyond his medical skill. His judgement frames the scene without requiring a modern diagnosis.

Connections to other characters

Act 2: physical washing becomes compulsive imagined washing; private concealment becomes public exposure.

Macbeth: she once managed his breakdown; now others watch hers while he prepares for siege.

Themes: guilt, sleep, conscience, secrecy, the limits of power and irreversible action.

Develop your interpretation

Basic: she is distressed by guilt.

Further: prose, broken recollections and repeated gestures contrast with the controlled verse and commands of Act 1.

Advanced: her suffering can invite pity without erasing her agency in Duncan's murder; the scene makes moral consequence bodily and theatrical.

Pair the evidence

"A little water clears us" (2.2) ↔ "All the perfumes of Arabia" (5.1): small practical confidence expands into an impossible demand for cleansing.

Context

The doctor and gentlewoman become onstage witnesses, so the audience watches guilt being interpreted. Avoid claiming a precise modern diagnosis or that the play stages her suicide; Malcolm later reports the belief that she died by her own hands.

Recall questions

How has the effect of her imperatives changed since Act 1?

Why do the doctor and gentlewoman matter to the scene's dramatic form?

Writing task

How does Shakespeare use language and stage action to present Lady Macbeth's guilt in Act 5?