Development

Macbeth turns the imagined crime into an actual murder. Private horror clashes with the public role he must perform, and one killing begins to require further concealment.

Journey through the act or stave

2.1: Alone before the murder, he sees a dagger and questions his perception.

2.2: He returns with bloody daggers, cannot pray and hears an accusing voice.

2.3: He kills the guards and performs grief when Duncan's body is discovered.

2.4: Scotland's disturbed natural order reflects political disorder; Macbeth goes to be crowned.

1. "Is this a dagger which I see before me"

Macbeth, 2.1

Method: Rhetorical question; soliloquy

His imagined weapon makes an inward desire theatrically visible. Uncertainty about sight does not remove his decision to approach Duncan.

2. "Sleep no more"

Voice reported by Macbeth, 2.2

Method: Auditory disturbance; repeated command

Macbeth reports a voice accusing him of murdering sleep. Peace and innocence seem destroyed along with the king; the voice is not an objectively confirmed supernatural speaker.

3. “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood”

Macbeth, 2.2

Method: Hyperbolic question; classical allusion

The enormous ocean cannot cleanse a small hand. Blood becomes moral contamination rather than a stain that water can easily remove.

4. “To know my deed, ’twere best not know myself”

Macbeth, 2.2

Method: Repetition of knowing; divided identity

Awareness of the deed becomes unbearable self-knowledge. His wish to escape himself contrasts with the confident warrior praised in Act 1.

5. “I do repent me of my fury”

Macbeth, 2.3

Method: Public performance of remorse

He explains killing Duncan’s guards as passionate loyalty. The audience knows that silencing possible witnesses also protects him, creating dramatic irony.

Connections to other characters

Lady Macbeth’s practical commands contrast with his fear; her claim that water clears the deed will be challenged by her own later blood imagery.

Duncan’s vulnerability exposes the betrayal of host, kinsman and subject.

Macduff discovers the body and questions why Macbeth killed the guards, making the attempted cover-up unstable.

Develop your interpretation

Basic: Macbeth feels guilt after killing Duncan.

Further: soliloquy, imagined voices and blood imagery expose what his public performance conceals.

Advanced: emotional suffering does not amount to restitution; he also kills to protect himself.

Pair the evidence

“Stars, hide your fires” (1.4) ↔ “not know myself” (2.2): hiding desire develops into wanting to escape the self that acted.

Context

Regicide violates political, familial and religious duties. Disturbed sleep and unnatural events connect private wrongdoing to the disorder of a kingdom.

Recall questions

How is the dagger connected to Macbeth’s mental conflict?

Why is his speech about killing the guards open to doubt?

Writing task

How does Shakespeare present the consequences of Macbeth’s decision to murder Duncan in Act 2?