Development

As his support collapses, Macbeth moves between defiant certainty and emotional exhaustion. The prophecies fail as guarantees, but he chooses to fight rather than surrender.

Journey through the act or stave

5.3: He clings to prophecy while admitting the emptiness of his old age.

5.5: Lady Macbeth's death prompts a bleak meditation on time and life.

5.5–7: Birnam Wood appears to move; military confidence is tested.

5.8: Macduff reveals the loophole in the prophecy; Macbeth fights and is killed.

1. "honor, love, obedience, troops of friends"

Macbeth, 5.3

Method: List of absent human relationships

He recognises what should accompany age but cannot possess it. A crown has not brought affection, belonging or an honourable legacy.

2. "I have almost forgot the taste of fears"

Macbeth, 5.5

Method: Sensory metaphor; qualification

Violence has made terror familiar. "Almost" complicates the boast: apparent fearlessness may be emotional damage rather than strength.

3. "Out, out, brief candle!"

Macbeth, 5.5

Method: Exclamation; metaphor

Life becomes a fragile light easily extinguished. The urgent repetition follows news of his wife's death and feeds the speech's despair.

4. “a tale”

Macbeth, 5.5

Method: Extended theatrical and narrative imagery

He imagines life as performance and a story without purpose. This bleak judgement belongs to a ruined character; the play need not endorse it as its final truth.

5. “I will not yield”

Macbeth, 5.8

Method: Defiant declarative

When promised security collapses, he still resists humiliation. Courage remains visible, but it cannot undo the suffering he caused.

Connections to other characters

Lady Macbeth’s death exposes the destruction of the partnership that first enabled the crime.

Macduff’s birth reveals how equivocal words deceived Macbeth’s hopes, not simply how a promise was broken.

Malcolm’s restored authority and the survivors’ losses offer a perspective beyond Macbeth’s despair.

Develop your interpretation

Basic: Macbeth loses power and dies fighting.

Further: brave resistance coexists with isolation and the failure of ambition.

Advanced: his final courage can complicate an audience’s judgement without turning tyranny into heroism or proving life meaningless.

Pair the evidence

“brave Macbeth” (1.2) ↔ “I will not yield” (5.8): courage survives, but its political and moral purpose has changed.

Context

The tragedy closes with political restoration, but lives lost cannot be restored. Distinguish the defeated ruler’s account of existence from the wider judgement created by the drama.

Recall questions

Why does the list of missing relationships matter more than the crown?

How can Macbeth remain courageous without being a good ruler?

Writing task

How does Shakespeare present Macbeth’s response to defeat in Act 5?

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