

At the end of the play,  
malcolm refers to  
lady macbeth as  
"fiend-like" essay  
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## **At The End Of The Play, Malcolm Refers To Lady Macbeth As “ Fiend-Like” Essay Sample**

When Malcolm refers to Lady Macbeth as “ fiend-like”, it evokes an assortment of reactions from the audience. A fiend would be devilish before, during and after committing murders. Before the murders, Lady Macbeth is strong, sure of herself and her husband’s position, and certainly displays some fiend-like tendencies. While the murders are taking place, she is not so calm. She is more human – tense and nervous – certainly not devilish. After the murders, she is incapable of dealing with her guilt, ending with her death.

An important factor to be considered throughout this study is varying meanings. The word “ fiend”, like many other words in the English language, has altered slightly in its meaning since Shakespeare’s day. In today’s dictionary<sup>1</sup>, the word fiend is described as “ an evil spirit; an inhumanly wicked person.” Similarly, but slightly different, in Shakespeare’s day, a fiend was a devil or a devil’s agent. A devil is, in Christian and Jewish theology, the supreme spirit of evil, who inhabits the earth to take souls to hell. Therefore, whether Lady Macbeth is indeed “ fiend-like” or not must be studied on two levels – that of today, and that of Shakespeare’s day. Ultimately, to conclude her state, Shakespeare’s audience’s view must take priority. This must be kept in mind during analysis to get a clear view of her state.

As soon as Macbeth hears the prophecies of the witches, he writes to Lady Macbeth to inform her of his foretold future. Immediately she begins to think of how to ensure these prophecies come true. Even thinking about murder

would have been seen as devilish in Shakespeare's time, and she herself admits she could kill by saying " I may pour my spirits in thine ear". Almost immediately, however, she contradicts herself, calling on the spirits to " unsex me here", " take my milk for gall" and to " fill me Of direst cruelty". If she really were a fiend, of either time, she would not have needed to call on the spirits here. Witches were also seen as fiend-like in Shakespeare's day, and Lady Macbeth greets Macbeth when he enters the room in a similar fashion to the witches:

" Great Glamis, worthy Cawdor

Greater than both by the all-hail hereafter."

The phrasing and wording of this greeting corresponds noticeably to the prophecy, " All hail Macbeth...that shalt be king hereafter". She also uses a sick image of killing a newborn baby to show her loyalty, which would have shocked both Shakespeare's audience and that of today, thus we consider her a fiend. Before the murders, Lady Macbeth is strong, sure of herself and certainly displays some fiend-like tendencies, considered so by audiences of both time periods.

Lady Macbeth's attitude changes immediately before and during the murders. She admits that she is nervous and has drunk alcohol to calm those nerves: " That which hath made them drunk, hath made me bold". She is nervous and jumpy, and confesses " I am afraid", which she certainly could not be if she was a fiend. She is beginning to show a more human side to her conscience. She also concedes that she is unable to kill Duncan herself,

saying that if he had not “ resembled My father...I had done’t”. If her fiend-like exterior ran deeper than the surface, his appearance would not have made a difference. In the presence of her husband, however, she is strong, encouraging and comforting. She shows no compassion when she says “ a little water clears us of this deed”, and orders him to “ consider it not so deeply”. During the murders she shows a more human interior, but when her husband needs her, for example when he needs to get rid of the daggers and set up the guards, she again becomes fiendish and shows an inclination towards evil. During the murder of Duncan, we catch a glimpse of Lady Macbeth’s true character, seeing her more human side.

After Duncan’s murder we see Lady Macbeth twice as queen, as her relationship with Macbeth is beginning to falter. He does not want her to know of his plans to kill Banquo, which shows he believes her to be incapable of dealing with the guilt. We then see her at the banqueting scene, looking after Macbeth when he sees Banquo’s ghost, making excuses for his reaction. She is solid and strong for him, and ends the gathering before he gives away any clues as to the deaths of Duncan and Banquo. She is, however, not fiend-like in this scene because she is looking after him, not herself. In the sleepwalking scene, she is obviously traumatised by what she has done, and her attitude has changed completely. In comparison with “ a little water clears us of this deed”, she continually refers to a “ damned spot” and insists her hands will “ ne’er be clean”. She even says all the “ perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this ... hand”. She does all this subconsciously which proves that she cannot cope and below the surface is not fiendish.

Before we can conclude Lady Macbeth's character as a whole, we must take into account some historical and cultural issues. Aristotle, a famous playwright of Greek history, once described true Greek tragedy as when one who has reached a great height falls due to one fatal flaw in their character. In this case, Lady Macbeth is so strong for her husband that eventually it all becomes too much for her to cope with, so that ambition is her downfall and Macbeth becomes a tragedy. This ambition is evident as she plans the murder of Duncan, and is only shown in this manner during the play.

Therefore, she may appear fiend-like, even though her character is not of a fiend, but of ambition. In fact, we cannot really expect the phrase " fiend-like" to be a fair comment, considering Malcolm is looking to ascertain his kingdom in place of his father's murderers. In addition, the staging of the Macbeths as wicked could be flattery of James I because of his succession from Banquo, so it is more than possible that Lady Macbeth was meant to be fiend-like in order to compliment James.

There is sufficient evidence at the beginning of the play to call Lady Macbeth " fiend-like", but it is presumptuous of her character as a whole: Lady Macbeth is strong for her husband when he needs her to be, especially after Duncan's murder, and her ambition is portrayed as fiend-like tendencies. A fiend would be devilish before, during and after committing murders. In reality, she is unable to cope with the guilt, resulting ultimately in her death. It seems most of Lady Macbeth's actions are founded on weakness, not evil, as it is unfeasible for fiends to have consciences. Therefore, we can conclude

that when Malcolm calls Lady Macbeth a “ fiend-like queen”, it is a less than just comment on her character.