

# Why is act two scene two an important scene in ‘macbeth’? essay sample

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Act two Scene two from the Shakespeare play ‘ Macbeth’ is very important to the play. We see in this scene Macbeth’s reaction to having just killed his king, Duncan. At the time it was written, the people generally believed the king of the country was ‘ appointed’ by God himself. It is written during King James’ time, after the famous Gunpowder Plot in 1605 in which Guy Fawkes tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament with King James inside. Therefore it is thought the play is also a warning to anyone considering treason against their king. Shakespeare’s audience would have considered the killing of their king not just a sin but an ultimate sin against God as they believed he had chosen the King by birthright. This probably would have made the play extremely fascinating for the audience, as they would have been desperate to find out what was going to happen to Macbeth as he had committed sacrilege. It also reflects certain aspects of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s characters, showing him openly guilty, and her being harsh and unfeeling in her speech. The scene also shows many underlying themes in the play, for example, guilt and trust. All these factors contribute to make the scene important to the play. Stagecraft is one of these contributing factors.

Shakespeare uses stagecraft well in this scene to convey feelings and the atmosphere of the scene to the audience.

An atmosphere of darkness is created in this scene using dramatic devices. Lady Macbeth at the beginning of the scene says,

‘ It was the owl that shrieked...’

(II ii 3)

which suggests a night time atmosphere to the audience as owls are nocturnal animals (bearing in mind that Shakespeare would not have had modern scenery or props available when he wrote the play). Lady Macbeth also says,

' I heard the owl scream, and the crickets cry.'

(II ii 15)

This comment reinforces the audience's perception that the scene takes place in the dark as Lady Macbeth mentions sounds that we would usually expect to take place at night. Another dramatic device used by Shakespeare to add to the ' creation' of a dark atmosphere is that Lady Macbeth does not see Macbeth coming at the beginning of the scene as she says,

' Did you not speak?'

(II ii 16)

which contributes to Shakespeare's gloomy, dark setting of this scene. Also, Lady Macbeth does not see that Macbeth has forgotten to leave the daggers until later in the scene,

' Why did you bring these daggers from the place?'

(II ii 46)

further suggesting to the audience that the scene takes place at night. The previous scene also helps to add to the dark setting,

' How goes the night, boy?'

(II i 1)

and as Act two Scene two is next scene we assume it is still night-time. This gloomy setting adds to the feelings of tension and suspense felt by the audience during this scene.

Shakespeare also uses sound effects to make the scene more dramatic. An owl is assumed to be heard calling at the beginning of the scene,

' What hath quenched them hath given me fire – Hark! – Peace!'

(II ii 2)

as Lady Macbeth proceeds to mention that the sound she heard was an owl calling. This creates immediate tension in the scene which makes it exciting for the audience.

Also, Shakespeare uses knocking sound effects toward the end of the scene. This creates tension as the audience are ' jolted' back to reality, making them realise Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's situation and that they may be caught.

The scene does not show the murder of Duncan on the stage. This is sometimes thought to be because of the obvious practicalities in removing the body from the stage in the 17th century. However, it is also considered that the murder takes place off the stage to add to the dramatic atmosphere as the actual murder is left to the audience's imagination, so they imagine it

to be worse than it is. If written for a modern audience as opposed to a 17th century audience, the murder would be more likely to take place on stage due to modern audiences being used to violence for example, modern horror films, and with modern day resources it is much easier to make it appear realistic. In recent film versions of Macbeth the murder is usually shown.

An atmosphere of tension, suspense and fear is cleverly built up over this scene. This is done using factors I have mentioned earlier, such as the dark setting, and by Shakespeare fluctuating the levels of tension during the scene. One of the parts with the most tension is probably lines 16-20, where Macbeth and Lady Macbeth exchange short, sharp dialogue,

‘ Macbeth: When?

Lady Macbeth: Now.

Macbeth: As I descended?’

(II ii 16-17)

which breaks Shakespeare’s typical iambic pentameter, having ten syllables to each character’s line. This sudden break in the style adds to the tension created by the swift exchanges of dialogue. The tension in the scene is reflected by Lady Macbeth and Macbeth to the audience, drawing them into the play.

Another way in which Shakespeare builds up tension throughout this scene is his use of soliloquies. At the start of the scene we see Lady Macbeth talking

by herself, and Macbeth has a soliloquy later on, with these short speeches usually showing the character's true thoughts and feelings. These break up the dialogue between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, creating sudden changes to momentarily break the audience's suspense before recreating it.

This extremely tense scene is followed immediately by Act two Scene three, known as 'The Porter Scene'. This scene provides light-hearted humour to contrast the suspense in the previous scene,

'this place is too cold for hell...'

(II iii 17)

giving the audience a decrease in tension, as it needs to be relieved as it cannot be sustained for long.

Shakespeare's stagecraft in this scene is cleverly used and adds to Act two Scene two's importance in the overall play.

Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are the only two characters in this scene, during which the audience learns more about both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's characters.

In Act two Scene two, Lady Macbeth is mainly seen as strong and uncaring of the murder, but it is also suggested occasionally to the audience that she may be feeling slightly guilty.

Lady Macbeth is not very tolerant of her husband, and speaks abruptly, almost cutting him off at some points

' Macbeth: Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,

Chief nourisher in life's feast;-

Lady Macbeth: What do you mean?'

(II ii 38-9)

She does not seem to understand the guilt her husband is feeling, but she could also be trying to suppress her guilt as she says

' These deeds must not be thought

After these ways: so, it will make us mad'

(II ii 32-3)

Lady Macbeth also speaks very insultingly to her husband, calling him ' worthy thane' to make fun of the fact that she believes he is not currently worthy of being a thane as he is openly showing how afraid he is. She also says he is ' infirm of purpose' which reinforces how guilty Macbeth is about murdering Duncan.

Some readers believe Lady Macbeth is purely evil with no conscience in this scene. There is certainly evidence to suggest this, as she does not deliberate in thinking about the practicalities of the crime,

' Get on your nightgown, lest occasion call us,

And show us to be watchers...'

(II ii 69-70)

and she also proves her bravery by returning to Duncan's chamber to 'smear the sleepy grooms with blood'. In the play, the audience often see Lady Macbeth 'taking charge',

' But screw your courage to the sticking-place

And we'll not fail [in Duncan's murder]'

(I vii 61-2)

and she uses imperatives in act one scene seven, almost instructing her husband to murder Duncan without him having a choice.

Lady Macbeth also says

' A little water clears us of this deed'

(II ii 66)

The fact that she believes the blood will wash right off, as if washing her guilt away easily, suggests to the audience that at this point in the play Lady Macbeth is not feeling guilty about her actions. However, later in the play we discover that this is not the case as her true feelings of guilt are unmasked

' What, will these hands ne'er be clean?'

(V i 4)

suggesting that she still imagines the blood on her hands which symbolises her feelings of guilt.

There are also points during this scene which are the audiences first signs of the tension and guilt within Lady Macbeth.

The audience's first ever suggestion that Lady Macbeth has a conscience comes right at the beginning of the scene,

' That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold.

What hath quenched then hath given me fire...'

(II ii 1-2)

This suggests that Lady Macbeth actually needs to drink to make herself braver using alcohol. As she is not naturally evil and needs ' helping' if she is to be involved in Duncan' murder. Also the drink may aid her in suppressing her guilt. Lady Macbeth's need to have help in attaining courage could also be seen earlier in the play,

' Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,

And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full

Of direst cruelty!...'

(I v 40-3)

Lady Macbeth needs to ask the spirits to give her courage and ‘make’ her evil, which gives the impression that she is not naturally evil but that she wants to help her husband achieve his ambition, as well as fulfilling hers to be queen.

Earlier in the play, Lady Macbeth hints that she will kill Duncan herself ‘Leave all the rest to me’, and the audience discover in act two scene two that she did in fact intend to kill Duncan herself,

‘...- Had he not resembled

My father as he slept, I had done’t...’

(II ii 12-13)

The fact that she could not kill Duncan because he reminded her of her father also reinforces the fact that she feels guilty about the murder, even though she never shares her feelings of guilt with her husband.

Lady Macbeth also uses euphemisms when describing Duncan’s murder during this scene, such as ‘he is about it’ (line 4). The fact that Lady Macbeth cannot apply more graphic terms to the murder suggests she is feeling guilty about it, just as in act one scene five she cannot say ‘Hail King of Scotland’ to Macbeth, but uses other phrases such as ‘All-hail hereafter’ (line 55).

We can also tell that Lady Macbeth is feeling nervous about the murder as she exchanges short parts of dialogue with her husband (lines 15-9), and she

is irritated by the animal noises which she ought to be used to as she lives there.

Lady Macbeth acts strongly in front of her husband in this scene, but there are many suggestions of her guilt in her actions and dialogue. We discover later in the play that in fact guilt consumes her, as if from this point on her guilt grows, as is demonstrated in her final scene during her sleepwalk.

' Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes

Of Arabia, will not sweeten this little hand. Oh! oh!

oh!'

(V I 47-9)

In act two scene two, the audience see Macbeth immediately after he returns from killing Duncan off stage. His guilt is evident, unlike Lady Macbeth's.

The scene shows Macbeth's reaction to having murdered a person, which contrasts with his earlier ease after murdering Macdonwald,

' Till he [Macbeth] unseamed him [Macdonwald] from the nave to the chaps,

And fixed his head upon our battlements'

(I ii 22-3)

showing how Macbeth is not afraid to kill, or to use extreme means to kill.

This implies that the reason he is feeling guilty in this scene is not because

he has taken a life but because he has killed his king, friend and guest in his home.

Macbeth uses euphemisms in this scene, as does Lady Macbeth, which implies his guilt as he cannot use more graphic terms, ' I have done the deed' (line 14).

It is suggested to the audience that Macbeth is worried and ' on edge' due to his short, sharp exchanges of dialogue with his wife (lines 16-20).

Earlier that night, in act one scene seven, Macbeth analyses the reasons for the deed he may decide to commit. He lists Duncan's many positive points, and realises that his only possible reason for killing Duncan is his own ambition. This suggests to the audience that Macbeth is bound to feel guilty as before the murder he has talked of Duncan's many good qualities.

Macbeth also shows his guilt and shock about the murder in his actions. Not only does he forget to leave the daggers, he also refuses to return them, ' I'll go no more' (line 49). His inability to return the daggers reinforces the audience's perception that Macbeth feels guilty.

In contrast to Lady Macbeth's view about blood simply washing off in this scene, Macbeth believes the opposite,

' Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood

Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather

The multitudinous seas incarnardine,

Making the green one red.'

(II ii 59-62)

Macbeth knows he has a guilty conscience and that the murder will stay on his conscience forever. However, the contrasting views of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in this scene change so that the characters hold almost the opposing view by the end of the play. Lady Macbeth cannot clean her hands of Duncan's blood during the sleepwalking scene, ' Out damned spot' (V i 33), symbolising her immense guilt. Macbeth however says

'... I am in blood

Stepped in so far, that should I wade no more,

Returning were as tedious as go o'er.'

(III v 136-8)

This statement meaning that Macbeth will continue to murder as he cannot go back, suggests his conscience and feelings of guilt no longer exist.

When Macbeth returns from murdering Duncan, he seems to be more worried about being no longer able to communicate with God than about the possibility of being caught,

' I had most need of blessing, and " Amen"

Stuck in my throat.'

(II ii 31-2)

This shows the audience that Macbeth feels guilty as his sin, considered the ultimate sacrilege when the play was written, has severed his connection to God. In the 17th century, at the time of writing, the majority of people watching the play would have been very religious Christians, believing in a true heaven and hell. To be isolated from God was unthinkable, showing why Macbeth was so concerned with this fact. The threat of no longer being able to communicate with God would also deter citizens at the time, such as Guy Fawkes, who may make an attempt on King James' life. Macbeth's fear of being separated from God also is reflected later in the play, as Macbeth 'loses' his conscience as he no longer communicates with God or believes he is going to heaven.

Macbeth also talks about sleep, meaning innocence, in this scene. This shows he knows he will no longer sleep properly at night as he has killed Duncan. Macbeth therefore feels very guilty, and even though he has not tried to sleep he knows he will have immense trouble sleeping,

' Methought I heard a voice cry, " Sleep no more!

Macbeth does murder sleep,"...'

(II ii 34-5)

Here we see Macbeth talking of himself in the third person narrative, about an 'imaginary' voice, perhaps an early indication of madness.

Later in the play, we know that Macbeth cannot sleep,

' In the affliction of these terrible dreams

That shake us nightly...'

(II ii 18-9)

Lady Macbeth also sleepwalks, so that the two main characters are guilty and have disturbed sleep patterns.

Important to this scene, Macbeth's last line shows that he regrets killing Duncan,

'(Knock) Wake Duncan with thy knocking. I would thou couldst!'

(II ii 73)

This suggests that the thought of the guilt, sleepless nights and loss of his connection with God is not worth the position of king which Macbeth later gains.

In this scene Macbeth's guilt is obvious, even though we know he is brave as he is a warlord and he has just murdered Duncan. He is more worried about his guilt, inability to sleep and his severed connection with God, than about the murder's practicalities and the possibility of being caught.

Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are almost parallels in this scene. Their characters contrast considerably. For example, Lady Macbeth believes the blood (their guilt) will wash off, whereas Macbeth takes the opposite view.

There are a few similarities though as we know they are both nervous from their short exchanges of dialogue. These character ‘opposites’ almost change places with each other towards the end of the play with Lady Macbeth unable to remove the blood (act five scene one) and Macbeth becomes a brutal tyrant.

Act two scene two shows many important aspects of Lady Macbeth’s and Macbeth’s characters, making the scene extremely important to the play.

Numerous themes and some imagery from the play are used effectively in act two scene two.

The theme ambition is ‘achieved’ in this scene, yet Macbeth regrets his actions

‘Wake Duncan with they knocking. I would thou couldst!’

(II ii 73)

Macbeth’s ‘Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself’ (I vii 27), is his only reason for murdering Duncan, yet he still does it. However, after the crime Macbeth reflects that his decision was wrong and the position of king was not worth the guilt, sleepless nights and the severing of his connection to God, which we assume he did not foresee.

Another theme in ‘Macbeth’ is having an appearance which is different to your reality, for example,

‘...look like the innocent flower

But be the serpent under't...'

(I v 65-6)

implying that Macbeth should look innocent but in fact be calculating and evil. In act two scene two, Lady Macbeth puts an outward appearance to her husband of strength and having no guilt, as if setting an example. However, it is implied to the audience in her soliloquy (and other points) that she in fact does feel guilty, so Lady Macbeth's appearance is different to her reality, as we discover her guilt later in the play.

Innocence, another theme in the play, is talked about by Macbeth in Act two Scene two. Sleep is portrayed as healing, ' Chief nourisher in life's feast;-' (line 39), and Macbeth has lost this. However, sleep in this context is also a metaphor for innocence, and Macbeth implies he will no longer sleep as he is no longer innocent. Also he is isolated from God, also showing his innocence has been destroyed in murdering Duncan.

There are many references to blood in ' Macbeth'. Shakespeare did this to reinforce guilt, another main theme in the play, as the blood in the play's context represents the character's guilt. Macbeth says he cannot wash off the blood, meaning his guilt, showing that he truly realises he will always be guilty from this point on. Lady Macbeth in this scene however believes she can wash off her ' guilt', suggesting that she has not realised the reality of her actions as yet.

The dark setting for this scene symbolises evil, as it does in other parts of the play. For example, Banquo's murder takes place in the dark, which reinforces the idea that darkness symbolises evil. In this scene, as it is immediately after the murder of Duncan, it is particularly 'evil' and is set in the dark.

Hands in the play are often used to represent the characters feelings in the play, for example, Macbeth refers to his hands as 'hangman's hands', implying he has the guilt of a murderer, and Lady Macbeth says 'What, will these hands ne'er be clean?' in act five, which suggests she cannot wash away the blood (her guilt).

There are many references to animals throughout 'Macbeth'. These animals are often 'evil' animals, or animals of the night or undesirable animals, such as serpents, tigers, bears, scorpions, owls and crickets. For instance, Macbeth says 'O! full of scorpions is my mind' later in the play, suggesting his mind is evil as it is filled with 'evil animals'. In this scene, Lady Macbeth refers to the owl (after it hoots) as a 'fatal bellman', meaning that Duncan is about to die, but it could also be interpreted, when the play is viewed as whole, that the Macbeths themselves are about to have their innocence 'die', and guilt consume them.

Act two scene two is important to 'Macbeth' as it uses many themes and imagery which are referred to throughout the play, and this scene is where many themes are 'born', or explored in more detail, making this scene pivotal to the play.

This scene, as a whole, uses many dramatic devices effectively. It explores in depth the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, which is crucial to the audience's understanding of the play. This scene uses imagery and themes pivotal to the play, and is important to the plot of 'Macbeth'. It is also important as a warning to people at the time of writing not to kill their king, as their spirituality would suffer. The scene is well written and would work successfully for not only a 17th century audience, but a modern-day audience too. In conclusion, though short, the scene is extremely important to the play.