

# Mid Year Common Test Notes: Literature

Sources: Lesson Notes, Lesson Slides, Worksheets, Online Resources

## Substance of Shakespearean Tragedy by AC Bradley

### Tragic Hero

- Someone of a “high estate” (as stated by AC Bradley)
  - o Not of birth, but of rank:
    - Othello is of moorish origin (would be entitled a visit to the second circle in Dante’s inferno), but yet he is a general (and thus the tragic hero)
    - Macbeth is noble and is of “high estate” because he is a double Thane, not because he was born into high estate
    - Inconsistency? Malcolm is simply born into high estate, (and thus it can be argued that he is not deserving of it). Yet, no supernatural occurrences when he becomes king?
  - o Highlights the powerlessness of man, and how even the most powerful and authoritative man is powerless in the face of the omnipotent Fate and Fortune.
  - o The fall of a man of high estate would lead to the greatest consequences (thus a better portrayal of a “complete reversal” of fortunes)
  - o Examples, Othello is a Moorish General, Macbeth is Thane of Cawdor and Thane of Glamis, and Hamlet is the son of the former King of Denmark, and nephew of the current King.
- Experiences a total reversal of fortunes
  - o From “next in line to throne”, Macbeth becomes a man who loses his wife as she commits suicide out of guilt, gets successfully dethroned (by getting slain) by Macduff.
  - o His reputation falls from a highly regarded man to a man cursed by everyone.
    - Duncan: “What he hath lost noble Macbeth hath won” (1.2)
    - Ross: “Most worthy thane” (1.3)
    - Macduff: “Not in the legion/ Of horrid hell can come a devil more damn’d/ In evils to top Macbeth” (4.3)
  - o Reputation actually happens to be very important in the Elizabethan era:
- Possesses a tragic trait (flaw in character) with a fatal tendency.

### Concept of Tragedy

Tragedy is the story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man in high estate (who would be the tragic hero). The tragedy stems from the actions of the tragic hero, and the main source of the deeds that drives the tragedy is the character of the tragic hero (ambition in Macbeth's case).

What is the purpose of tragedy? Entertainment? Life lessons by explaining consequences? Critique of the world?

The tragedy is not the expulsion of evil – it is the waste of good.

### Elements of Tragedy

- Strange Occurrences
  - In Shakespearan plays, strange occurrences happen when legitimate kings die, as seen when Duncan dies.
    - Lady Macbeth: "I heard the owls scream and the crickets cry" (2.2)
  - However, there are no such strange supernatural occurrences when Macbeth dies as King.
    - Act 5 ends with Macbeth's death, the hailing of Malcolm as the new king.
    - What is Shakespeare's critique on Macbeth as king?
    - When Malcolm describes himself as lustful, greedy and ambitious (parallel to Macbeth), Macduff says "Fit to govern? No, not to live!". Is this the voice of Shakespeare?
- Abnormal conditions of mind
  - Example: Insanity
  - Abnormal mental conditions are never the driving factor behind the tragedy, but rather an effect of the intentions and actions of the character
    - Macbeth sees the knife in front of him because he is fuelled by the desire to kill Duncan.
    - Macbeth: "Is this a dagger which I see before me, The handle to my hand?"
    - He sees the ghost of Banquo out of guilt for killing his comrade out of ambition
- Supernatural Elements
  - Ghosts and witches have supernatural knowledge. It is not merely an illusion, and actually contributes to the action (indispensable)
    - The prophecy laid out by the summons of Hecate in the first scene
  - Note, however, that these supernatural elements do not remove the tragic hero's capacity to deal with these.
    - Macbeth still can choose not to resort to murder to quicker fulfil the prophecy, and this is where he is driven by this ambition to kill Duncan.
    - Macbeth himself acknowledges that he need not do anything to obtain kingship: "Why chance may crown me/ Without my stir" (1.3) Yet, he makes the conscious choice to murder Duncan.

- Macbeth: “My thought, whose murder is yet so fantastical/ shakes so my single state of man” (1.3) foreshadowing of the murder that would occur soon.
  - Invokes the pity (catharsis) that the tragedy is supposed to aim at.
- Inwardly and Outwardly Conflicts (tragedy must contain both of these to truly be a tragedy, according to AC Bradley)
  - Outwardly: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth VS those who truly support Duncan (Ross, Macduff)
    - Dramatis persona usually belongs to the antagonist group (what’s this supposed to mean?)
  - Inwardly: Could we argue that his inwardly conflict occurs across the progression of Macbeth’s buildungsroman (correct use of term?) (development from a loyal man of Duncan to a greedy, ambitious murderer → fight of his conscience (sighting the ghost of Banquo))

### **Important Macbeth Quotes**

- Fair is foul, and foul is fair (1.1)
- Shall he dwindle peak and pine (mental state) (1.3)
- Or have we eaten the insane root that takes the reason prisoner? (1.3)
- There’s no art to find the mind’s construction in the face (1.4)
  - Foreshadowing of Duncan’s second error
- Come you spirits/ That tend on mortal thoughts! Unsex me here/ And fill me from the crown to the toe top full/ With direst cruelty” (1.5)
- Come to my woman’s breasts, and take my milk for gall (1.5)
- Your face, my thane, is a book where men/ May read strange matters... look like the innocent flower/ But be the serpent under’t” (1.5)
- Screw your courage to the sticking-place, And we'll not fail."
  - Lady Macbeth is a particularly devious character. In elizabethan times, men were supposed to be represent valour, whereas women were identified by present notions as talkative. LM uses this talkative aspect of hers to trick MB into committing the murder:
    - First, by threatening his status as a man (by threatening his courage and valour) – “Art thou afeard/ To be the same in thine own act and valour/ As thou art in desire?” (1.7)
    - Next, by threatening him against swearing falsely (which he never did to begin with) – “I have given suck, and know/ How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:/ I would, while it was smiling in my face,/ Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums,/ And dash'd the brains out,/ had I so sworn as you/ Have done to this.”
- Macbeth acknowledges his “manly” wife on her undaunted mettle – “Bring forth men-children only;/ For thy undaunted mettle should compose/ Nothing but males” (1.7)

### **Key Analysis of Macbeth**

#### **Porter Scene**

The porter breaks the unity of place to refer to Inverness as Hellsgate. "Here's a farmer who has hanged himself on the expectation of plenty" refers to farmer Garnet (alias of father Garnet) who wanted to kill the king then (by blowing him up). So the porter draws parallels between the original Elizabethan context, Inverness, and hell by breaking Aristotle's Unity of Place.

By saying that Macbeth's home is hellsgate (last chance to turn back to heaven, but alas, one can equivocate for his own selfish desires, but yet "cannot equivocate to heaven").