

I'm not a robot



























Photo by Mikes Photos on Pexels.com Here is a last detailed look at a key scene from Macbeth, at least for a while. This is our introduction to Lady Macbeth, and provides us with a sharp insight into her personality and attitudes. As I have been at pains to point out CIE IGCSE students need to be very aware of the four Assessment Objectives when they are writing examination essays. This piece below tries to show how to focus on these important key areas, while examining themes, characterisation, symbolism and a whole host of other literary techniques. I hope it proves of some use to those of you working away on the play at the moment. 1.5 Where we first meet Lady Macbeth, who is a reading a letter from her husband describing everything that has happened to him. Lady Macbeth anticipates her husband's arrival, ahead of the king who she plans to murder. Lady Macbeth reveals that she worries her husband's nature is too decent to take the easiest way to the throne. This is one of the pivotal early scenes in the play. We are given our first glimpse of Lady Macbeth and we most certainly learn a lot. This is a formidable, though ruthless and ambitious woman. Any exam question that focusses, even tangentially, on Lady Macbeth will have to reference this scene heavily. So, buckle up, pens at the ready, and I will break down the scene for you. We are introduced to Lady Macbeth in Macbeth's Castle at Inverness. She is reading a letter from her husband. This is Macbeth opening his heart to his beloved and as such affords us another few glimpses of his character and personality. Some thoughts on prose versus verse: Interestingly the letter is written in prose? Why, I hear you ask? Generally, Shakespeare has his highborn characters speak in verse. Later, we will meet the drunken Porter, who like many lowborn characters, is given prose to utter. Shakespeare maintains this distinction throughout his plays. One notable exception is when Shakespeare is apportioning prose to characters whose mental state is agitated or atypical. I think we can agree that Macbeth has been shaken by the witches' visitation, the ambition warring in his heart and the roadblock that is the Prince of Cumberland which has been placed in his way. Seen in this light, I think we can agree his state of mind is somewhat unusual, hence the use of prose. Macbeth's Letter to his wife Macbeth reinforces that the witches have more in them than mortal knowledge, which hammers home again how readily these medieval characters would have accepted the intervention of the supernatural in their lives. Contextually, fear of the Devil and his servants was widespread in the late Sixteenth Century, when Shakespeare was writing. The man himself admits I burned in desire to question them further. His ambition is laid bare by this metaphor, as is his frustration at their sudden disappearing act, when they made themselves air. Macbeth goes on to recount how the messives (messengers) from the king greeted him with the title Thane of Cawdor, which the witches had promised him moments earlier. He finishes by pointing out how the witches also referred me to the coming on of time by predicting he would eventually become king. Macbeth wastes no time in getting word to his wife (This have I thought good to deliver thee), who he refers to as my dearest partner of greatness. This is interesting as it highlights the bond of closeness between the two of them. Macbeth (somewhat unusually for the time) clearly considers his wife an equal. Alternatively, some have seen in his eagerness to inform his wife the signs of a hen-pecked husband, a man under his wife's control, who can do nothing without consulting her. My advice, let us take a little time to get to know both of them better before rushing to judgement. Macbeth's mind is clearly on the future here though. He doesn't want his wife to lose the dues of rejoicing or that she should be ignorant of what greatness has promised her. That he sees the future in terms of a promise is telling. The witches' honeyed words have clearly wormed their way into his heart. His eyes are most definitely on the prize (the crown, in this case). Has he been so seduced by the possibility of glory that he has thrown aside common sense? Well, he has committed his thoughts to writing, creating a record that might get him into trouble if they fell into the wrong hands. Though interestingly there is no actual mention in the letter that he plans anything illegal. Yet letters go awry after all. Shakespeare used this as a plot device more than once himself (see Romeo and Juliet for a tragic example). That being said, he exhorts his wife to Lay it [this news] to thy heart, which is clearly a plea that she keep the information secret. Lady Macbeth reveals her thoughts quickly: 1. She is determined Macbeth will get what was promised to him (the throne) Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be/What was promised. The enjambment here draws our eye again to this idea of a promise, a sense that this is all destined or pre-ordained. 2. She questions her husband's fortitude, or cruelty perhaps, suggesting he is too squeamish to commit murder I fear thy nature/It is too full o' the milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way. Regicide is the quickest way to ascend the throne, yet Lady Macbeth wonders whether this is something her husband will be able to stomach. This is a key insight in so many ways. She knows him best and wonders whether he has what it takes to kill in cold blood. Which is a sense speaks to Macbeth's basic decency. Most people would likely shy from killing their king, their own cousin. Yet we have already seen that Macbeth is no stranger to killing. His sword smoked with bloody execution in the battle earlier. He is a medieval general, a man used to wading through rivers of blood in his country's defence. Yet the legalised murder of the battlefield is a far cry from a secretive stab in the dark. Interestingly Lady Macbeth's mind races to the nearest way, when thinking of how Macbeth might win what the witches promised. Murder is the first thing on her mind. 3. Shakespeare makes use of inversion when he has Lady Macbeth articulate her fear for her husband. Ordinarily people worry about what others might do, what they are capable of. Here Lady Macbeth worries about what her husband might not be capable of. 4. She acknowledges her husband is a formidable man Thou wouldst be great. She highlights that he is not without ambition. Yet perhaps he lacks the illness should attend it. What she means by this is that while her husband possesses ambition, the essential ruthless drive that accompanies such dreams of power is lacking in him. This puts me in mind of the most successful sportsmen and politicians. Often skill and talent are not enough. The very best and highest achieving people are often ruthlessly unlikeable, they will countenance any stratagem or ruse in the pursuit of victory. In this sense true ambition is an illness, in that the innocent often suffer so that ruthless people can reach the very top. 5. Lady Macbeth surmises that her husband really wants to be king, yet he would have his ascendancy be free from evil doing. What though wouldst highly/That thou wouldst thou holily. He will not play false to win the throne (or so she thinks). Her language between lines 19-26 is very convoluted and complex. Scholars have argued endlessly over the exact meaning of what she says here. Let's take a look at them and try and parse them in the simplest terms. What thy wouldst highly/That wouldst thou holily/ wouldst not play false/And yet would wrongly win. Thou dost have Glamis, That which cries, Thus thou must do if thou have it/And that which rather thou dost fear to do, Than wishes should be undone. I always imagine this is the section that the actress playing Lady Macbeth must worry themselves sick over. Try memorising that and speaking it aloud. This is dense writing by any standard. Remember you are sitting an IGCSE exam, you are not having to write a scholarly paper for a degree level dissertation. You simply have to get a sense of what this ambitious woman is driving at. So what is she saying? I would paraphrase it simply as Lady Macbeth saying: you (Macbeth) would love to see the death of Duncan, an act that screams you have to do it, if you are to win the crown. This murder is something you are scared of committing, yet you would rather do it than see it left undone. 6) Lady Macbeth ends her musing by saying Hie thee hither, (get yourself home quickly)/That I may pour my spirits in thine ear. She is confident in her powers of persuasion and we may assume, the influence she has over her husband and her ability to direct his thoughts and actions. Does this make you think that Macbeth is a weak man, or one easily manipulated? She plans to encourage and direct him. She is presented here as the catalyst to all that will follow, the driving force behind the plan to murder the king. She plans to chastise with the valour of my tongue/All that impedes thee from the golden round. The word choices here are all important and in focussing closely on them we will be focussing on the Assessment Objectives. Chastise, is an interesting verb. It carries a negative connotation. We chastise children (tell them off) when they are misbehaving. This is an interesting way of seeing the relationship between the Macbeths. We know that she suspects his scruples and morals will get in the way of committing the necessary crime. Thus, she intends to chip away at his resolve and doubt. All she cares about here, it would seem, is the golden round the crown. Her sense of self is telling here she believes the forcefulness of her words: the honeyed power of her rhetoric will be enough to overcome what impedes her husband from doing what is needed. 7) Lady Macbeth seems convinced that fate (theme) and metaphysical aid (read: supernatural help) are on their side. That events appear to have been ordained. As I mentioned earlier each student will have to decide for themselves if Macbeth is something of a victim here, caught up in destiny's weave, or if he does have agency of his own. At this point he is certainly facing pressure to do the wrong thing. The witches have presented him with a vision of the future that would have been very attractive, we now know his wife plans to encourage him to catch the nearest way. Yet Macbeth himself has referenced his own ambition and hinted that he has considered the idea of kingship in the past. We are only five scenes into the play and yet already a complex picture is being presented. This is masterful dramatizing by Shakespeare. So, our introduction to Lady Macbeth encompassed only 28 lines, yet the picture of a domineering, ambitious, ruthless, pragmatic woman has been well established. We have also learned a little of the relationship between the Thane and his wife and seen how perceptive and thoughtful Lady Macbeth is. Onwards. An Attendant informs Lady Macbeth that the king is paying them a visit that night. Macbeth will be following him. Lady Macbeth's initial reaction Thou'rt mad to say it, is very interesting. It links into the issue of fate mentioned earlier. Lady Macbeth would clearly see the hand of destiny at work here. No sooner has she received her husband's letter than fate deposits the king at her doorstep. This really must seem as if it is written in the stars for Lady Macbeth. When she discovers that a messenger, almost dead for breath has ridden his horse into the ground to deliver the message, she ensures he is to be looked after, for he brings great news. Once more we dip into the theme of appearances. The servant would take it that his mistress is pleased at the great honour the king is paying her with his visit. Yet in reality the news is great because it brings the plan, already forming in her mind, one step closer to completion. The famous soliloquy she utters following the exit of the attendant, makes absolutely clear what she intends. This next section is one of the Shakespearean most famous soliloquies. If you had any doubt about Lady Macbeth's motivations and personality, then this speech will dispel them. Now that she is truly alone she can reveal her innermost thoughts. How she views Duncan's visit is instantly clear. The raven himself is hoarse/That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan. The mention of the raven is subtle foreshadowing. Ravens were birds that carried a sinister connotation. It is often seen as a symbol of death. They often alight of corpses following a battle. Now, we have just witnessed a battle that featured plenty of corpses and the mention of the raven hints that another (royal) corpse is on the horizon. She mentions the fatal entrance of the king. She has no doubt in her mind that Duncan's arrival will be swiftly followed by his death. There is no wondering or deliberation here she knows what she wants to do. What follows is something of an incantation, an exhortation to the spirits of darkness and evil to give her the courage and resolve to do what must be done. Traditionally the speech has been seen as particularly shocking in that it sees Lady Macbeth renounce all the gentle traits people associate with women. That she appears to be selling her soul, inviting dark powers to possess her would have shocked the audience. Come you spirits/That tend on mortal thoughts/Be not unkind/To murder sleep. She is making a direct plea to demonic forces, spectres and demons that plague mankind with evil thoughts and whispers. She asks them to unsex me here, the wound it makes. There are two very interesting points to take from this line. Firstly, one might sense a scruple here, a fear of seeing the bloody nature of her handiwork. She wishes the king's death, she wants to be queen, yet she also hints she would be happy not seeing the evidence of the crime. This is something of a wish to get the thing over with, to avoid facing the bloody evidence of murder. Secondly, she seems to be suggesting that she would carry the knife herself. She is asking for evil supernatural aid to allow her to murder Duncan. That Lady Macbeth realises that what she plans is a shattering of the divine and natural order is clear. One of the reasons she wishes for a pall, a covering of thick night, is so that heaven will not peep through the blanket of the dark to cry, Hold, hold. She intends to commit regicide. She knows that this would set the natural universe on its head and would thus be something heaven was against. A brief comment on the supernatural. We have noted that the audiences of Shakespeare's day would have had a ready fear of the supernatural. Witches and other minions of evil were readily believed in. The Devil was thought to take an interest in the workings of the mortal world. Here we have Lady Macbeth referencing all manner of spirits, murdering ministers that wait on nature's mischief. Beyond the bounds of the natural world, were believed to exist malevolent spirits who delighted in causing chaos and corrupting humans. Following the completion of Lady Macbeth's speech/incantation her husband arrives. Lady Macbeth's words to Macbeth hauntingly echo the predictions of the witches. Great Glamis, worthy Cawdor/Greater than both by the all-hail hereafter. She lets him know, in a flowering metaphor, how his letters have transported me beyond/This ignorant present. The hope it has kindled in her heart has allowed her to feel now/The future in the instant. To my mind it seems as if Lady Macbeth has taken the prophecy of the witches as a sign of fate's favour. We see once more the great love and respect Macbeth feels for his wife My dearest love. After letting his wife know that the king is coming, she gets straight down to business. When informed Duncan plans to leave tomorrow she says O never/ Shall sun that morrow see. If she has any say in the matter tonight will be his last night on earth. Now, is Macbeth shocked that his wife would set this out so plainly? I think so. Perhaps he has underestimated his wife's own ambitions. Perhaps he does not know her quite as well as she appears to know him. Has she hidden her darker ambitions from him throughout their marriage? She says, Your face, my Thane, is a book where men/May read strange matters. It is fair to assume that he has a shocked look plastered on his face or is at least showing signs of surprise or bafflement. Shakespeare is drawing our attention, once more, to the theme of appearances. His wife quickly puts him straight. To beguile [trick] the time/Look like the time. She is saying that if he is to fool everyone else he will have to wear a metaphorical cloak, he will have to seem just like everyone else in the royal party, happy and content that the king is paying them a visit. He must choose an expression that fits the circumstances. In short, he will have to act. What follows is one of the most quoted lines in the play Macbeth will have to look like thinnest flower/But be the serpent undert. Shakespeare, with this clever simile, is playing with words once more. Macbeth will have to deceive Duncan, who famously has no power to find the minds' construction in the face. The two contrasting flora and fauna images are telling. The flower is a symbol of purity and life, this is how he must appear. Yet in his heart he will have to adopt the persona of the serpent, an ill-omened creature and a powerful symbol of deceit, associated closely with Satan. Appearances (theme) are never far away in this play. You can look at Lady Macbeth's comment that follows in two ways. He that's coming/Must be provided for. Perhaps she is simply being literal, in the sense that they will have to make hasty preparations for the king's arrival. However, she may be engaging in a little cruel, gallows humour. By provided for, read: killed. The use of enjambment focussing our eye on the forceful word must seems to be Shakespeare nodding his head at the idea of fate once again. She follows this by once again asserting her authority. You shall put this night's great business into my dispatch. Once again, this line demands to be turned over and considered from a number of viewpoints. Lady Macbeth presents this as a statement, she assumes command You shall. The tone of this depends on the delivery of the actress playing the role. Either it could be seductively whispered a sort of leave all this to me, to sooth her troubled husband's worries or perhaps gruffly faked as she gives you a chance to show an awareness and understanding of all four of the Assessment Objectives. The fact that I have taken 4115 words to discuss the scene highlights the depths of the writing here. A01 Knowledge of the content of the writing here. A02 Awareness of the play's social and historical context and the meanings and ideas put forward by the writer A03 Understanding of how the writer uses structure, form and language. All the above will help you write the informed and personal response A04 demands. This section explores the language used in Macbeth by William Shakespeare. Language plays a crucial role in shaping the themes, characters, and overall atmosphere of Macbeth. Shakespeare uses a range of linguistic techniques to explore the psychological depth of characters and highlight the central ideas of ambition, power, and guilt. Imagery Shakespeare's use of imagery in Macbeth is vivid and powerful, often invoking elements of nature, violence, and the supernatural. These images reflect the dark and chaotic world the play inhabits. Blood: Blood imagery is central to Macbeth. It symbolises guilt and violence throughout the play. From Lady Macbeth's "Out, damned spot!" to Macbeth's vision of his "blood-boltered Banquo," blood represents the moral consequences of their actions. Example: Macbeth: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?" (Act 2, Scene 2) This reflects Macbeth's realisation that he cannot escape the guilt of murdering Duncan. Darkness and Light: Darkness symbolises evil and the unknown, while light represents goodness and clarity. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth often call upon darkness to hide their deeds. Example: Macbeth: "Stars, hide your fires; / Let not light see my black and deep desires" (Act 1, Scene 4) Here, Macbeth asks for darkness to conceal his evil thoughts about killing Duncan. Animal Imagery: Shakespeare frequently uses animal imagery to reflect the characters' states of mind or to foreshadow events. For example, owls, associated with death, appear around Duncan's murder, reinforcing the ominous mood. Soliloquies Shakespeare uses soliloquies to give insight into characters' inner thoughts and conflicts, especially Macbeth's. Macbeth's Soliloquies: These speeches reveal Macbeth's internal struggles, ambition, and growing descent into madness. They allow the audience to see how he is tormented by his thoughts and guilt. Example: Macbeth's "Is this a dagger which I see before me?" soliloquy (Act 2, Scene 1) explores his hesitation and fear before murdering Duncan. The imagined dagger symbolises his guilt and ambition. Lady Macbeth's Soliloquies: Lady Macbeth's famous soliloquy in Act 1, Scene 5 ("Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts") shows her ambition and ruthless desire for power. By invoking dark forces, she symbolically abandons her femininity and morality to aid her husband's rise. Rhythm and Structure Blank Verse (Iambic Pentameter): Much of Macbeth is written in blank verse, unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter, which lends a formal, controlled structure to the dialogue. This rhythm often reflects a character's nobility or calmness, though disruptions in the metre can signify inner turmoil. Example: Macbeth: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day" (Act 5, Scene 5) This famous passage uses the regular rhythm of iambic pentameter to convey Macbeth's despair and sense of the meaningless repetition of life. Prose: Prose is used for less noble characters or to show a loss of control. Lady Macbeth speaks in prose during her sleepwalking scene (Act 5, Scene 1), which reflects her mental breakdown and loss of composure. Symbolism The Supernatural: The presence of the witches and their ambiguous language ("Fair is foul, and foul is fair") reflects the theme of deception and confusion between good and evil. The witches' cryptic language plays with paradoxes and equivocation, making their words difficult to interpret and reflective of the play's moral ambiguity. Banquo's ghost and the hallucinations of the dagger both symbolise the psychological consequences of Macbeth's actions. The supernatural elements reinforce the themes of guilt, paranoia, and the distortion of reality. Sleep: Sleep represents innocence, peace, and a clear conscience. After murdering Duncan, Macbeth hears a voice cry, "Macbeth does murder sleep" (Act 2, Scene 2), indicating that he will no longer enjoy the restorative effects of sleep due to his guilt. Alliteration and Repetition Shakespeare uses alliteration and repetition to highlight key moments and ideas. Repetition: The repetition of certain words and phrases emphasises themes and psychological states. Example: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" (Act 5, Scene 5) Macbeth's repetition underscores his despair and growing sense of the futility of life. Alliteration: Alliteration is often used to intensify emotional moments or draw attention to specific ideas. For instance, in Lady Macbeth's famous speech ("Look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under it"), the repetition of the "s" sound mimics the hissing of a snake, reinforcing the theme of deception. Metaphors and Similes Shakespeare frequently uses metaphors and similes to convey complex emotions and ideas. Metaphors: Macbeth's ambition is often expressed through metaphors related to growth and nature. Example: "I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition" (Act 1, Scene 7) Here, ambition is metaphorically compared to a rider who overleaps himself, indicating that Macbeth knows his ambition may lead to his downfall. Similes: Shakespeare also employs similes to create vivid imagery and comparisons. Example: Lady Macbeth compares Macbeth's moment of hesitation to the innocence of a child: "Like the poor cat i' th' adage" (Act 1, Scene 7), accusing him of cowardice and urging him to act decisively. Dramatic Irony Shakespeare uses dramatic irony to build tension and suspense, as the audience is aware of key information that the characters are not. Example: Duncan's comment that Macbeth's castle has a "pleasant seat" (Act 1, Scene 6) is ironic, as the audience knows that Duncan will be murdered there. This contrast heightens the sense of tragedy. Equivocation Equivocation plays a significant role in Macbeth, particularly through the witches, whose prophecies are deliberately ambiguous. Example: The witches' prophecy that Macbeth "shall never vanquish'd be until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him" (Act 4, Scene 1) seems impossible, but later proves true when Malcolm's soldiers use branches from Birnam Wood to disguise themselves as they march on Dunsinane. In conclusion, Shakespeare's Macbeth uses a rich variety of language techniques, from imagery and soliloquies to metaphors and dramatic irony, to explore themes of ambition, guilt, and the corrupting nature of power. Understanding these elements is essential for appreciating how Shakespeare conveys the psychological depth of the characters and the play's overall tragic atmosphere.

What happens in act 1 scene 5 of macbeth. Language techniques in act 1 scene 5 macbeth. Macbeth act 1 scene 5 language analysis.