



Teacher's Notes

Responding to the Shakespeare essay question

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Introduction

In Component 1 of the Eduqas GCSE English Literature examination, part of the assessment is for candidates to write an essay on the Shakespeare text they have studied. The purpose of this guide is to develop the necessary skills so that candidates can show off their knowledge and understanding of the text in the 40 minutes or so available, and look at what makes a successful response.

Although the examples of tasks and work here are all drawn from Macbeth, the approaches will be readily adaptable for all the Shakespeare texts in the Eduqas specification.

There are three Assessment Objectives covered in this part of the examination:

AO1 - Read, understand, respond

AO2 - Analyse language, form and structure

AO4 - Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.

The first two are equally weighted, whilst AO4 is worth 5 marks of the 25 awarded for the question (2.5%), whilst AO1 and AO2 are equally weighted.

Tackling the question

The first thing to do, obviously, is to focus on the question, such as this one, from the Specimen Assessment Materials:

Write about Banquo and the way he is presented in Macbeth.

Notice how the first part of the question focuses on AO1 and the second on AO2, though these will not need to be addressed separately, and will be marked as “best fit.” Preparing students to underline key parts of the question may be useful - here it would be “Banquo” and “is presented.”

Once the question has been read and understood, the next important part is for candidates to show their knowledge of the text, so selection is very important.

Macbeth the series

Use the digital resource 'Macbeth - the series' to allow students to consider what they would include in each episode if Macbeth were to be serialised.

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Character's journey

Ask students to make a list of the main characters in the play, and make a timeline for them.

They should start with the first time they are seen (or mentioned by another character) and end with the last time they are seen (or mentioned) then fill in the key points of their journey through the play. Ask them also to choose a quotation (as brief as possible) for each stage of their journey.

Then, make a timetable for other main characters, such as Macbeth, Banquo, and Macduff.

Use the digital resource 'Character's journey' to model the work using Lady Macbeth. The slider can be used to reveal each stage of the journey. Encourage students to suggest what they think should come next before revealing each stage.

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Themes

Use the interactive resource 'Themes' and have students place the following in rank order explaining the reasons for their choices.

- Power
- Ambition
- Love
- Jealousy
- Supernatural
- Gender roles
- Time
- Violence

Then have them go back to the episodes task and decide which themes are most important in each episode.

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Getting to detail

Use the digital resource 'Detail' and the printable quotation cards for students to carry out the following tasks.

1. Match the line to the character.
2. Order the quotations in the chronological order of the play.
3. For each quotation, briefly explain what is going on. (AO1)
4. Read each quotation again. Consider key words in the quotations, and say how they are important. For example, it may show language/imagery used in a particular way, or it may highlight a theme, or aspect of a character, whether the one speaking, or not. (AO2)

Quotations

Fair is foul, and foul is fair

Witches/weird sisters

[At start of play, before meeting Macbeth and Banquo. Highlights world about to be turned upside-down]

If you can look into the seeds of time,

Banquo

And say which grain will grow, and which will not

Speak then to me

[To witches/weird sisters, after they made prophecies to Macbeth. Imagery of nature – time like a field of seeds and how they may develop]

Two truths are told

Macbeth

As happy prologues to the swelling act

[To himself – soliloquy – when he's been told he's been made Thane of Cawdor, so witches' predictions are coming true. Imagery of theatre and plays]

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well

Macbeth

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It were done quickly.

[To himself – soliloquy – when trying to gear himself up to kill Duncan. Alliteration and repetition give impression of nervous whispering]

I dare do all that may become a man -

Macbeth

Who dares do more is none.

[To Lady Macbeth, when she's persuading him to kill Duncan. Theme of manliness.]

I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters

Banquo

To you have they showed some truth.

[To Macbeth, just before murder of Duncan. Highlights contrast with Macbeth]

Is this a dagger which I see before me,

Macbeth

The handle toward my hand?

[To himself – soliloquy – on way to murder Duncan]

My hands are of your colour - but I shame

Lady Macbeth

To wear a heart so white!

[To Macbeth, after Duncan's murder. Blood imagery]

Our fears in Banquo

Macbeth

Stick deep - and in his royalty of nature

Reigns that which would be feared.

[to himself – soliloquy – as he orders the assassination of Banquo and Fleance. Highlights parallel yet contrasting natures of Macbeth and Banquo]

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Things without all remedy

Should be without regard. What's done is done.

Lady Macbeth

[To Macbeth, just after he's ordered the deaths of Banquo and Fleance, without her knowledge. Practical tone belies her worries.]

O, full of Scorpions is my mind

Macbeth

[To Lady Macbeth, just before murder of Banquo. Strong image suggesting his mental anguish]

This is the very painting of your fear:

Lady Macbeth

This is the air-drawn dagger which, you said,

Led you to Duncan.

[To Macbeth, during banquet scene, after he's seen Banquo's ghost, and she hasn't. Imagery of imagination.]

Avaunt and quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee!

Macbeth

[To Banquo's ghost, in the banquet scene. Exclamations suggest he's close to hysteria]

I must also feel it as a man

Macduff

[To Malcolm, having just heard of the massacre of his household, wife and children. Highlights theme of manliness – contrast with Macbeth]

Each new morn

Macduff

New widows howl, new orphans cry.

[To Malcolm, in England, reporting on Scotland. Irony, as he's about to be told of the massacre of his wife and children]

Front to front

Macduff

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Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself.

[To Malcolm, in England, after being told of his family's massacre. Beginning of the end. Fiend = Macbeth's less than human]

Here's the smell of the blood still!

Lady Macbeth

[Lady Macbeth sleepwalking, watched by Doctor and gentlewoman. Imagery of blood – contrast with after Duncan's murder]

Wash your hands, put on your night-gown. Look not so pale. - I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot come out on's grave.

Lady Macbeth

[To herself – soliloquy - in the sleepwalking scene, in the presence of the doctor and gentlewoman. Echoing events on night of Duncan's murder – shows the effect it's had on her]

this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen

Malcolm

[to Macduff and the assembled company at end of play, when he's been made king. Note connotations of butcher and fiend-like – he brutal killer, she less than human]

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Starting your Shakespeare essay

As time is limited, it is important that students “hit the ground running” and have a strong start, or introduction, to the essay.

Use the interactive resource ‘Getting started’ to look at and discuss the examples with students.

There are three opening paragraphs to the question, “Write about Banquo and the way he is presented in Macbeth” and a commentary on each in the resource.

Example 1

Banquo at first seems like he is an unimportant character, but Banquo is actually quite interesting if you look closer. Banquo is as honourable and brave as Macbeth but after the battle it is only Macbeth who receives a reward but King Duncan calls him ‘noble’ which means he is loyal and truthful. Banquo is what I believe to be the other part of Macbeth the path he didn’t take, the good side.

Example 2

Shakespeare presents Banquo in ‘Macbeth’ as a man of great valour and friendship. Macbeth and Banquo were described by the Captain as ‘cannons over-charged with double cracks’ in battle which is a good metaphor to show the audience that even though they must have been tired from the previous battle, they joined together as friends and fought fiercely, as though there was twice the man power.

Example 3

Banquo is Macbeth’s best friend and is an important character in Macbeth until Macbeth murders him.

At the start of the play Banquo is portrayed as a fighter. He is shown to be powerful and brave, ‘ they were as canons overcharge with double crack’. He and Macbeth were as powerful as four men on the battle field. They had double the power of the average man. ‘bathe in reeking wounds’, this shows Banquo could be ruthless as he made so much bloodshed in other people that he could bathe in it.

There are positive points in all of these responses. They all address the audience’s first impressions of Banquo, but Example 3 is the strongest of the three, as it has more of an overview, and gets a bit closer to Shakespeare’s language and its effects. Even though Example 2 used the word “metaphor”, Example 3 would get AO2 credit for exploring the imagery.

Having read these 3 examples, have students try writing their own introduction to the same essay.

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Assessing answers

Use the interactive resource 'Assessing answers' to look at and discuss the full responses to the question, "Write about Banquo and the way he is presented in Macbeth."

Example 1

We first meet Banquo alongside Macbeth whilst in battle. Banquo (and Macbeth) is described as "cannons overcharged with double cracks." This shows that Banquo is twice as brave and powerful in battle. It also shows that he is loyal towards his country.

Banquo is then seen with Macbeth meeting the 3 witches. However, Banquo knows not to trust what the witches say as he knows that they are "instruments of darkness" and pure evil. Banquo also thinks that he is hallucinating or has taken a magic mushroom as the witches look extremely unusual and disfigured. "Insane root".

Although the witches state that Banquo's children will be heirs to the throne, Banquo shows that he will not do anything to harm the king as he is loyal towards Duncan "alligience clear".

On the night of the murder Banquo notices that nature is acting rather unusual and weird "their candles are all out". This shows how there are no stars in the sky which is very suspicious. Also on the night of the murder Banquo feels as if something is forcing him to stay awake. "lies like lead upon me". This quote shows that Banquo is afraid that something terrible is about to happen.

After the murder, Banquo knew that Macbeth was the murderer and that it is unfair and wrong of him to become king. "Foullly for't". This states how Banquo knows Macbeth is in the wrong and that he doesn't deserve to become king.

We last see Banquo alive when he was out spending quality time with his son, Fliance, on their horses. As Macbeth is extremely suspicious of him and that his son is heir to the throne, Macbeth orders assassins to assassinate Banquo and Fliance. Banquo shows his love for his son as he tells him to run and not to look back "fly Fliance fly". This shows that Banquo gave up his life to protect his son.

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Banquo is then seen for the last time in Macbeth's eyes as a ghost. ~This shows how guilty Macbeth feels in killing his own best friend and that Banquo will now haunt him for the rest of his life

Comments

This response is focused and engaged, revealing an understanding of key aspects of the play where Banquo is involved, supported by some direct references, with comments on language. As it is a bit underdeveloped, it is best placed at the top of Band 3, with a mark of 3 for AO4.

Ways to improve

Provide a bit more detail about the key incidents dealt with here.

Develop the discussion of language/imagery.

Write an additional concluding paragraph, pulling together the key points, or, maybe, making a fresh, original point.

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Example 2

Banquo presented himself to Macbeth as a strong and constant person I know this because it says "thou o'st play'd most foully for it" this gives me the impression that Banquo is saying it wasn't fair game or very present. Banquo is very confident to Macbeth. The three sisters had already told Banquo things but he didn't believe anything they said. Banquo suspects Macbeth to have murdered King Duncan and that he smeared the blood on the guards also Lady Macbeth drugged them so that she could get the daggers and for them not to see Macbeth kill Duncan. Banquo suspects Macbeth because he keep saying he can see the dagger covered in blood. Also when they sit down to have the meal Lady Macbeth has to say that its just normal for him to hallucinate and cover up the tracks I think Banquo suspects something here but he had no proof. He also suspects that when they are at the castle Macbeth starts talking about that night when Duncan was murdered but when he starts going into detail Lady Macbeth distracts them by fainting then everyone sees to Lady Macbeth and doesnt question Macbeth.

Comments

Although there is some general reference to the character of Banquo and his presentation in the play, the knowledge of the story is insecure, most evident in the reference to the banquet, and comments on language are mainly implicit, so this response is best placed in Band 2, with a mark of 2 for AO4.

Ways to improve

Note down (or refer back to) a timeline of Banquo's story, and build the answer around this.

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Example 3

Shakespeare presents Banquo as a character who is loyal to all of his people and mainly his king, and cares about people more than himself, for example, 'Fly, Fleance, fly,' shows us that in danger, he puts his son's life before his own, showing kindness and loyalty to his friends and family.

Banquo is also known for his extreme valour and bravery when in battle, when he is said to be as powerful 'as cannons overcharg'd with double cracks' which presents Banquo's valour as grand because the quote tells us that he has double power and can destroy anything in his path.

Extending on this, Banquo is described as a powerful valour man from the quote 'as sparrows eagles, or the hare the lion' stating to the reader that he is ruthless, powerful, and unstoppable as he is compared to animals at the highest rank in the food chain, showing he is superior.

Linking in to this, Banquo doesn't really bother about all the blood he comes across, as he is said to 'bathe in reeking wounds' stating that he may as well relax and wash blood and guts and wounds, implying that he is used to all of the killing and stabbing of other soldiers, making him sound merciless and bloodthirsty.

However, looking past all of the killing and gruesome battles, he seems to be very loyal to anyone that he encounters, especially king Duncan. We know this as when he was in Macbeth's castle, and Macbeth asked him about the prophecies, he says 'keep my bosom franchis'd and allegiance clear' in other words keep him clear from all of the information, as he wants to stay loyal to his king, and this shows his loyalty as even if the prophecies are true, he wants to look past them and stay 'clear' from it all, stating that his loyalty is very strong for his leader and that he doesn't want to get involved in the murky mess.

However, after having this chat with Macbeth, he becomes very uneasy in his castle, as at one point, he grabs his sword and shouts 'who's there' and this shows his uneasiness as he is grabbing for a sword when he hears footsteps. His uneasiness becomes even more clear to us as he is staying in a good friend's castle, which states that he is highly uneasy, as he is staying in a castle that belongs to his partner in battle.

Later on in the play, after the murder of Duncan, Banquo seems to get a clear image that Macbeth has done the deed, 'thou play'd most foully for it' showing that Macbeth has listened to the prophecies by the death of Duncan in his own castle.

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Banquo seems to know that Macbeth has done it by the fact that he told Macbeth to ignore them, and he also uses the oxymoron, 'the instruments of darkness tell us truths, stating that the 'instruments of darkness' are the witches that are associated with being evil and dark, but are telling them things that are likely to be 'truths' stating that they most likely cannot be trusted and need to be ignored – this shows the reader that Banquo is being wise and is doing the right thing.

Comments

Although this is a very promising response, it only covers the earlier parts of the play. Banquo's death is briefly alluded to in the opening paragraph, but needs more detail, as does the appearance of his ghost at the banquet and subsequent references to him later in the play. As it stands, it would stay in Band 3, with a mark of 3 for AO4. Clearly, it is very important for candidates to pace themselves, so they achieve coverage of key points of the whole play.

Ways to improve

Jot down all the parts of the play where Banquo is involved or referred to.

It may also be worth noting that the imagery discussed here from the opening of the play applies equally to Macbeth. The way that they start out as equals, but then diverge, would have been a useful point to make. Try rewriting the introductory paragraph with this in mind.

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Example 4

When the audience first hears of Banquo he seems almost interchangeable with Macbeth. They are both praised by the bleeding Captain who reports to Duncan how they “were/As cannons over-charged with double cracks” in defeating the Norwegians in battle, the imagery of warfare suggesting their fighting skills. However, the fact that it is Macbeth who is singled out for promotion to Thane of Cawdor by Duncan, and promised kingship by the witches, sets Banquo on a different path. When Banquo challenges the witches:

“If you can look into the seeds of time,

And say which grain will grow, and which will not,

Speak then to me”

they cryptically tell him “Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.” It is this that seals his fate later in the play. When Macbeth is made Thane of Cawdor, Banquo says, “What! Can the devil speak true?” which may suggest he is suspicious of the witches’ power, and he warns Macbeth how:

“The instruments of darkness tell us truths,

Win us with honest trifles, to betray’s

In deepest consequence.”

The next time we see Banquo is when he arrives at the palace at Forres. Duncan welcomes both Macbeth and Banquo equally, but while Macbeth sees Malcolm being named as Duncan’s heir as “a step on which [he] must o’erleap”, Banquo expresses his loyalty to Duncan: “...if I grow, The harvest is your own.” Banquo is presented as a contrast to Macbeth in his loyalty.

We see this again when Duncan and his party arrive at Dunsinane, Banquo admires the peaceful, beautiful setting, “heaven’s breath/Smells wooingly here”, whilst Macbeth and Lady Macbeth begin planning the murder of Duncan. So Banquo is presented as the opposite to Macbeth, being associated with health and wholesomeness.

The night before the murder, Banquo and his son Fleance are together, and we learn that Banquo is having difficulty sleeping. Perhaps he is worried about Macbeth, or perhaps “the cursed thoughts” he is having are his own temptations. He tries to talk to Macbeth about “the three weird sisters”, and Macbeth suggests they should talk later. When Banquo stresses that he will only do so if he can keep his “allegiance clear” we again see a clear contrast between the two characters.

When we next see Banquo he speaks in soliloquy of how he fears Macbeth “played most foully” for all he has gained, yet is still wondering about what the witches promised him. This is clearly lingering on his mind, but Macbeth has already decided that he must die, as “in his royalty of nature/Reigns that which would

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be feared.” Thus Macbeth sends hired killers to assassinate Banquo and Fleance, in order to defeat the witches’ predictions. However, Banquo, although dying, saves his son’s life, by urging him to “flee” and this sets in motion the next stage in the disintegration of Macbeth.

At the celebratory banquet, Macbeth may overplay his “concern” about Banquo’s absence, as each time he mentions his name, he, and only he, sees Banquo’s ghost: “Never shake thy gory locks at me.” This marks the separation between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, who both fall into a type of madness. Macbeth becomes a despot, slaughtering anyone who seems in his way, whilst Lady Macbeth later sleepwalks, when she reveals her guilty conscience to the watching doctor and gentlewoman, “Banquo’s buried: he cannot come out on’s grave.”

The last time there is mention of Banquo is when Macbeth goes back to visit the witches, and they put on a sort of show, which includes the “blood boltered Banquo” pointing at the visions of Kings of the future, suggesting that they are his descendants. This is perhaps Shakespeare flattering King James, his king, who was a descendant of Banquo.

Thus, overall, Banquo is presented as a brave soldier, loyal subject, father and friend, who resisted the temptations laid before him, unlike Macbeth.

Comments

This is an assured and quite perceptive discussion of the character of Banquo and how he is presented, with a clear overview, and some assured points on how meanings and effects are conveyed. The text is covered well, and there is use of pertinent quotations and direct references to support points made. As such a mark representative of Band 5 would be appropriate, with 5 marks for AO4.

Ways to improve

References to stylistic features could have been developed still further, in order to achieve the very highest marks.

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Checklist for a successful Shakespeare essay, linked to the Assessment Objectives:

Clear, focused, introduction, making strong points from the start

Focus on the question asked *-throughout* the essay

Discussion of characters and relationships

Discussion of how and why characters and their behaviour may change at different parts of the play

Using the story of the play and its key points as a foundation for the points you make

Showing how the way the play is written adds to the understanding/appreciation of the audience - this may include discussion of the words used (language and imagery), contrast, echoes, turning points, dramatic irony, and so on...

Strong conclusion, maybe summing up the main ideas of your essay, maybe using a new and original point, that will leave the reader (the examiner) thinking

Clearly expressed ideas, with accurate spelling, including of names, and punctuation.