

Tracing Macbeth's Downfall
Acts I-III

Directions: Use unit vocabulary when possible as well as other vivid, descriptive words to trace the development of Macbeth's character in each of the places in the text. Provide textual evidence to support your assertions. Then, write a response to the prompt that follows.

Act I, Sc. ii

Macbeth is a valiant warrior who is greatly respected by his peers and the King. He is praised for the valor and bravery he displays on the battlefield.

Act II, Sc. i

Macbeth's angst is palpable. He is hallucinating, seeing a bloody dagger that draws him towards Duncan's chamber to commit his murder. Power and manipulation have seized Macbeth.

Act III, Sc. i

Macbeth, now fully corrupted by power, maliciously plots Banquo's murder. He himself becomes a manipulating force in the play, when he convinces his henchmen that Banquo is their true enemy.

Act I, Sc. vii

Macbeth is torn, he waffles back and forth between murdering Duncan and staying out of the way of fate. He is truly conflicted, desperate to hold on to his virtue but becoming drunk on power.

Act II, Sc. ii

Macbeth is an emotional wreck. His hands are gilded in Duncan's blood. Lady Macbeth chastises his infirmity. At this moment, he simply cannot carry on with the plan any further. The reader can still see shades of Macbeth's character from Act I.

Act III, Sc. iv

Macbeth's dissent into paranoia is on full display, as he sees Banquo's ghost on his banquet table. There are no traces of once brave and noble Macbeth.

Respond to the following:

In Poetics, Aristotle claims that a great tragedy includes a character whose change in fortune “be not from bad to good, but, reversely, from good to bad.” How do the changes in Macbeth’s behavior in Acts I-III illustrate this idea? Cite evidence from throughout Acts I-III to support your answer.

As the play begins, Macbeth is characterized as brave and noble. He is a fierce warrior, and is handsomely rewarded for his success on the battlefield. The King presents him with a diamond for Lady Macbeth and bestows upon Macbeth a new title. Shakespeare sets Macbeth up to be the quintessential tragic character. Very quickly, the reader begins to identify Macbeth’s frailties: his thirst for power, his susceptibility to manipulation, and his hubris. By Act III, these flaws are on full display and Macbeth is a mere shell of the character he once was. His dissension into paranoia and evil is most displayed by his hired murder of his former best friend and most loyal confidant, Banquo. Macbeth perfectly illustrates Aristotle’s concept of an effective tragedy.