

NATIONAL 5 CRITICAL ESSAY EXEMPLAR – ‘MACBETH’

Techniques: characterisation, key scene(s), structure, climax, theme, plot, conflict, setting, dramatic irony, foreshadowing

Choose a play which you feel has a dramatic final scene.

Describe briefly what happens in the final scene and then, by referring to appropriate techniques, explain how effective the ending is in bringing to a conclusion the central concerns of the text.

A play which has a dramatic final scene is ‘Macbeth’ by William Shakespeare. ‘Macbeth’ is a tragedy which portrays the downfall of the title character. A highly respected and honourable lord and general at the beginning of the play, Macbeth’s fatal over-ambition leads him down a path of murder and evil which ultimately ends in his own destruction. The play’s final scene, in which Macbeth is revealed to have been killed and Malcolm is made king of Scotland, effectively brings to a conclusion the play’s central concern of how wrongful ambition can lead to destruction.

When the final act of ‘Macbeth’ starts, Macbeth is king of Scotland. He achieves this earlier in the play by murdering King Duncan, and then attempts to secure his new position by having his friend Banquo assassinated, by asking the Weird Sisters to tell him his future, and by having Macduff’s family wiped out. In response to Macbeth’s murderous rule, the king’s son and Macduff lead an army against him. Macbeth’s lords and soldiers abandon him, the witches’ prophecies turn out to be tricks, and, in the final scene, Macduff reveals he has killed Macbeth by presenting his decapitated head.

One reason this scene effectively concludes the theme of destructive ambition is that it is well foreshadowed. Before he murders Duncan, when it looks as though his better instincts will keep his ambition in check, Macbeth predicts his own downfall by saying: ‘I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself / And falls on th’ other’. Using a metaphor in which he compares his plans to a horse, he says he has no reason to kill Duncan other than ambition, and that acting solely out of ambition leads to crashing failure. In the same scene he says that ‘bloody instructions... return to plague th’ inventor’. Both of Macbeth’s observations – that ambition leads to destruction, and that the violence required to achieve these ambitions will backfire on him – are illustrated by his death, showing that he was correct to doubt that following his ambitions was a good idea.

Shakespeare makes the final scene effective as a conclusion by portraying Macbeth's military defeat and death as a product of his wrongful ambition. Earlier in the final act, Macbeth laments that he does not have 'honour, love, obedience, troops of friends'. Because his actions have alienated or enraged his subjects, no-one will fight for him while many fight against him. In the final scene, Macduff reveals Macbeth's severed head, but the reason Macduff was so desperate to kill Macbeth himself was to avenge his family, who Macbeth had killed. In this sense, Macduff is a nemesis created by Macbeth's ambition. The final scene demonstrates that putting his ambition above everything else was a fatal mistake on Macbeth's part.

The final scene effectively shows how letting ambition guide him has resulted in the destruction of Macbeth's reputation. At the beginning of the play, Macbeth is characterised as a highly respected and beloved leader - a captain in the Scottish army calls him 'Valour's minion', as if Macbeth embodies the concepts of bravery and honour, and King Duncan calls him a 'peerless kinsman', meaning that he believes Macbeth is as good a man as it is possible to be. However, because of the actions Macbeth takes in pursuit of power, the news of his death in the final scene is greeted with celebration, with Malcolm referring to Macbeth as a 'dead butcher'. The extent to which Macbeth has fallen in his peers' eyes illustrates the play's central concern by showing how socially destructive letting ambition guide you can be.

However, while the new king and his lords understandably view Macbeth as a monster, one of the reasons for the final scene's thematic effectiveness is that the audience does not. In the play's climax, after Macduff reveals he was born by caesarean section, Macbeth considers surrendering but ultimately decides to go down fighting: 'Lay on, Macduff, / And damned be him that first cries, 'Hold, enough!'' For a moment Macbeth resembles the honourable warrior he was at the start of the play, rather than the ambitious and conspiring murderer he later becomes. This develops the central theme because, when the audience sees Macbeth's head, we see him as a good person who fell because of a fatal flaw, not simply a power-obsessed murderer.

In the final scene of 'Macbeth', Shakespeare demonstrates to the audience the destructiveness of wrongful ambition by portraying Macbeth's fate as a logical conclusion. Macbeth's death by Macduff's sword, the armies attacking him and his own subjects' hatred for him are all natural consequences of the actions he takes in pursuit of his ambitions. The final scene is an effective conclusion because it is well set up by the play's plot, and because, by making sure Macbeth is still a little sympathetic, we are left with a more complex understanding of the theme.