

New Exam Task - *Macbeth*

Read the following extract from Act 1 Scene 1 and then answer the question that follows. This is the opening of the play. None of the other characters have appeared on stage yet.

Starting with this speech, explore how far Shakespeare presents the witches as strange but powerful characters.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents the witches as strange but powerful characters in this speech
- how Shakespeare presents the witches as strange but powerful characters in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]
AO4 [4 marks]

A desert place.

Thunder and lightning. Enter three Witches

First Witch

When shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

Second Witch

When the hurlyburly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

Third Witch

That will be ere the set of sun.

First Witch

Where the place?

Second Witch

Upon the heath.

Third Witch

There to meet with Macbeth.

First Witch

I come, Graymalkin!

Second Witch

Paddock calls.

Third Witch

Anon.

ALL

Fair is foul, and foul is fair:
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

Sample Answer

Shakespeare offers conventional representation of witches, with references to the familiars, which suggests their strangeness. By placing these characters in 'a desolate place' the audience understand that these creatures are other-worldly, with the setting embodying the nature of these characters. The play's central motif of inversion of normality ('fair is foul') returns later in the play, suggesting their power lies in their ability to meddle with the morality of the protagonist. Yet whether their power is 'real' or merely the power of suggestion is an interesting debate.

In the extract given there are several ways in which Shakespeare makes the three witches to appear as strange and mysterious characters. Before the dialogue even begins the setting at which the witches are found represents their lack of human interaction as they are found in a "desert place." This is an oddity, they lack the knowledge to socialise with others and suggests a power as they are able to predict their encounter with Macbeth, a person they had never met before. It also shows these witches as to fit into the stereotype as they appear to talk to animals. This would show them to be strange as talking to animals shows some delusion, however it could be believed that these animals house the devil proving their power over others.

Throughout the rest of the text the witches are portrayed as having strange qualities, one of these being how their appearance is described as "hags". Their strange appearance leads us to question the feminine features of what a woman should have, whether they have beards or not could question our way of thinking about the appearance matters it is clear that they are unusual in appearance to the women society knows, withered features and rags for clothes showed a complete opposition to the idealistic woman. They also show strange and psychopathic personality tastes, they used any excuse to inflict pain and suffering on those that stood in their way. An example of this is when the witches decide to punish a sailor's wife for not sharing her food with them.

Within the extract Shakespeare also gives indication to the witches having unnatural powers which will help them to then lead the downfall of Macbeth. As the three witches enter the scene, thunder and lightning can be heard to create suspense and anticipation to the scene. This creates a feel of fear but can also be linked to the power they may have, as the thunder is heard it is known a point is about to occur which involves the witches. Due to this occurring every time in which the witches appear could link to power they may have over the weather, this would be inhumane and an unnatural power. The witches who we know are in a desolate place, isolated from the rest of society. Somehow we are aware of Macbeth's existence and where they are going to encounter him.

Shakespeare also gives indications to the witches' power through the rest of the play, an example of this is that they are able to take control of Macbeth and manipulate him into killing King Duncan. By simply telling Macbeth that he could

become King he takes into his own hands to commit the crime, this brings up the question of can the witches' power be stopped if they are successful in causing the death of the King? They also show power to create spells and other forms of black magic which would be done by witches, they are able to concoct spells which could cause harm to people. The ingredients used within this usually include things which are deemed to be morally wrong, an example of this is the "finger of a strangled babe." Shakespeare's choice to open the play by focusing on the witches suggests their importance in the play, an idea which is confirmed in 1.3. Their power is clear as the play progresses, when we see how they influence Macbeth through their strange prophecies, bringing about his downfall. In the extract, Shakespeare has the witches speak briefly, and the exchange of their lines suggests a closeness, but also a strangeness, as if their power is concentrated in their unity. The inversion of 'fair is foul, and foul is fair' suggests their oddity where normal values are muddled.

Sample Answer Commentary

This is a highly effective answer. In the first paragraph, the student makes an interesting point about how the role of the witches links to the wider themes of the play. This is often the hallmark of a good answer. The second paragraph begins to use examples and offer good comments about the strangeness of the witches.

The third paragraph offers insightful points about the inversion of gender stereotypes. It is written fluently. The fourth paragraph is well developed and indicates that the student is thinking quite deeply at this point in the answer. The penultimate paragraph is also detailed and writes effectively about power. There is some speculation about meaning here.

The essay ends well and once again, makes reference to wider themes of the play. The key task terms 'strange' and 'powerful' are tackled well by the student.

Taken together, this would get a mark in Level 6. A student-friendly mark scheme is below:

- Level 1 (0-5 marks) – SIMPLE ANSWERS
These are brief answers which don't really answer the question in any depth. They might be re-tellings of the stories. Often poorly phrased.
- Level 2 (6-10 marks) – RELEVANT ANSWERS
These are answers which do answer the question in a basic way. They are often 'PE' answers – ie, there are several POINTS made, followed by EXAMPLES, but not much in the way of discussion or detail.
- Level 3 (11-15 marks) – EXPLAINED ANSWERS
These are straightforward answers which make sense and have some detail. They are often a collection of PEE paragraphs (POINT-EVIDENCE-EXPLANATION).
- Level 4 (16-20 marks) – CLEAR ANSWERS
These are essays which have some detail where several sensible points are being made. There is a bit more depth in the explanation of points. The phrasing makes clear sense.
- Level 5 (21-25 marks) – THOUGHTFUL ANSWERS
These types of answer show the examiner that once or twice there are moments of genuine thought, where a really good point is being made. Phrasing is clear.
- Level 6 (26-30 marks) – DETAILED/PERCEPTIVE ANSWERS
These answers have one or two moments of impressive points. They are conceptual – they link to the wider ideas of the text and argue points convincingly. Phrasing is fluent.