

Lady Macbeth | Sample answer

‘Lady Macbeth’s strengths and weaknesses lead to her downfall’ (2014 mock)

The mettle of a woman is often weighed down by restricting cultural barriers and societal expectations regarding one’s gender. Women in literature are constantly boxed into roles which deem their femininity synonymous to weakness. In the case of Lady Macbeth in the play “Macbeth”, however, this is not the case. She displays single-minded ambition, unwavering intelligence and fortitude, all qualities that are typically ascribed to male characters. However, she is not without a conscience, as we witness further on in the play. William Shakespeare has truly managed to create a well-rounded character that is wrought with an amalgamation of both strengths and weaknesses. Below I will discuss these traits further, and how they ultimately lead to her demise.

First of all, upon our initial introduction to Lady Macbeth, we witness far greater strength of will than her “dearest partner in greatness”. Subsequent to their correspondence, she demonstrates an intimate understanding of her husband and his potential to achieve “the golden round”, despite the fact that he may be “too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way”. Thus, she becomes aware that she must make a moral sacrifice in order to fully commit to her husband’s pursuit of power. She begins to sublimate her femininity with coarse evil, praying to “spirits” to “unsex” her and to “fill her toe top-full of direst cruelty”. Perhaps this sacrificial decision to annihilate her humanity ultimately sows the seed for her eventual destruction, however, such ruthless fidelity is truly a strength of Lady Macbeth’s character.

She is more than aware of her husband’s adoration for his “dearest partner in greatness”. Thus, in order to persuade her “dearest love” to work against his moral conscience and commit the crime of regicide, she employs her strongest weapon, the “valour of [her] tongue”. She will “pour [her] spirit into [his] ear” and guide him toward regicide. Macbeth’s vacillations do not cloud her judgement. Through incessantly berating him on his sole insecurity, his masculinity, she eventually succeeds in conniving him to commit the crime, committing herself to counselling the reluctant Macbeth throughout the process, a stark reversal of archetypal dynamics so often depicted within a patriarchal society.

During the night of “the bloody business”, Lady Macbeth reprimands Macbeth for appearing reluctant to commit regicide initially. Her mention of knowing “how tender it is to love the babe that milks me” would demonstrate natural stirrings of maternity. This notion is soon abolished, however, as she admits that “while it were smiling in my face, have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums and dash’d the brains out, had I so sworn as you have to this.” Her mind, now dominated by evil spirits, is perverse, equating the violent murder of an infant with loyalty and a natural maternal instinct with weakness. Perhaps this suggests an insecurity rooted within her, however, evident through her inability to murder King Duncan herself, admitting that “had he not resembled my father as he slept. I had done’t”.

The deterioration of Lady Macbeth is arguably the most atmospherically disturbing component of the play. Most notably, the sleep-walking scene. She enters holding a candle, as though it were an attempt to combat the darkness of the fate she has bestowed upon herself, “she has light by her continually, tis her command”. The eternal blood stain on her hands appears to be a devastating consequence of a guilty conscience as she asks “will the hands ne’er be clean?” While the audience may or may not believe in hell, it is evident that Lady Macbeth is trapped in a hell of her own making.

Furthermore, her lamentation that “all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand” depict a mind that has utterly abandoned a grip on reality. This truly terrifying vision is aptly summoned up by the doctor as he concludes that “unnatural deeds do breed unnatural troubles”. The “unnatural troubles” do not conclude with Lady Macbeth’s suicide however as upon learning of her death, Macbeth is far from perturbed, declaring that life is but a “tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”. We later witness his own deterioration upon learning that the witches prophecies on which he desperately placed his faith are false as Macduff reveals that he was “from his mother’s womb, untimely ripped”. and thus, submits himself willingly to his own inevitable oblivion. Thus, rendering the two as a mere memory of horror and tyranny, deemed by Malcom “this dead butcher and his fiend like queen”.

In summary, it’s clear that Lady Macbeth’s strengths, such as her loyalty to her husband, her strong will and her persuasiveness, as well as her weaknesses, such as her eventual mental instability, ultimately led to her deterioration and eventual death. Although refreshing to experience a strong female character like her, it also becomes evident that not all of her qualities are ones to aspire to, and we learn that our strengths do not always work in our favour.