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10 Honors LA

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Act II

*Macbeth* Act II: The floating dagger

In Macbeth's soliloquy of Act II, Shakespeare uses the weapon motif to foreshadow Macbeth's murder of King Duncan in order to demonstrate that overambition leads to moral degradation. The first appearance of the motif presents itself as a vision of a dagger floating in front of Macbeth, who is awaiting Lady Macbeth's signal to kill King Duncan. Macbeth remarks "Is this a dagger which I see before me, The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee" (II, i, 32-34). Seeming to encourage Macbeth to utilize it to commit atrocities, the weapon motif incorporated by Shakespeare foreshadows the gory, guilt-filled journey Macbeth is about to undertake. Moreover, the illusion also accentuates the mental instability Macbeth develops from his overambition— his desires have evolved to become so extreme that they incite hallucinations. Later in the soliloquy Macbeth also remarks that "I see thee still, And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood" (II, i, 45-46). The now blood-smearred dagger conveys a substantial leap forward in the foreshadowing of Macbeth's murder. For instance, instead of only hinting that Macbeth is gravitating towards murder by implementing the imaginary dagger, Shakespeare incorporates a bloody element to the motif to both allude to how King Duncan's death has become inevitable, and also to call attention to the inescapable guilt Macbeth will experience as a result of his actions. Parallel to the never disappearing blood covering the

weapon in Macbeth's vision, the enormity and irreversibility of his guilt are emphasized. Additionally, despite the fact that Macbeth was a loyal friend, kinsman, and subject to King Duncan, a simple prophecy caused him to violate his better judgment and commit unspeakable atrocities against a man he once loved, demonstrating the manipulative effects of desire. As it signifies Macbeth's departure from reality and descent into guilt-ridden imagination, the motif of a weapon is used to foreshadow Macbeth's murderous plot, which ultimately ensued into distraught hallucinations combined with extreme guilt to demonstrate the heavy toll that overambition took on Macbeth's life and society.