



Macbeth by William Shakespeare

What's It About?



Macbeth is one of William Shakespeare's best-known tragedies. Based partly on real events, it's the story of a Scottish warrior whose desire for power leads him to commit terrible crimes.

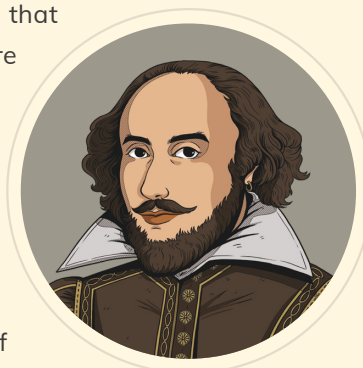
Macbeth, the titular character, hears a prophecy that he will one day become King of Scotland. Encouraged by his wife, Lady Macbeth, he murders King Duncan and takes his throne. Once Macbeth becomes king, he becomes increasingly ruthless, killing anyone who stands in his way, including his best friend Banquo and the family of his rival, Macduff. His tyrannical rule eventually leads to his own downfall as he is killed by Macduff and Duncan's son Malcolm takes the crown.

Through the play, Shakespeare explores a number of key themes including power and ambition, fate and free will, and the role of women in society.



Context

Macbeth is an example of a **tragedy**, a play that ends unhappily. Shakespeare's tragedies were especially popular with audiences because they often included bloody and violent scenes. *Macbeth* is a classic example of a **tragic hero** (a main character who starts out good but suffers a terrible downfall) – he begins the play as a heroic soldier, but his own ambition leads him to commit a series of terrible murders that result in his own death.



Most of the plot of *Macbeth* is fictional, but many of the characters are based on real historical figures. Macbeth was a Scottish nobleman in the 11th century who killed King Duncan in battle and took the throne of Scotland. He was later killed himself by Malcolm, Duncan's son. Over the years, these events were retold in stories and legends that changed many of the facts and added dramatic details. Shakespeare took the story and added his own twists, most importantly the character of Lady Macbeth.

Lots of the themes and events in *Macbeth* are relevant to real-life events at the time the play was written. *Macbeth* was written in around 1606, early in the reign of King James I. Many of



the plot details can be seen as references to James's reign. In 1605, the Gunpowder Plot (a plot to kill James by blowing up the Houses of Parliament) was stopped just in time, and *Macbeth* explores the consequences of regicide (the murder of a king). The character of Banquo and the prophecy that his descendants will be kings are also nods to King James, who was thought to be a descendant of the real-life Banquo.



Who's Who

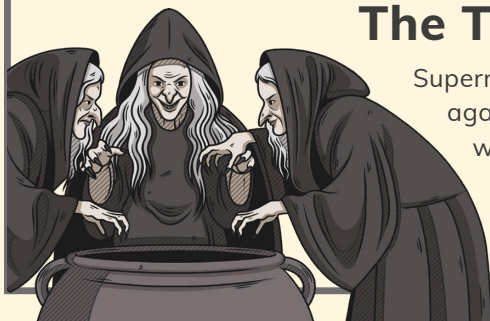


Macbeth

A Scottish noble and a general in King Duncan's army. His desire for power, encouraged by his wife and by the prophecy of the witches, leads him to kill Duncan and take the throne himself. Once he becomes king, he becomes increasingly ruthless, using murder and terror to hold onto his throne.

Lady Macbeth

Macbeth's wife. She is ruthless and ambitious and encourages Macbeth to kill King Duncan. After the murder, she is filled with guilt and falls into madness, eventually taking her own life.



The Three Witches

Supernatural creatures who plot mischief against Macbeth. They predict that he will become Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland. Macbeth interprets their prophecy as a sign that he must murder King Duncan.

King Duncan

The King of Scotland. He is a good and generous ruler and a father figure to Macbeth. Macbeth murders him to take his throne.





Who's Who



Banquo

Macbeth's friend and fellow general. The witches predict that Banquo's children will take the throne of Scotland. Macbeth sees this prophecy as a threat to his power and has Banquo murdered, but is haunted by visions of his ghost.

Fleance

Banquo's son - destined by the witches' prophecy for the throne. He escapes Macbeth's attempt to have him murdered.



Macduff

A Scottish nobleman who leads the fight to remove Macbeth from the throne. Macbeth has Macduff's wife and son murdered. Macduff wants to restore the throne to Duncan's son, Malcolm, but also wants revenge for his family's murder.

Malcolm

King Duncan's son and the rightful heir to the throne. He flees the country when Macbeth kills his father but wins the support of the King of England and returns to Scotland with an army to claim his crown.





Summary

Act I

Scene i: Three witches meet during a storm and decide to approach Macbeth.

Scene ii: A wounded sergeant returns from a battle. He tells King Duncan that Macbeth and Banquo have fought heroically and defeated the Thane of Cawdor, a rebel against the king. Duncan orders that the Thane of Cawdor should be executed and says that his title will be given to Macbeth.



Scene iii: Macbeth and Banquo encounter the three witches. The witches address Macbeth as the Thane of Cawdor and the future king. They declare that Banquo will not be king, but his children will be kings. The witches disappear. Ross and Angus arrive to give Macbeth the news that he has been made Thane

of Cawdor. Banquo and Macbeth are shocked by this news as it seems to confirm that the witches' prophecy is coming true. Macbeth immediately begins to feel ambitious about becoming king.

Scene iv: King Duncan praises Macbeth and decides to visit him at his castle. He announces that

when he dies, his son Malcolm will inherit the throne. Macbeth sees Malcolm as standing between him and the crown. He sends a letter to Lady Macbeth, explaining the details of the

witches' prophecy and telling her that Duncan is coming to stay at the castle.

How does Macbeth feel about the witches' prophecy?

Why does Lady Macbeth call upon 'spirits' in this scene? What does this tell us about her?



Scene v: Lady Macbeth reads the letter and quickly decides that Macbeth needs to kill Duncan and take his throne. She believes that he is too good-hearted to do this on his own and decides to convince him. When Macbeth arrives, Lady Macbeth tells him that she will make the plans for Duncan's murder.

Scene vi: King Duncan arrives at the castle and Lady Macbeth gives him a warm welcome.

Scene vii: Macbeth thinks about the consequences of killing Duncan. He knows that he would be risking his soul in the afterlife. He also considers all the reasons he should not kill Duncan and realises he has no motives for the murder other than his own ambition. He tells Lady Macbeth that he can't go through with the murder, but she mocks him and calls him a coward. She explains her plan to kill Duncan while he sleeps and frame his servants for the crime.

What arguments does Macbeth give for not killing Duncan?

How does Lady Macbeth influence Macbeth to go ahead with the murder?

Act II

Scene i: Banquo and Macbeth briefly talk about the witches. Banquo notes that some of the things they have predicted have come true, but Macbeth claims he has not thought about them since the meeting. Macbeth has a vision of a dagger floating in front of him and questions whether it is real or a hallucination. A bell rings and Macbeth heads to Duncan's chamber to commit the murder.



Does the vision of the dagger give Macbeth confidence or fear?

Scene ii: Lady Macbeth has drugged the king's servants and prepared a pair of daggers for Macbeth. She waits for him to commit the murder, full of confidence that he will succeed. When Macbeth returns, he is full of horror and remorse at his actions. Lady Macbeth notices that



he has forgotten to leave the daggers behind to frame the servants. She becomes angry at Macbeth for his cowardice and takes the daggers herself. She takes Macbeth to wash the blood from his hands and then the two pretend to be asleep.

How does Macbeth react to murdering Duncan? What does this tell us about him?

Scene iii: A porter answers the door to Macduff and Lennox, who have arrived to meet Duncan. Macduff discovers the king's body in his chamber and shouts that Duncan has been murdered. Macbeth and Lennox rush into the room and Macbeth kills the king's servants, who were found with the bloody daggers, blaming them for the murder. Malcolm and Donalbain, Duncan's sons, fear that whoever killed their father will want to kill them too. They decide to flee the country.

Scene iv: Ross, a nobleman, talks to an old man outside the castle. They note that strange events have been happening over the past few days that seem to be bad omens. Macduff arrives to tell Ross that Macbeth has been chosen as the next king. Because they fled the scene, Malcolm and Donalbain are suspected of arranging Duncan's murder.

What is the significance of the strange supernatural events that happen after Duncan's murder?

Act III

Scene i: Banquo notes that all the witches' predictions about Macbeth have come true and suspects Macbeth of Duncan's murder. He wonders if the prophecy about his children will come true as well. Macbeth arrives and invites Banquo to a feast that evening. Because of the prophecy, Macbeth sees Banquo as a threat to his rule. He hires murderers to kill Banquo and his son Fleance while they are out horse-riding.

How has Macbeth's character begun to change in this scene?



Scene ii: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth talk. Macbeth feels troubled that Banquo and Fleance are still alive. He tells Lady Macbeth to put on a cheerful face and make Banquo feel welcome at the feast.

Scene iii: The murderers wait in the woods for Banquo and Fleance. They kill Banquo but Fleance escapes. The murderers return to the castle to give Macbeth the news.



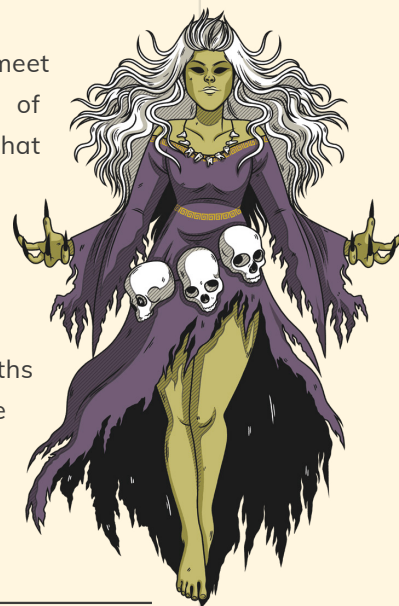
Scene iv: The feast is taking place at the castle. Macbeth learns that Banquo is dead and that Fleance escaped. He worries that the threat to his power has not been stopped. As he returns to the feast, he sees the ghost of Banquo in his seat and reacts with horror. Lady Macbeth tells the guests he is ill and sends them away. Macbeth decides to visit the witches again to learn more about his future.

How does Macbeth react to Banquo's ghost? What does its appearance represent?

Scene v: The witches meet with Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft. Hecate is angry that

the witches did not involve her in their previous mischief with Macbeth. She tells them to prepare particularly powerful spells to trick Macbeth when he arrives.

Scene vi: Lennox and another lord talk about the deaths of Banquo and Duncan. They suspect Macbeth of the murders. The lord says that Macduff and Malcolm are in England, asking the king for help in removing Macbeth from the throne.



Act IV

Scene i: The witches brew a powerful potion. Macbeth arrives and demands another prophecy about his future. The witches show Macbeth three visions. A floating head tells Macbeth to beware Macduff. A bloody child tells him that no man born of a woman will harm him. A crowned child tells him that he will



never be defeated until Birnam Wood marches to his castle. The witches then show Macbeth a parade of kings walking ahead of Banquo's ghost. The witches vanish. Lennox arrives to tell Macbeth that Macduff has gone to England. Macbeth decides that he will have Macduff's family killed as punishment for betraying him.

What is the significance of each of the visions Macbeth sees?

Scene ii: Macduff's wife, Lady Macduff, finds out that her husband has gone to England. She worries that people will think he is a traitor because he has fled. Murderers sent by Macbeth arrive and kill Lady Macduff and her son.

Scene iii: Macduff tries to convince Malcolm to return to Scotland with an army to overthrow Macbeth. Ross brings the news that Macbeth has killed Macduff's family. Macduff swears to take revenge on Macbeth. Malcolm and Macduff leave to lead an army to Scotland.

Act V

Scene i: A doctor and a gentlewoman watch as Lady Macbeth walks and talks in her sleep. She mentions the murders of Duncan, Banquo and Lady Macduff. She seems to see blood on her hands that cannot be cleaned off.

What does the blood on Lady Macbeth's hands represent?

Scene ii: Outside the castle, the English army led by Malcolm and Macduff approaches. Scottish lords opposed to Macbeth arrange to meet them with their own soldiers at Birnam Wood.

Scene iii: Macbeth boasts that he has nothing to fear from Malcolm or the English army because of the witches' prophecies. His servant warns him that ten thousand soldiers are approaching the castle and Macbeth puts on his armour. The doctor tells Macbeth that Lady Macbeth is suffering hallucinations and he cannot cure her.





Scene iv: Malcolm and his army arrive at Birnam Wood. He orders every soldier to break down a branch and carry it in front of himself to disguise the size of the army.

Scene v: Macbeth prepares the castle to defend against the attack. His servant tells him that Lady Macbeth has taken her own life. Macbeth talks bitterly about the nature of life. A messenger tells Macbeth that Birnam Wood is moving towards the castle. Macbeth recalls the prophecy and says that he is ready to die.

How does Macbeth react to the news of his wife's death? How is he feeling in this scene in general?

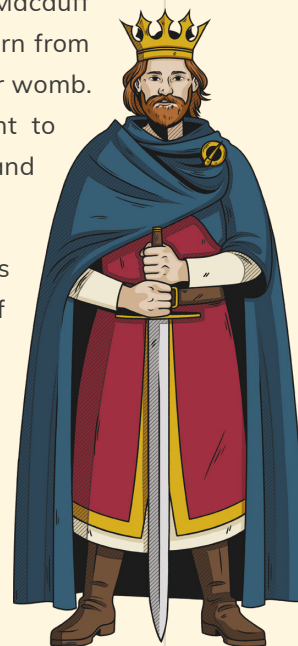
Scene vi: The battle begins outside the castle. Malcolm orders the soldiers to throw down the branches and draw their swords.

Scene vii: Macbeth enters the battle and fights without fear, believing he cannot be harmed by anyone born of a woman. He kills the son of Siward, the English leader.



Scene viii: Macduff finds Macbeth in the battle, determined to avenge his family. Macbeth tells Macduff that he is wasting his time trying to kill him as he cannot be killed by anyone born of a woman. Macduff reveals that he was not born from his mother, but cut from her womb. Macbeth says he will fight to the death. The two fight and Macduff kills Macbeth.

Scene ix: Malcolm enters the castle. Macduff enters carrying Macbeth's head and declares Malcolm King of Scotland. Malcolm says that he will begin to right the wrongs done to the country by Macbeth and invites all of the gathered Scottish noblemen to his coronation.



What is the tone of the play's ending? What message do you think Shakespeare was trying to get across?