

Themes

Macbeth is a fascinating play which explores many themes.

Guilt

One of Shakespeare's reasons for writing the play was to illustrate the terrible consequences of murdering a king. The play was first performed in 1605, the year of the Gunpowder Plot, and this theme would be very politically acceptable to an audience composed of members of James I's court. Shakespeare shows the murderers of a king tormented by their own guilt and driven to their doom.

The idea of guilt first appears in Act 1 Scene 3, when Banquo shows his surprise at Macbeth's reaction to the witches' promises: "Why do you start and seem to fear, / Things that do sound so fair?" The word 'start', meaning to jump with shock, is always associated with a guilty reaction. Later, Macbeth's guilt takes visual form when he hallucinates that a blood-covered dagger is leading him to murder Duncan.

In the murder scene, we again see Macbeth tormented by guilt. Shakespeare has the murder happen offstage so that he can focus on Macbeth's tormented mental state. Macbeth is terrified by his own sense of sin, as he could not say 'Amen' when he heard someone praying. He imagines his guilty conscience will never let him sleep peacefully again: "Methought I heard a voice cry "Sleep no more"". References to sleeplessness recur later in the play, as when Lady Macbeth says, "You lack the season of all natures, sleep". Even when he does sleep he will be tormented by his guilt in the "terrible dreams that shake us nightly".

One of most striking images in the play equates guilt with the idea of blood-stained hands. Macbeth refers to his own hands as "hangman's hands", which would be covered in blood from disembowelling victims of execution. When Lady Macbeth urges him to wash the blood off, he realises the impossibility of washing away his guilt. His crime is so wicked that the blood will "the multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red".

During the murder scene, Lady Macbeth reassures him: "A little water clears us of the deed". The audience will realise the irony of this during her sleepwalking scene later in the play, when she obsessively washes imaginary blood from her hands.

After arranging Banquo's murder, Macbeth is tortured by guilt even more. Again this takes visual form, as he imagines the ghost of Banquo returned to accuse him: "Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake thy gory locks at me"!

In Act 5, we see Lady Macbeth destroyed by the strain as her guilt becomes revealed for all to see. The metaphor of a guilty conscience being represented by the image of sleeplessness is shown in her sleepwalking. She is also seen constantly washing her hands, as her guilt has made the stains seem indelible to her: "Out damned spot!... 'All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand". Her rambling words reveal her complicity in Macbeth's crimes: "Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? ... The Thane of Fife had a wife; where is she now?" Her reassurance to Macbeth in Act 3 "What's done is done" is twisted into a despairing admission of guilt: "What's done cannot be undone".

When he meets his nemesis, Macduff, Macbeth finally faces his guilt. Believing in the witches' prophecy that "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth", he warns Macduff to stay away from him, admitting "My soul is too much charged with blood of thine already", a reference to the brutal killing of Macduff's wife and

children. When Macduff reveals he was "from his mother's womb untimely ripped", Macbeth knows he is about to pay for his crimes.

The nature of the ideal king

Shakespeare's patron, King James, had written a book on this topic, *Basilikon Doron*, and so this theme was also of great contemporary interest.

The first example is Duncan, who is a good man but not a perfect king. Macbeth pays tribute to his personal qualities when he considers in his soliloquy that Duncan has done nothing to deserve his fate: "so clear in his great office, hath born his faculties so meek....his virtues will plead like angels..." However, as a king, Duncan has the fatal flaw of being over trusting and gullible. After being taken in by the traitorous Thane of Cawdor, he transfers the title to Macbeth who will prove even more treacherous. Similarly, when Duncan comes to Macbeth's castle he misjudges the atmosphere and sees it as a "pleasant" place where the air smells "sweetly".

Banquo would clearly have made a good king, and Macbeth is jealous of his "royalty of nature", acknowledging his courage and wisdom. Shakespeare was aware his own monarch, James Stuart, claimed descent from Banquo, and this is a flattering tribute.

By contrast, Macbeth is unfit to be a king. He is dishonest and unscrupulous, happy to blame others for Duncan's murder. He is even responsible for the killing of Macduff's wife and children. Macbeth becomes the worst sort of king, a tyrant, whose cruelty drains the life blood from his country: "each new morn, new widows howl, new orphans cry." He is contrasted with the king of England, the saintly and Christ-like Edward, who is described as treating his subjects with "healing benediction": "sundry blessings hang about his throne / that speak him full of grace". This religious imagery contrasts with the demonic imagery used to describe Macbeth: "this fiend of Scotland".

Duncan's son Malcolm is depicted as the perfect king. In his testing of Macduff, he lists the "king-becoming graces", such as justice, verity, temperance, mercy, lowliness etc., showing his awareness of how a king should be. He has his father's noble character but without Duncan's fatal flaw of gullibility. He tells Macduff that he is aware Macbeth has tried to entice him back to Scotland to his death, and shrewdly tests Macduff for signs of being a dishonest flatterer. A metaphor describes Malcolm's healing role: he will be "the medicine" for his country. He restores order to Scotland after the disruption caused by Macbeth.

Order and disorder

Only a century earlier, England had suffered under the massive disorder of the [Wars of the Roses](#). Civil disorder was now seen as the ultimate disaster, and also as an ungodly state. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare reminds his audience of this, as a further warning against treachery.

The play begins with disorder as a battle is raging between the Scots and the Norwegians, assisted by some traitors. The "thunder and lightning" of the stage direction symbolises this "hurly-burly", as the witches flippantly refer to the fighting. Order is restored by the "captains, Macbeth and Banquo" who are victorious. At this stage, Macbeth could be seen as a force for good. However, his bloodthirsty brutality in the battle contradicts this impression: in killing Macdonald, he "unseamed him from the nave to the chaps and fixed his head upon our battlements." The order restored is soon seen to be an illusion.

The fact that Macbeth's opening words "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" echo the chant of the witches links Macbeth with the forces of disorder, as does his eagerness to communicate with them, "Tell me more!"

The fact that both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth frequently invoke darkness, always linked to the forces of evil and disorder, prepares the audience for the disorder to come: "Stars, hide your fires"; "Come thick night" etc. Darkness allows evil to flourish.

In seeking to make the witches' prophecies come true, Macbeth brings about disorder. The Elizabethans believed in "The Great Chain of Being". This was the idea that everyone was ordered by God into his allotted place, with the king at the head. By killing the king and taking his place, Macbeth was subverting this natural order. Disorder in nature reflects the disorder in human affairs. On the night Duncan is murdered, Lennox describes the 'unruly' storm, and even an earthquake: "chimneys were blown down...the earth was feverous and did shake."

Order and disorder are clearly illustrated at Macbeth's banquet. When his guests arrive, he greets them with the words, "You know your own degrees, sit down". This is ironic, in that he has ignored his own 'degree' or station in life, and tried to take a higher place. With the appearance of the ghost and Macbeth's loss of control, the banquet breaks up in disorder, with Lady Macbeth confirming this with her words, 'Stand not upon the order of your going, but go at once'.

Disorder is described in the reign of terror conducted by Macbeth, culminating in the second great battle between Macbeth and the forces of Macduff and Malcolm. With Malcolm's victory, order is truly restored.

False appearance

This important theme is introduced in the witches' chant of "Fair is foul and foul is fair". There are frequent verbal paradoxes in the play emphasising this duality, such as "when the battle's lost and won". This suggests that something may be good for some people, but bad for others. To Macbeth, the promises of the witches seem good, but this is deceptive: actually, they will destroy him. Duncan, too, makes errors, misjudging the appearance of his thanes. He has been betrayed by the first thane of Cawdor, noting ruefully, "there's no art to find the mind's construction in the face". This is echoed by Macbeth's resolve that "False face must hide what the false heart doth know".

When Duncan visits Macbeth's castle, he is deceived by the tranquil atmosphere "This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air nimbly and sweetly recommends itself". Banquo too is taken in by the deceptive calm and beauty of the place, sensing the presence of "heaven's breath". Lady Macbeth and Macbeth pretend to welcome Duncan affectionately while harbouring murderous thoughts.

As king and queen, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth put on a false front. At the banquet, Macbeth says he will 'play' the humble host, which is appropriate, since he is not king by right, but just performing a role. Lady Macbeth's demeanour of hard control is a pretence. When she encourages her husband to be "bright and jovial" among his guests, she had just expressed her own despair: "Nought's had, all's spent".

Perhaps the clearest examples of false appearance are in the promises made by the witches' apparitions: "None of woman born shall harm Macbeth"; "Fear not, till Birnam Wood do come to Dunsinane". These promises appear to say Macbeth is invincible, but this is an illusion.

Malcolm uses false appearance to test Macduff, first claiming he is thoroughly wicked to see if Macduff would support such a person. Malcolm reflects on the difficulty of deciding whether people are good or bad, and that this may lead good people to be misjudged: "angels are bright still, though the brightest fell."

Bravery, and what makes a man.

Courage is a theme throughout the play. In the second scene, where the battle is described, Macbeth's courage is praised to the skies. He is "Bellona's bridegroom", a metaphor which compares him to Mars, the

god of war. The Captain describes his bold exploits in battle, including the disembowelling and beheading of Macdonald and his routing of the Norwegians. He, along with Banquo, is compared to the kings of beasts and birds – to 'eagles' and 'lions', both brave noble creatures.

The first time Macbeth shows fear in the play is when the witches speak to him: "Why do you start and seem to fear things that do sound so fair?" asks Banquo. Macbeth is afraid of his own nature, which has conjured up the "horrid image" of regicide.

When he starts to reconsider killing the king, it is his courage which Lady Macbeth challenges, asking if will "live a coward?". She is scornful, saying that while he had the courage to do the murder, "then you were a man". Macbeth objects "I dare do all that may become a man – who dares do more is none". This implies that only a beast would murder Duncan. Lady Macbeth wins the argument, and so she uses the same tactic when Macbeth loses control during the banquet: "Are you a man?" Macbeth answers "Ay, and a brave one". However, this time, Lady Macbeth's taunts fail.

The idea of manhood also crops up as Macduff shows his grief over the deaths of his wife and children. Malcolm tells him to "dispute it like a man", suggesting action will help repair his sorrow. Macduff answers, "But I must also feel it like a man", as he covers his face to hide his weeping. This suggests that it is still manly to feel emotion. A true man is not without tender feelings.

Macbeth does come across as truly valiant, however. We cannot help but admire him for fighting to the last: "I'll fight till from my bones my flesh be hacked". His comparison of himself to a fighting bear; "bear-like I must fight the course" is also an image of dauntless courage. The bear is individually greater and nobler than the dogs which are set on it, but it always loses.

Other Themes

Several other themes are also explored in this complex play.

Ambition: ambition is seen in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth with purely negative consequences; but it is clear that Banquo, too, is ambitious. He asks the witches to tell his fortune, and wonders if the fact that Macbeth's promises have come true may 'set (him) up in hope' also. However, Banquo maintains his integrity: "In the great hand of God I stand". This clearly shows that Macbeth, too, had a moral choice between good and evil.

Good and evil: Macbeth has to choose between the two. He and Edward of England come to be the embodiment of the two extremes. The witches are the incarnation of evil, and may be seen as representing the evil in human nature.

Trust and Betrayal: Duncan trusts the wrong men with disastrous consequences. Macbeth trusts the witches, and ultimately they destroy him.

Actions and their consequences: the first Thane of Cawdor pays the penalty for his treachery; Macbeth repeats the pattern. Duncan is punished for his poor judgement. Macbeth wishes his action could be the "be-all and end-all" but he knows there will be consequences: he will have 'judgement' both on earth and in heaven. Lady Macbeth and Macbeth both have to suffer the consequences of their crimes.

Power and the abuse of power: Lust for power motivates Macbeth. However he discovers power without security is not worth having: "To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus." Lady Macbeth, too, finds she cannot enjoy her new positions "without content". Macbeth realises that although he could commit crimes with "barefaced power" he still has to consider his public image. When that is damaged beyond repair, he abuses his power by becoming a tyrant.

It is important to show your awareness of the genre of a text. Macbeth is above all a drama, intended to make its impact in performance on the stage.

This can sometimes get forgotten when you are reading the play from a book in class or studying at home! When writing on Macbeth in your critical essays for Higher English, you should:

- avoid writing about the characters as if they are real people
- avoid writing about the play as if it is a novel
- avoid referring to the play as a 'book'

Always include some dramatic terms in your answer. These can be simple ones such as stage and audience, or more technical ones such as aside and soliloquy.

Dramatists use many dramatic devices, as the tricks of the trade are known, to make their plays grip the audience. The audience accept the lack of reality in some of the tricks used. For example, we realise we are hearing the internal thoughts of a character performing a soliloquy or an aside, while in reality only facial expressions might reveal someone's thoughts, and then not always clearly.

Soliloquy and Aside

These are dramatic devices by which a dramatist lets the audience know what a character is thinking. The root of the word **soliloquy** is the Latin word *solus* – alone. A character alone on the stage will appear to be thinking aloud.

An **aside** works similarly, except that the character will not be alone on stage. When a character makes an aside, it is the accepted convention that while the audience can hear the words clearly, the other characters on stage are oblivious to them. In Act One Scene 3, Banquo describes Macbeth as 'rapt' or lost in thought. Only the audience know what he is really thinking: about murder!

An accepted dramatic convention is that what we hear in soliloquies and asides will always be the **truth**: characters cannot be lying as we see into their innermost thoughts.

Soliloquies enable the dramatist to develop his characters in depth, and allow the audience particularly to empathise with them. In Macbeth, it is Macbeth himself to whom Shakespeare gives the greatest number of soliloquies. This adds greatly to our audience experience as we can share in his fears, agonies and torments over the various dilemmas which face him. In Act One Scene 7, for example, tension is built up as we see how close he comes to resisting the blandishments of the witches. However, soliloquy also reveals the darkness and evil in Macbeth, as for example he bitterly reflects in Act Three Scene 1 on how Banquo is the better man and how the murder of Duncan may have been to Banquo's benefit rather than his own. This soliloquy prevents us seeing Macbeth too sympathetically as a simple soldier acting on his wife's commands.

Lady Macbeth's soliloquies are thrilling dramatically, particularly the one where she prays to the spirits of evil to 'unsex' her. However, they also reveal her underlying lack of real ruthlessness. Her short despairing soliloquy in Act Three Scene 2: "Nought's had, all's spent..." is poignant as it contrasts with her briskness when she tries to encourage Macbeth. The soliloquy has revealed to the audience she is not as confident as she pretends.

Banquo's short soliloquy in Act Three Scene 1 reveals him to be an ambitious character also, as he is "set up in hope", but also builds tension as he voices his suspicions of Macbeth's guilt. Notice that Shakespeare does not give soliloquies to Macduff or Malcolm, although they have significant roles. This means the

audience always maintains a certain emotional distance from them, which prevents our interest in the main characters from being diluted.

Asides throw interesting light on characters also. Macbeth has a series of **asides** in Act One Scene 3 in which we see how his thoughts race on towards murder. The fact that his thoughts must be kept separate from his words show that he is already embarking on a course of deception. Banquo, as a man of integrity, says aloud what he is thinking. He tells both Fleance and Macbeth of his nightmares about the witches, whereas Macbeth lies: "I think not of them". Having witnessed the earlier 'asides', the audience realise that Macbeth is becoming devious as we know he is thinking of little else.

Dramatic Irony

Various forms of dramatic irony are used in the play. These raise tension and grip the audience. One form of dramatic irony is when a character knows less than the audience, and we wait in anticipation for the character to find out the truth. One example occurs in Act One Scene 3 when the witches hail Macbeth as "Thane of Cawdor". He is baffled, saying, "the Thane of Cawdor lives." However, the audience have already seen Duncan condemn him to death and bestow the title on Macbeth. This builds up to the moment when Ross arrives to announce it, to the consternation of both Banquo and Macbeth: "What!? Can the devil speak true?" Another example of dramatic irony is when Duncan arrives at Macbeth's castle and is struck by the peaceful atmosphere of the place: "This castle hath a pleasant seat". These words follow immediately after the scene in which Macbeth and Lady Macbeth begin plotting his murder. Duncan's complete unawareness of danger builds suspense.

A more subtle form of irony is where a character's words only become significant later. There are many examples of this in the murder scene. Lady Macbeth briskly says, "A little water clears us of the deed." By the end of the play she will be obsessively washing her hands, imagining "the smell of the blood still". She dismisses his talk of hearing voices: "So, it will make us mad." This ironically looks ahead to her own descent into madness.

Visual irony is used effectively in Macbeth. When Duncan ruefully comments on the traitorous Thane of Cawdor, "he was a gentleman on whom I built an absolute trust", his words are followed by the stage direction "Enter Macbeth". Macbeth's appearance at this precise moment requires no words to tell the audience Duncan is repeating his error. Another good example is when Macbeth is considering his motives for murdering Duncan, and concludes "I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent..." This is followed by the direction, "Enter Lady Macbeth". At once we see she will act as a spur does to a reluctant horse, urging it on.

Presenting the Supernatural

Supernatural events pervade Macbeth. The witches are supernatural beings, who "have more in them than mortal knowledge". In Shakespeare's time, it was usual to believe literally in such spirits, who were seen as the embodiment of evil and servants of the devil. The opening scene raises the universal theme of good versus evil. Although the witch scenes would perhaps be terrifying to a contemporary audience, there is also much black comedy which provides a foil and light relief to the serious drama of the main action. Their gleeful accounts of revenge on those who offend them, and the horrible recipe they concoct to raise the spirits are very effective theatrically.

The Ghost. In Act Three Scene 4, the ghost of Banquo returns to haunt Macbeth for his crimes. The ghost arrives at the most embarrassing moment: during the great banquet Macbeth is holding to celebrate his accession. All the most important people in the country witness his breakdown, which gives the scene great

dramatic impact. The text makes it clear that the ghost is only visible to Macbeth himself, and the other characters show amazement when he reacts to it: "What sights, my lord?"

A director may present the ghost in one of two ways:

- have the actor playing Banquo enter and leave as indicated by Shakespeare's stage directions. Polanski chooses this traditional method in his film.
- have Macbeth react to an invisible ghost, as was done in the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) filmed version starring Sir Ian McKellen.

In the case of the first method, which seems to have been Shakespeare's original intention, the audience is invited to empathise with Macbeth, as we, too, see the ghost. We can understand his frustration when even Lady Macbeth cannot share his horror: "you look but on a stool." His reaction seems rational and leads on to his eventual isolation in Act Five.

In the case of the second method, the audience shares the viewpoint of the Scottish lords. Macbeth appears to have gone mad. In the RSC production, McKellen emphasised this impression by foaming at the mouth. You must decide for yourself which form of staging you think most appropriate.

Off-stage action

Shakespeare knew he had to rely on the imagination of his audiences. The play Henry V begins with a character known as the 'Chorus' inviting the audience to 'imagine' scenes of battle with horses and huge crowds within the 'wooden O' which comprised the Shakespearean theatre. In Macbeth, the greatest demand on the audience's imagination occurs in the scene of Duncan's murder, which takes place off-stage. Why does Shakespeare hide it from view?

It is not because Shakespeare likes to avoid showing violence on stage. Banquo's murder does take place on stage, and in other plays very gruesome events take place in view of the audience. In King Lear, for example, a character has his eyes put out.

Having the murder take place off-stage raises the tension. It throws the spotlight firstly on Lady Macbeth's fear, as she paces the stage alone, jumping at every noise. It also focuses the audience's attention on the effect of the murder on the two main protagonists. We see Macbeth almost driven mad by guilt, while Lady Macbeth suppresses her feelings. We are not distracted by feelings of sympathy for Duncan. The scene ends with a dramatic sound effect: 'knocking'. This very effectively raises the tension, as Lady Macbeth and Macbeth seem likely to get caught literally red-handed. Shakespeare shows Macbeth is already paying the penalty of his crime, by losing his peace of mind for ever.

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Contrast

There are many different types of contrast in the play.

Juxtaposition. One type is the placing of very different scenes side by side. The first two scenes of the play contrast in many ways. An eerie, supernatural scene with three strange female characters chanting is followed by a scene of bustling normal activity with a large cast of male characters.

The first scene of Act Five, Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking, contrasts effectively with the following scenes. It is at night, in a chamber, quiet and dark, with only three characters present, two of whom are very still observers. The scenes that follow are all busy daylight scenes of action. However, scenes 2- 9 also contrast with one another, as Shakespeare alternates scenes involving Malcolm's huge army outside Macbeth's castle, with scenes showing Macbeth growing increasingly isolated inside the castle.

Comedy/ tragedy. A striking example of contrast is the juxtaposition of comedy with tragedy in order to give the audience relief from the emotional build-up of tension. The witch scenes do this to some extent, but the most striking example is the character of the drunken porter whose comic monologue is placed between the tension of the murder scene and the drama of the murder being discovered.