

MACBETH : CHARACTER ANALYSIS

MACBETH

- Protagonist and tragic hero. A brilliant man who up until the start of the play has been increasingly successful and heroic throughout his life. He has good, strong friendships and a great reputation. The Captain fuels his reputation at the beginning of the play (Act 1.2) before we even meet Macbeth personally in 1.3: '*brave Macbeth... well he deserves that name*'.
- With a tragedy, it is the audience's job to try and figure out the tragic hero's fatal flaw (**hamartia**). Macbeth has several possible tragic flaws: greed, ambition, susceptibility to temptation, mental weakness, lack of Christian faith, and enjoyment of violence among others.
- A Scottish war general - a captain in King Duncan's army.
- Thane (lord) of Glamis at the beginning of the play, then promoted thane of Cawdor after the traitor is destroyed, and finally King after Duncan is murdered. He climbs up the social hierarchy.
- A 'brave' soldier with a 'noble' reputation - in favour with King Duncan after defeating the traitor who opposed him at the beginning of the play.
- Powerful in war, but unstable in political situations - Shakespeare is making the point that a good leader in war is not the same as a good king or ruler, who has the interests of the people at heart.
- A dynamic character who changes throughout the play - rather than analysing him as if he is the same the whole way through, try to analyse him in his various stages of downfall.
- Destructively ambitious, but also full of guilt after committing murder.
- Conflicted internal psychology - revealed through soliloquies and asides. He is at times torn between good and evil - he is hesitant to kill Duncan, but after the first murder, he is encouraged to commit increasingly bloodthirsty and evil acts, showing how bad actions lead one down a path of evil and encourage darkness to take hold.
- Abandoned by God / the forces of goodness when he starts to commit terrible acts.
- Susceptible to evil forces, such as Lady Macbeth's ruthless ambition and the Witches' manipulation - it is arguable that he is not entirely evil at the beginning, but that he allows evil to take hold of his mind by making a series of decisions based on greed and lust for power.

- Very much in love with Lady Macbeth, which enables him to be manipulated by her, although they have an unconventional relationship because they don't have children - he has a '*barren sceptre*' and '*fruitless crown*', he will be left without an heir to the throne. It is possible to interpret the two characters as an allegory of Adam and Eve (see Lady Macbeth for more info on this interpretation).
- Starting with the murder of Banquo, he takes less direction from the evil forces and is more actively evil, deciding to commit evil acts by himself without the input of Lady Macbeth and without any direct comment from the Witches.
- Some say that he redeems himself towards the end of the play, when he decides to confront his fate and fight MacDuff, even though he knows he will lose. Though bad, he is certainly a brave character and he does accept responsibility for his actions and choices. A tragic hero cannot be entirely villainous, we admire them in some ways yet are repelled by them in others; they must be a mixture of good and bad conflicting qualities.



Macbeth Meeting the Witches by **John Jones**

KEY DEBATES

- Is Macbeth purely evil or is he led astray by evil influences around him?
- Without Lady Macbeth, would Macbeth have suffered the same fate?
- Though Macbeth gains temporary power, goodness is restored to the throne through Malcolm at the end, who follows in his father King Duncan's footsteps. Therefore, is Shakespeare making the point that evil actions are pointless as good always wins in the end?
- Are Macbeth's visions a sign of madness, or are they supernatural hallucinations sent by the witches to trick him?
- Is Macbeth a strong or weak man?
- What is Macbeth's fatal flaw?
- What are the ultimate messages that we learn by studying Macbeth's downfall?

LADY MACBETH

- Macbeth's wife. Lives with him in their castle at Inverness.
- Powerful, ambitious, ruthless, unforgiving, she has a cruel and intelligent personality.
- Loving towards her husband and supportive of him most of the time, but cruel when she feels it will be beneficial to him in the long run, such as questioning his 'manhood' when he shows doubts about killing Duncan.
- Equated with the Biblical figure of Eve in the Garden of Eden (book of Genesis), who was tempted by the devil and led her husband Adam astray.
- No children, as she expresses hatred towards the idea of motherhood.
- Has a desire to be more masculine, as she equates masculinity with power and femininity with weakness.
- Interpreted by some modern critics as a feminist character who rebels against the constraints of her society - refusing to be a passive housewife, instead using her intelligence and ruthlessness to navigate the political world, albeit through Macbeth as she cannot participate directly in politics.

- Possibly a 'femme fatale' character who uses her intelligence and attractiveness to lead Macbeth down a path of darkness. In some versions of the play, Lady Macbeth is depicted as very beautiful and much younger than Macbeth, using this to manipulate him.
- Physically weak but psychologically stronger (at first) than Macbeth, she also uses her skill with words to manipulate and persuade him into taking power. Over time her psychological strength deteriorates as she descends into madness.
- Unlike Macbeth, she fully embraces evil and asks it to give her power and courage. This seems to work at first, making her confident and strong. However, she is later plagued by guilt and visions to the point of insanity.
- Occasionally shows weakness, even early on in the play. Such as not being able to kill Duncan herself as he looked too much like her own father.
- Lady Macduff is a foil to Lady Macbeth - both are the wives of thanes, both supportive of their husbands, but Lady Macduff is motherly and protective of her son, as well as kind and empathetic, whereas Lady Macbeth is cold and brutal. The contrast between these two characters accentuates their personalities and emphasises their differences.
- Potentially the play can be interpreted as a Biblical Allegory of the Fall of Man - Lady Macbeth's persuasiveness and Macbeth's gullibility is reminiscent of the story of Adam and Eve, where Eve the temptress convinced Adam to fall from grace and be cast out of the garden of Eden. Lady Macbeth does use imagery of the snake too in the line "look like th'innocent flower, but be the serpent under't".
- Descends into madness by the beginning of **Act 5** - starts sleepwalking and confessing her crimes, having visions of blood on her hands, she dies offstage (likely commits suicide).
- Important in **Acts 1-3** of the play, but fades into the background for much of **Act 4** and dies part way through **Act 5** after suffering a breakdown.
- A dynamic character who changes throughout the play - very sure of herself at the beginning and very confused by the end.



Macbeth, Lady Macbeth and Duncan by **Charles Rolls**

KEY DEBATES

- Is Lady Macbeth a powerful woman, or a weak and cowardly one?
- Is Lady Macbeth to blame for Macbeth's downfall?
- Can we ever feel sorry for Lady Macbeth, or do we accept her as a purely evil being?
- In what ways does Lady Macbeth's character explore ideas about gender?

THE WITCHES + HECATE

As 'instruments of darkness', the Witches are an extremely important group of characters in Macbeth. They are the first characters that we meet onstage; although their physical presence fades into the background of the play, their spiritual presence can be seen everywhere in the evil deeds that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth commit, and the madness that takes over their minds. Below is a list of key points about the witches that would be suitable to make in any essay about them directly, or about key themes such as evil, darkness, power and the supernatural.

- The three witches always appear onstage together, out on the heath in **1.1/1.3/3.5** they appear on moorland - a cold, dark, misty setting. Later they appear in a dark cave with a cauldron in **4.1**. They seem able to control the elements, and are always associated with extreme weather conditions - thunder, lightning, and rain (this is an example of pathetic fallacy, where the weather reflects the mood).
- Always appear together in a group of three - this was considered a magic number in Jacobean times, so it has supernatural significance. They also give predictions in threes.
- Appear in female form, but look distinctly unnatural - they have beards; they speak in trochaic trimeter (a metre which uses three feet per line) and rhyming couplets (unlike the human characters, who mostly use blank verse) - they are an example of uncanniness - they seem human, but aren't, they are androgenous - they have a mixture of male and female characteristics.
- Banquo calls them "instruments of darkness" - evil works through them. They encourage revenge, suffering, ambition, power and disaster. They prey on the evil aspects of human nature - our selfishness, our fears and our desire for power.
- Concoct potions and make predictions about the future, which all seem to come true - it is unclear whether they are seeing the future or whether they are influencing it through their prophecies. We question whether they only observe fate, or whether they can change it through their spells and words.
- Mysterious to the audience, and would have been genuinely frightening to some spectators in Shakespeare's time - they reflect real historical beliefs of witchcraft representing evil forces in the world. Some Jacobeans, such as King James I himself, believed in the real threat of witches; others would have been more skeptical.
- Macbeth only meets the witches twice (**1.3 / 4.1**), but they are the first characters we encounter in **Act 1 Scene 1**.
- They provide the inciting incident for Macbeth - planting the seeds of doubt and need for more power in his mind. They also indirectly affect Lady Macbeth, who wishes to embrace darkness in return for power.

- Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft, appears briefly in **3.5** to scold the witches for wasting their time on Macbeth. She gives them guidance on how to manipulate and torture Macbeth further, which they later do (with Hecate there) in **4.1**.
- Parallels of The Moirae, the three fates in classical Greek and Roman mythology. These Fates were said to hold the threads of mortals' lives in their hands, and cut the threads when they die.

KEY DEBATES

- Are the witches able to change the fate of humans, or are they just predicting what will already come to pass?
- How much 'truth' do they actually speak? What is Shakespeare's message about the deceptiveness of truth?
- Do they have any power in the world if people choose not to listen to them?
- Do they send the Macbeths visions? Or are those visions just a result of their own guilty minds?

DUNCAN

- The rightful king of Scotland, an honest, just and noble man.
- Represents the Divine Right of Kings - the belief that God appointed a true and just leader to be his representative on Earth.
- Kind-hearted and gentle, loved by most of his subjects and his sons (Malcolm and Donalbain).
- His speech is always formal and shows his gracious character, he is pleasant mannered and grateful to Macbeth and Banquo for defeating the traitor Macdonwald, the original Thane of Cawdor.
- He admits his weaknesses (unlike Macbeth) - he did not foresee the thane of Cawdor's attack.
- Arguably too innocent and naive, as he does not expect the thane of Cawdor to

rebel, and completely trusts Macbeth and Lady Macbeth - this is a more modern interpretation; at the time he would have been viewed as a representative of 'good' who is destroyed by the evildoers around him.

- Both Duncan and Macbeth are based on real historical figures. However, Shakespeare does modify the historical sources somewhat to suit his own narrative.

KEY DEBATES

- Is Duncan a good king, or a naive king?
- Through the restoration of Duncan's bloodline at the end of the play, when Malcolm is crowned as the new king, what comment is Shakespeare making about temporary power and permanent power?
- What is the difference between a king who rules through love, and one who rules through fear?

MALCOLM + DONALBAIN

- Duncan's sons - Malcolm will be King after Duncan dies (in 2.3).
- They flee after Duncan's murder - Malcolm goes to England, Donalbain to Ireland. This is because they fear they'll be murdered too.
- After they flee, Macbeth uses this as justification to blame them for their father's death.
- Malcolm leads an army against Macbeth, with King Edward (of England) and Macduff's support.
- In the end, Malcolm is restored as the rightful King of Scotland - he has a similar character to his father.

KEY DEBATES

- What is the difference between a 'tyrant' and a true leader?

MACDUFF

- Thane of Fife.
- A direct parallel (a 'foil') to Macbeth - a loyal and noble lord who serves King Duncan, but a man who retains his 'manly' status by resolving conflict cleanly and directly without overthinking, scheming and plotting (as Macbeth does).
- The first to discover Duncan's body.
- Loses trust in Macbeth straight after Duncan's death, refuses to go to Macbeth's coronation which makes Macbeth suspicious of him.
- In 2.3 he knocks on Macbeth's door and is likened to Christ going into Hell to release souls.
- Leaves for England to seek help fighting against Macbeth, at which point Macbeth sends murderers to kill his wife and children.
- This gives Macduff clear motives for personal revenge, so he comes back to fight Macbeth with a vengeance. Critics call this Macduff's 'revenge subplot'.
- A brave character who fights Macbeth despite being told he is invincible.
- Kills Macbeth, he decapitates him (as the traitor before Macbeth was also given the same treatment).

KEY DEBATES

- How is Macduff a foil to Macbeth?
- In what ways is Macduff acting on behalf of the good of his kingdom?
- In what ways is Macduff selfishly on a personal revenge mission?
- How is Macduff a representative of 'goodness'?

LADY MACDUFF

- A direct parallel (a 'foil') to Lady Macbeth.
- She embodies womanly virtues and stays true to the expectations of her gender - emotional, caring, loving, devoted to her husband and child, supportive.
- Unlike Lady Macbeth, she does not challenge her position in society or wishes for more power.
- She does occasionally criticize Macduff's actions, for example, his decision to abandon her and their son to go to England in 4.2 ('leave his wife and babes'), though she understands that his intentions are selfless and he's trying to protect their family and the realm - a crucial difference between her and Lady Macbeth.
- She and her son are presented as innocent victims who suffer indirectly as a result of Macbeth's evil plans to gain and maintain power over the kingdom.

KEY DEBATES

- How does the comparison between Lady Macduff and Lady Macbeth demonstrate attitudes to gender?
- Is Lady Macduff a perfect wife, and Lady Macbeth a terrible one?
- What characteristics does Lady Macduff have that demonstrate 'goodness' in a Jacobean context?

ROSS

- Lady Macduff's cousin, another Scottish nobleman.
- He has some significant supporting scenes:
 - » Appears first in **1.2** (before we meet Macbeth), where he praises Macbeth and Banquo's efforts in the fight against the traitor Thane of Cawdor and the King of Norway in the battle before the play begins.
 - » **2.4** - just before Duncan's death is revealed, he discusses the unusually dark

atmosphere of the setting with an Old Man and later discusses Duncan's death with Macduff.

- » **3.4** - he is disturbed at the feast by Macbeth's odd behavior and tries to help him.
- » **4.2** - he consoles Lady Macduff after informing her that her husband has left for England.
- He is always seen as a supporting character who helps those he feels loyal towards - first Duncan, then Macbeth, then Macduff and Malcolm (he joins in on their side in the final battle of the play).

BANQUO

- Macbeth's long term friend and ally - another lord and war general in the King's army.
- Morally superior to Macbeth - he mistrusts the witches and doesn't act on their prophecies, he is not tempted by evil. He calls them 'instruments of darkness', showing that he knows they are forces of evil, and that darkness works through them.
- Banquo has thoughts of ambition, such as when he says 'Speak then to me' to the witches in 1.3, showing that he also is interested in their prophecies and his future. Yet, crucially, he is passive - he does nothing to act on their words.
- You could argue that even though he dies, his descendants become kings so in a way he has succeeded where Macbeth has failed because his bloodline lives on as monarchs. Macbeth is jealous of Banquo's lineage coming to power, he states that the witches "hailed him [Banquo] father to a line of kings. / Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown / And put a barren scepter in my grip" in Act 3.1, resolving that all his actions to take power from Duncan will really benefit himself only in the short term, and Banquo's family instead will profit in the long run.
- One of the most important quotations for Banquo is the stage direction 'ENTER THE GHOST OF BANQUO and sits in Macbeth's place' in 3.4 - though he has died, he is still a presence in the play - an especially haunting presence for Macbeth, who failed to kill his son Fleance and therefore failed to eradicate the witches' prediction that Banquo's sons will take over from Macbeth as King. We could interpret Banquo's ghost as a vision in Macbeth's mind, or a genuine apparition from beyond the grave - either way, it shows that the murder of his friend weighs heavily on Macbeth's conscience and hangs over his reign as king, serving as a reminder that he will one day die and fall from power, leaving no heir to continue after him.

- Many critics think of Banquo as a foil to Macbeth - a character that exposes Macbeth's weaknesses as he is in a similar situation but acts very differently. However, he is not exactly the opposite of Macbeth either - he does seem interested in the prophecies, but chooses to wait and see whether they come true rather than altering his behaviour to suit them.
- King James I was thought to be related to Banquo, considering himself one of his descendants - therefore Shakespeare portrays him in a positive light. When King James, the patron of the play, watches the action he is reminded of his own family's history.
- You could also interpret Banquo as imperfect - he is good himself, but he doesn't do anything to stop Macbeth even when he doubts him, and doesn't accuse him after Duncan's murder despite saying to himself "I fear thou playd'st most foully for't"; i.e. he fears Macbeth won the throne unfairly. Notice the adverb 'foully' which recalls the Witches' utterance 'fair is foul and foul is fair' in 1.1.

KEY DEBATES

- Is Banquo a good or bad character?
- Does Banquo ultimately fare better than Macbeth, as his sons become kings?
- What is the function of Banquo appearing as a ghost?
- Banquo appears to distrust the witches, but does that mean he doesn't believe them?

FLEANCE

- Banquo's son, a minor character in the play but an important historical figure.
- Macbeth orders him to be murdered along with his father, but he escapes.
- While Banquo fights the murderers in 3.3 he shouts at Fleance to run, saying 'thou mayst revenge', suggesting the idea of revenge and justice, and creating the potential for a further cycle of violence. This parallels Macduff's own revenge subplot.
- In the play, we don't know what happens to him but we assume he is safe.
- Also based on a real-life Scottish figure - in the historical source that Shakespeare

read (Hollinshead's Chronicles), Fleance escapes Macbeth and lives in Wales, he then fathers a boy who returns to Scotland and establishes a line of Scottish kings - fulfilling the Witches' prophecy in 1.3.

- Remember that King James I - who the play is written for - is historically descended from this line, so in a sense, the play is about his own family's history.
- We can say that Fleance is a very minor character in the play, but very important in terms of the play's function - to prove that good characters will triumph over evil and to convince the audience that true Kings will always be reinstated on the throne, even if they are temporarily beaten by evil and ambitious usurpers

THE PORTER

- The porter is just called "Porter" in the characters list, so you can call him either "the porter" (no capital letter) or "Porter" (capital letter).
- He is a minor figure, but very unusual for the dark tone of the play, as he is a comic figure in the middle of a tragedy.
- There is a darkly comic tone set by the porter, as he pretends that he is the gatekeeper to the doors of Hell; this creates dramatic irony as he doesn't know how much evil has entered the castle (but the audience does).
- He has the conventions of a stock character (traditional characters that were used in comedies that audiences could immediately recognize).
- As a stock character, he is lower class and drunk, but not unintelligent - he does have some perceptive comments about what's going on. The combination of his drunkenness and his insight is what provides the comedy of the scene.
- He remarks wittily, for example, that these cannot be the gates to hell after all as it is 'too cold for hell', i.e. suggesting that Macbeth is stingy and doesn't have enough heating, as well as implying that it might even be nicer to work for the Devil himself because at least it would be warm!

- He only appears at the beginning of 2.3 - at first by himself, and then speaking to Macduff.
- Shakespeare often uses comic elements in his tragedies, and vice versa - the comedy serves to sharpen the tragic effect of the later scenes because it provides a brief moment of comic relief after Duncan's murder, before we're plunged further into Macbeth's violence and madness.

KEY DEBATES

- What is the purpose of the Porter? Why does Shakespeare include him?
- How does the introduction of tragicomic elements heighten the dramatic tension of the play as a whole?