

Macbeth: Act 1

Themes

Supernatural: the witches open the play and suggest an upset in the natural order with contradiction in their language.

Equivocation: are the witches misleading Macbeth? a major theme in the play where half truths are used to mislead others.

Ambition: Macbeth does not appear until scene 3, does his character live up to his reputation created by others?

Subject terminology

Dramatic Irony: soliloquies and asides are used by Shakespeare to show characters' inner thoughts.

Metaphor: animal imagery is used to show bravery (lions/eagles) and the use of the snake/serpent links to evil and biblical references (temptation).

Foreshadowing and pathetic fallacy: a storm rages as the play begins, creating a sense of doom.

Context

King James I wrote a book on the 'evil of witchcraft' called 'Daemonologie'.

A Jacobean audience would have recognised biblical references ; a 17th century audience would have strong belief in Christianity.

To consider murdering a King would be seen as a despicable crime which would be against nature and God.

What happens?

Sc 1 – Three Witches plan to meet Macbeth.

“Fair is foul, and foul is fair.”

Sc 2 – King Duncan learns that rebels and invaders have been defeated. Macbeth is praised for his bravery in battle and Duncan makes him Than of Cawdor.

“But all’s too weak, for brave Macbeth-well he deserves that name- disdainig Fortune with his brandished steel, which smok’d with bloody execution”.

Sc 3 – The three witches appear to Macbeth and Banquo. They tell Macbeth he will become Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland. They also tell Banquo that his sons will be Kings. After this, Macbeth hears that he has been made Thane of Cawdor and he begins to imagine that he can become King.

“If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me”.

“Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none”.

Sc 4 – King Duncan names his son Malcolm heir to the throne. Macbeth sees this as an obstacle to his ambition.

“Stars, hide your fires! Let not light see my black and deep desires.”

Sc 5 – Lady Macbeth reads a letter from Macbeth telling her what the Witches have predicted. She decides to persuade Macbeth to kill Duncan so that he can become King. Macbeth arrives and tells her that Duncan will be staying at their castle.

“Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye, Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower, But be the serpent under ’t”.

Sc 6 – King Duncan and Banquo arrive at Macbeth’s castle. They are greeted by Lady Macbeth.

“All our service, in every point twice done and then done double.”

Sc 7 – Macbeth debates whether he should kill Duncan. Lady Macbeth persuades him to.

“I dare do all that may become a man; Who dares do more is none”.

“When you durst do it, then you were a man”.

Macbeth: Act 2

Themes

Regicide: the act of killing a King.

Murder: even sleep is 'murdered' (remember Duncan is killed while sleeping) which suggests that Macbeth will be plagued by his guilt.

Nature: the natural world is 'turned upside-down' by the act of regicide.

Subject terminology

Symbolism: the natural world (animal imagery) is used to show the chaos that now occurs because the natural order of Absolute Monarchy has been upset.

Repetition: 'Blood', 'Amen' and 'sleep'. Links to motifs throughout the play.

Metaphor: animal references to show chaos and disorder.

The Porter refers to 'hell gate' opening which can be seen as a metaphor for the chaos and deception that will now rule Macbeth's world. The gates 'of hell' are literally opening.

Hyperbole: description of Duncan's murder uses religious references, this compares him to a 'heavenly' being.

Context

Absolute Monarchy and the Divine Right of Kings. To kill a good king, while asleep. Treason.

The Porter scene is widely regarded as an allusion to the Gunpowder plot trial which was conducted prior to Shakespeare's production of Macbeth.

Gender: Lady Macbeth is the antithesis of a Jacobean woman, strong, scheming and in control of her husband.

What happens?

Sc 1 – Macbeth sees a vision of a blood stained dagger. It seems to be guiding him to kill King Duncan.

"Is this a dagger which I see before me, The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee".

"Now o'er the one half-world, Nature seems dead".

Sc 2 – Macbeth has killed the King. He is so shaken that he has forgotten to leave the bloody daggers near Duncan's attendants so they will be blamed for the murder. Lady Macbeth takes control and returns the daggers to the room.

"I had most need of blessing, and "Amen" Stuck in my throat".

"Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep!"

"Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood Clean from my hand?"

Sc 3 – 'The Porter scene' Macduff and Lennox arrive. Macduff discovers the King is dead. Macbeth admits to killing Duncan's attendants because he was so angry that they had murdered the King. Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, escape fearing they will be killed too.

"O, come in equivocator. Knock, knock, knock. Who's there?"

"Confusion now hath made his masterpiece! Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope The Lord's anointed temple, and stole thence The life o' the building!"

"There 's daggers in men's smiles".

Sc 4 – Ross and the Old Man discuss strange events in nature. Macduff reports the belief that the attendants killed Duncan on the orders of his two sons. Macbeth is to be crowned King.

"A falcon, towering in her pride of place, Was by a mousing owl hawk'd at and kill'd".

Duncan's horses, a thing most strange and certain, beauteous and swift, the minions of their race, turn'd wild in nature. "

What happens?

Macbeth: Act 3

Themes

Supernatural: the witches can now be seen to control Macbeth's actions and plans.

Murder: Macbeth comes to realise that he can no longer 'turn back'. He will have to kill again and this act sees him become even more brutal.

Guilt: both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are suffering the consequences of their guilt. Neither of them can sleep and Banquo's ghost can be seen as a manifestation of Macbeth's guilty conscience.

Subject terminology

Motif: blood is repeatedly shown or spoken about. Sleep is a consistent reference and symbolises a settled mind.

Context

References to the Divine Right of Kings/Absolute monarchy, Macduff will be 'aided by God' in restoring peace.

'The ghost at the feast'. Early revenge tragedies, in the 16th/17thC, often featured a ghost that would call for revenge. Shakespeare also used a ghost in Hamlet to prompt revenge.

Sc 1 – Banquo suspects that Macbeth killed Duncan. Macbeth plans to have Banquo and his son Fleance murdered.

"Thou hast it now, King, cawdor, Glamis, all, as the weird women promised, and I fear thou played most foully for't."

"Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown, And put a barren sceptre in my gripe, Thence to be wrench'd with an unlineal hand, No son of mine succeeding."

Sc 2 – Macbeth is troubled and anxious. He hints to Lady Macbeth that something is going to happen, but doesn't tell her of his plans to kill Banquo.

"We have scotch'd the snake, not kill'd it."

"Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, Till thou applaud the deed."

Sc 3 – The murderers kill Banquo, but his son Fleance escapes.

O, trechery! Fly good Fleance, fly, fly, fly! Thou mayst revenge."

Sc 4 – Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost at a banquet. He is clearly terrified. Macbeth also notes that Macduff is absent from the feast. He decides to visit the Witches and to spy on Macduff.

"But now I am cabin'd, cribb'd, confined, bound in To saucy doubts and fears."

"Hence, horrible shadow! Unreal mockery, hence!"

"How says t thou that Macduff denies his person at our great bidding?"

"I am in blood Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, Returning were as tedious as go o'er."

Sc 5 – The Witch goddess, Hecate, is angry with the Witches for leaving her out of their dealings with Macbeth. She promises that Macbeth's confidence in what the Witches show him will be used to destroy him.

"He shall spurn fate, scorn death and bear his hopes 'bove wisdom, grace and fear, and you all know, security is mortals' chiefest enemy."

Sc 6 – Lennox and another lord talk about the murders and their suspicions of Macbeth's guilt. They have news that Macduff is with Malcolm in England, planning to return with an army to defeat Macbeth.

"Thither Macduff is gone to pray the holy king upon his aid to wake Northumberland and the warlike Siward, that by the help of these, with him above to ratify the work, we may again give to our table meat, sleep to our nights."

Macbeth: Act 4

Themes

Supernatural: the witches' prophecies are deliberately ambiguous and drive the plot from this point.

Deception: the witches, under Hecate's orders, equivocate with Macbeth. She wants him to be deceived.

Subject terminology

Foreshadowing and imagery: the apparitions/predictions are clues to Macbeth's downfall in Act 5. Society and nature will rise up against Macbeth, supported by the 'Godly' English army and Macduff.

Sustained metaphor: bird imagery is used in scene 2 to present the Macduff family as defenceless in their nest. This is mirrored in scene 3 when Macduff refers to his children as his 'pretty chickens'.

Context

In scene 1, the line of Kings shown to Macbeth relates to king James I who was also descended from a long bloodline of Kings.

In scene 3, Macduff and Malcolm discuss what it is to be a good king. They use the English King, Edward (the Confessor), as an example of 'Godly' conduct.

What happens?

Sc 1 – Macbeth visits the Witches again. They show him three apparitions/predictions. These are ambiguous but Macbeth interprets them in his favour and is confident. The witches also show him a line of Kings holding mirrors that all reflect back to Fleance and Banquo. This angers Macbeth. Lennox arrives to confirm that Macduff has fled to England. Macbeth plans to have Macduff's family killed.

"Beware Macduff, beware the Thane of Fife."

"Laugh to scorn the power of man, for none of woman born shall harm Macbeth."

"Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until Great Birnham Wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him."

"The castle of Macduff I will surprise; seize upon Fife; give to th' edge o' th' sword his wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls that trace in his line".

Sc 2 – Lady Macduff and her children discuss Macduff's flight and Lady Macduff is angry because he has left them in certain danger. They are murdered on Macbeth's orders.

"For the poor wren, the most diminutive of birds, will fight, her young ones in the nest, against the owl".

Sc 3 – In England, with the English King's help (Edward), Malcolm and Macduff plan their revenge on Macbeth. Scotland must be freed from the suffering he has caused. Malcolm purposely pretends to be more 'evil' than Macbeth to test Macduff's loyalty to Scotland. The scene ends with Macduff being informed that his wife and children have been murdered. He vows revenge. Malcolm offers his support to the battle for Scotland.

"Dispute it like a man".

"I shall do so; but I must also feel it as a man".

Macbeth: Act 5

Themes

Equivocation: Macbeth realises he has been misled by the witches. He is reflective of his ambition yet vows to fight on.

Subject terminology

Sustained metaphor: in scene 5, Shakespeare uses the idea of a stage as a metaphor for his 'story'. That life is a stage and that we are all actors. He compares life as a 'tale told by an idiot'.

Motif: blood on hands, cannot be washed off. A symbol of guilt.

Animal imagery: Shakespeare uses bear baiting as a metaphor for Macbeth's situation. He is trapped and outnumbered.

Structure: the action ends in battle, this mirrors act 1 (the play begins with a battle). This could be interpreted as linking to the witches: 'when the battle's lost and won'.

Context

Absolute monarchy: the rightful King is now in place and Macbeth has seen to be punished by God, nature and society. This would have pleased James I as it serves as a warning to those who would consider regicide and confirms the Divine Right of Kings.

What happens?

Sc 1 – Lady Macbeth is seen sleepwalking, trying to wash blood from her hands. Her actions suggest that her mind is tormented by what she has done.

"Out, damned spot! Out, I say! One, two. Why then 'tis time to do't. hell is murky."

"The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now? Will these hands ne'er be clean?"

Sc 2 – A number of Scottish lords march to join forces with Malcolm and his English army near Birnam Wood.

Sc 3 – Macbeth hears that Malcolm's troops are coming to get him. He is unafraid because of his confidence in the Witches' predictions.

"I cannot taint with fear. What's the boy Malcolm? Was he not born of woman?"

"I will not be afraid of death and bane, till Birnam Forest come to Dunsinane."

Sc 4 – At Birnam Wood, Malcolm's soldiers cut branches from the trees to disguise their numbers as they approach Macbeth's castle.

Sc 5 – Macbeth hears that Lady Macbeth is dead. He is then told that Birnam Wood seems to be moving. Desperate, he decides to lead his soldiers out and fight to the end. Macbeth shows signs of his previous 'warrior' self.

"she should have died hereafter."

"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more."

"Ring the alarum bell! Blow wind, come wrack; at least we'll die with harnesses on our backs."

Sc 6 – Malcolm's army, led by Siward and his son, gets ready to attack.

Sc 7 – Macbeth kills young Siward, but troops enter his castle. Macduff hunts for Macbeth.

"They have tied me to a stake; I cannot fly, but bear-like I must fight the course."

"Tyrant, show thy face! If thou be'st slain, and with no stroke of mine, my wife and children's ghosts will haunt me still."

Sc 8 – Finding Macbeth, Macduff reveals that he was not born of a woman, but by a Caesarean. Macbeth, knowing that this is the end, still fights desperately. Macduff kills him.

"I bear a charmed life which must not yield to one born of woman."

"macduff was from his mother's womb untimely ripp'd."

"I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, MacDuff, and damn'd be him that first cries 'hold, enough!'"

Sc 9 – Macduff enters with Macbeth's head on a pole. All declare their support for Malcolm, the new King of Scotland.

"Behold where stands the usurper's head. The time is free."