

# Macbeth

## Synopsis

Macbeth and Banquo, generals in the service of King Duncan of Scotland, are returning victorious from battle when they are hailed by three witches who predict that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor and then King of Scotland, whereas Banquo's descendants will be kings.

The first part of the prophecy is soon fulfilled when Duncan rewards Macbeth's loyal service and names him Thane of Cawdor. Encouraged by this, and playing on her husband's ambition, Lady Macbeth persuades him to murder Duncan while he is a guest at their castle. Malcolm and Donalbain, Duncan's sons, flee to England for safety, fearing that they will be killed next. Macbeth, now king, has Banquo murdered in an attempt to secure his own position, but Banquo's ghost haunts him at a banquet.

Macbeth visits the witches again. They warn him to beware of Macduff, a noble who has also fled to England, but assure him that he cannot be harmed by any man born of woman. Macbeth orders the murder of Macduff's wife and children.

In England, Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty and they then raise an army to march against Macbeth. However Macbeth, armed with the witches' prophecy, believes that he is invincible.

As his enemies draw nearer, Macbeth learns that his wife has killed herself. He faces Macduff in combat but when he learns Macduff was born by caesarian section, he realises that he must face death.

With Macbeth dead, Malcolm is crowned King of Scotland.

## Did You Know?

That uttering the play's name aloud in a theatre causes bad luck?

- Sixteenth century Scotland was notorious for its witch-hunts, mainly due to King James VI of Scotland's obsession with witchcraft.
- To appease the King's obsession, Shakespeare was said to have researched the weird sisters in depth; their chants in *Macbeth*, and ingredients of fenny snake, eye of newt and toe of frog, are supposedly real spells.
- According to folklore, *Macbeth* was cursed from the beginning. A coven of witches objected to Shakespeare using real incantations, so they put a curse on the play.
- Legend has it the play's first performance (around 1606) was riddled with disaster. The actor playing Lady Macbeth died suddenly, so Shakespeare himself had to take on the part. Other rumoured mishaps include real daggers being used in place of stage props for the murder of King Duncan (resulting in the actor's death).
- The play hasn't had much luck since. The famous Astor Place Riot in New York in 1849, caused by rivalry between American actor Edwin Forrest and English actor William Charles Macready, resulted in at least 20 deaths and over 100 injuries. Both Forrest and Macready were playing Macbeth in opposing productions at the time.
- Other productions have been plagued with accidents, including actors falling off the stage, mysterious deaths, and even narrow misses by falling stage weights, as happened to Laurence Olivier at the Old Vic in 1937.

- Instead of using the play's name, many instead refer to it as *The Scottish Play* or *The Bard's Play*.
- So how can you avoid catastrophe if you utter the play that shall not be named? Exit the theatre, spin around three times, spit, curse and then knock on the theatre door to be allowed back in...

## Themes

### Theme of Ambition

- Macbeth is set in a hierarchical world in which loyalty and service to the king is rewarded with titles and land. When Macbeth is successful in battle, King Duncan rewards him with the title 'Thane of Cawdor' because he is 'worthy'.
- All of the characters have hopes for their own futures and the future of Scotland; however, ambition that oversteps the moral boundaries is condemned and punished. In the opening scene, we hear about 'merciless' rebels who have attempted to seize power and are overthrown and executed.

### Theme of Supernatural

- The very first thing we learn at the opening of the play is that there is a supernatural force, which is first seen in the form of the three witches. They appear in 'thunder and lightning' and plot to meet with Macbeth, before calling to their supernatural familiars and casting a strange spell. Both Macbeth and Banquo believe in the witches' magic and power.
- This is a world where magic is a real presence, although it is associated with the devil. In Act 1 Lady Macbeth calls on 'spirits' and 'murd'ring ministers' to help her achieve her aims; in Act 2 Macbeth sees a ghostly dagger on his way to murder Duncan; and in Act 3 he sees a terrifying apparition of his murdered friend Banquo. After Macbeth's last visit to the witches in Act 4 Scene 1, the supernatural presences disappear, although their influence remains.

### Theme of Fate

- The witches make several prophecies and they all appear to come true. In Act 1, the first prophecy is realised almost immediately when Macbeth is made Thane of Cawdor; this is proof for both men of the witches' power and Banquo remarks 'What, can the devil speak true?' (Banquo, 1:3). However, as soon as Lady Macbeth hears of the prophecy, she wants to speed up what has been 'promised'.
- When Macbeth commits murder to achieve the crown, it becomes ambiguous whether his fate is predestined or if he has been influenced to make choices out of his own free will.
- Macbeth also tries to cheat fate by sending murderers after Banquo and Fleance in order to avoid the witches' prophecy about them coming true

## Characters

**Macbeth:** Macbeth is the Thane of Glamis and married to Lady Macbeth. He is a brave and successful captain in King Duncan's army.

**Lady Macbeth:** Lady Macbeth is married to Macbeth and lives at their home in Inverness.

**The Witches:** The witches are three weird sisters who have supernatural powers. They plan to meet with Macbeth after the battle and deliver prophecies to him and Banquo.

**Banquo:** Banquo is a friend of Macbeth and a fellow captain. Along with Macbeth, he has led the Scottish troops to victory.

**Macduff:** Macduff is the Thane of Fife. He is married to Lady Macduff and has children.

**Duncan:** Duncan is the King of Scotland. He has two sons, Malcolm and Donalbain. He is a well-liked and successful king.

**Malcolm:** Malcolm is King Duncan's eldest son, and is set to inherit the throne after Duncan's death.

**Ross:** Ross is a thane in Scotland. He brings reports of Macbeth's bravery to King Duncan.

**Fleance:** Fleance is Banquo's young son.

## For Discussion

(or ideas to be used as writing prompts)

### Before your workshop:

- What do you think the rules are surrounding ambition? When does it become an evil act to pursue your ambition?

### After your workshop:

- Who do you think the hero was? Who was the villain? Why?
- By referring to Lady Macbeth's actions, thoughts and words and the things that are said about her, develop a character sketch of her.
- Are there any characters without ambition? Have your thoughts on the rules surrounding ambition changed?
- Look at the prophecies that the three witches make and the moments when they come true. Do you believe in their magic, or could there be another explanation? Are there any that you cannot explain?
- Do you think the prophecies would have come true without Macbeth's intervention? Do you think the prophecy about Banquo's sons will come true?

## Visual Art Prompts

### Witches

Discuss with students what the witches might look like. Could they be elderly women, young children, figments of Macbeth's imagination or aspects of the environment on the heath? Every director has a different interpretation of what they want the witches to look like.

In the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1976 production of *Macbeth*, director Trevor Nunn wanted the witches to be believable individuals so they were different ages dressed in different ragged clothing rather than three identical beings. The same company's 1999 production, directed by Gregory Doran, had the witches dressed differently from one another again, but this time they were dressed in combat gear, like soldiers. However, in the 2004 production, directed by Dominic Cooke, the

witches had a different look by having them dressed similarly in simple black attire. Finally, in 2011 the company, directed by Michael Boyd, had a different portrayal of the witches by having the prophecies delivered by supernatural children.



If you were directing *Macbeth*, how would you want the witches to look? Think about how the visual representation of the witches change how the audience views them. How do the different interpretations of the witches from the Royal Shakespeare Company influence the play?

**Activity:** Have each student draw a picture or find in magazines his or her idea of the perfect Macbeth witch.

## Drama Activities

### The Hot Seat: Gaining Perspective

A story can change depending on who tells it. People see the world from different viewpoints. A group of people might see the same event from completely different perspectives and tell about the event in very different ways.

Objective: Students will analyze events from the play through the perspective of different characters.

Step 1: Make a list of the important events in the story of *Macbeth*.

Step 2: Set up the “hot seat”: a single chair in front of your classroom.

Step 3: Have students or a group of students choose one of the characters from the story.

Step 4: One by one, each student or group of students takes the “hot seat.” Have them introduce themselves in the voice and manner of the chosen character.

Step 4: Using the list you made of important events in the story of *Macbeth*, ask the “characters” in the “hot seat” questions about how these events affect them.

Step 5: After the class has interviewed several “characters,” discuss how the characters’ viewpoints differed. How were they alike? Was there a point in the story when most of the characters’ viewpoints were the same?

**Writing Extension:** Describe 5 of the characters in the play: write down 10 adjectives describing them then use your adjectives to write a paragraph description of each character. Now write about one of the characters, describing them as another character sees them. Describe one character from the perspective of a different character.

### **Conversations for Two**

This improvisational activity will help you to begin thinking about the themes of the story. With a partner, students brainstorm different scenarios that would fit the following situations. They then carry out a conversation. If comfortable, students can share their conversations with the rest of the class. Discuss the different choices made by pairs working with the same scenario.

1. You are Macbeth, and you hear the witches’s prophecy for the first time. What do you think? Have a conversation where one student is Macbeth, and the other is one of the witches. As Macbeth, do you believe in the magic of the witches? If so, what does a prophecy like this mean to your ambitions when you are told you won’t lose? If not, do you still take the opportunity to claim the throne seriously? As one of the witches, what are your motivations for sharing Macbeth’s future with him? Are you concerned with making sure he believes you?
2. Brainstorm different scenarios for the conversation that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth would have had for the first time after hearing the prophecy. Discuss the meaning of fate: do you wait for it to happen to you, or do you go out and make it happen? As Macbeth, what is holding you back from killing Duncan and claiming the throne? As Lady Macbeth, how do you justify murder to fulfill fate?
3. When Macduff escapes to England to find Malcolm, he is met with a hesitant young prince who is unsure of himself. What are some different scenarios between the two men as Macduff tries to convince Malcolm to return? Is Macduff sympathetic, frustrated, angry? Why does Malcolm hesitate? What makes a “good” ruler, and why does Macduff think Malcolm will be one or, alternatively, why does Malcolm think he might not be a good king?

### **Revisiting the Story**

Below, the plot of *Macbeth* has been simplified into five basic actions, one to accompany each act.

Act 1: The witches **prophesize** that Macbeth will become King of Scotland.

Act 2: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth **murder** Duncan to claim the throne.

Act 3: Macbeth is **haunted** by Banquo after having him killed.

Act 4: Macduff **convince**s Malcolm to fight against Macbeth.

Act 5: Macduff kills Macbeth, and Malcolm is **crowned** the King of Scotland.

1. In groups, using the same outline, students create and present a series of five tableaux depicting each of these key images that summarize the story of *Macbeth*.

2. Students then add seven more key images or actions to the summary.

3. Students can present their twelve part tableaux sequence adding background music to bridge the transition from one tableau to the next in the sequence.

### **Movement: Discovering the Characters**

As students work through the following exercise on the characters in the play, encourage them to think about which characters are closest to Macbeth and influence him the most and which characters affect him, whether it's their words, deeds or even deaths that have the most impact.

1. Divide students into groups of three, providing them with the Character Facts for one of the characters. Explain that these character facts introduce us to the character at the start of the play.
  - MACBETH • He is described as a 'brave' soldier and has been fighting for Duncan. • He shares his news with Lady Macbeth when he meets the witches. • He describes himself as ambitious.
  - LADY MACBETH • She doubts Macbeth will do what needs to be done, and kill King Duncan. • She is described by her guests as their 'honoured hostess'. • She believes the only way for Macbeth to become king is to murder Duncan.
  - BANQUO • He is a friend and fellow soldier of Macbeth and has fought beside him. • He seems to believe the witches before Macbeth does, asking them questions. • He has a son called Fleance.
  - MALCOLM • He is the first son of King Duncan. • King Duncan has only just made him his official heir to the throne – so when Duncan dies Malcolm should become king. • He flees to England for safety when his father dies.
  - DONALBAIN • Duncan's second child. • Runs to Ireland when his father dies, at the same time Malcolm does. He does not say anything about his father's death but leaves to keep himself and his brother safe.
  - MACDUFF • He is a thane who lives in Fife with his family. • Macduff travels to Macbeth's castle with Duncan after the battle is won and seems loyal to the king. • When Duncan dies, Macduff is very suspicious of Macbeth and is one of the only characters not to go to his coronation.
  - ROSS • He is a thane and is the one who delivers the message to Macbeth that Duncan has given him a new title. • He is loyal to Duncan but also supportive of Macbeth.
  - WITCHES • There are three of them and they are described as 'So withered and wild in their attire, / That look not like th'inhabitants o'th'earth'. • They cast spells and have planned their first meeting with Macbeth and Banquo. • They give Macbeth and Banquo three prophecies, telling Macbeth that he will be king and Banquo's sons will be kings, but they do not answer Macbeth and Banquo's questions directly.

2. Ask each group to create a statue or freeze frame of their character, with one or two people acting as the character and the other(s) moving them and directing them to create the best and most effective image. How many things can they show about the character?
3. Invite each group to share their freeze frames or statues, allowing the rest of the group to look and to question their choices. How much can they work out about the character from what they are seeing in front of them?
4. Invite the group who have created Macbeth to move into position in the middle of the room and then ask the groups who have created statues of other characters to position themselves around Macbeth, imagining how close or far away from him they are at the start of the play. The directors can stand back and help the students in their group who are part of the statue to make their decision.
5. Reflect with students on why they have made their choices. According to their 'diagram' who is the closest to Macbeth? Do they think this person has the most influence over him? Look at the characters closest to him. What would need to happen for him to hurt that person? Would he care if they died?

**Writing Extension:** Allow students time to create a drawn version of their diagram, with Macbeth in the centre and the characters in his life around him. Extend this by asking them to draw a second diagram of how important they each are in causing Macbeth's downfall and eventual death, with the most important being closest to him and the least furthest away. How different are the two versions of the diagram? Which of the characters has moved the most – i.e. was not close to him but is really important in causing his death or has nothing to do with his death but was very close to him?

### **Sculpture Gallery**

1. Divide the class into groups of 3.
2. Instruct each group to designate each group member as either A, B or C. Group member A will be the "artist" and group members B and C are the 'clay'.
3. Instruct the artists to use the clay to create a sculpture that captures the essence of the given line. Artists must be sure to work gently with their clay, and remember that the clay can be transformed into both inanimate objects or people, and can be manipulated to create facial expression, suggest bold movement, or to create different levels. Artists must also be sure to creatively incorporate the index card into the sculpture so that it may easily be read.
4. After about 5 minutes, the artists may finish and be invited to freely walk through the sculpture gallery and appreciate each others' wonderful works of art.
5. Repeat so that group members B and C each have turns to be the artist.

The following are examples of quotes that may be used to create beautiful sculptures!

1. "Fair is foul, and foul is fair."  
— Witches, 1.1.12
2. "It will have blood, they say: blood will have blood."  
— Macbeth, 3.4.152–53
3. "Double, double, toil and trouble;  
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble."  
— Witches, 4.1.10–1
4. "By the pricking of my thumbs,  
Something wicked this way comes."  
— Second Witch, 4.1

5. "Out, damned spot! out, I say!"  
— Lady Macbeth, 5.1.31
6. "What are these  
So wither'd and so wild in their attire,  
That look not like the inhabitants o' the earth"  
— Banquo, 1.3. 40-2.
7. "Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none"  
— Third Witch, 1.3.69.

## Writing Prompts

### **Point of View Questions**

Example point of view questions:

- Use clues from the play and your own ideas to identify (character's name) point of view. How might the story be different if it was told by (another character's name)?
- Identify the main point of view or perspective in the play by using details and your own background knowledge. Explain another point of view or perspective that could exist.
- How might (character's name) point of view differ from your own? Use three details from the play in the explanation of your thinking.
- How might your background, experiences and perspectives have influenced the way you understood the play?
- Using evidence from the play and what you can infer about the character's point of view, explain how it is similar or different from your own perspective.
- What does the character's decision mean to you and how might it affect other characters in the story?

### **Monologue Writing**

**Objective:** In the exercise, students will map out the character traits of several of the characters in the play. Then they will write a short monologue from the perspective of one of the characters. Students will demonstrate an understanding of character traits, recall facts, characters and events from the story.

#### **Discussion Outline:**

1. Use the character of Macbeth. This could be either a whole class or small group discussion.
  - First plot out the main points of what happens to Macbeth in the play.
  - Discuss what Macbeth does in each section.
  - Discuss how Macbeth acts and interacts with different characters in each section.
  - Make a list of words that describe Macbeth during each section.
  - Choose four words from the list that best encompass his whole character.
  - Discuss where in the play these character traits reveal themselves. (At this point, students are acting like detectives to find evidence to back up the character traits they have chosen. What the character does or says in the play is the proof that this word helps describe him/her.)
2. Then, have students choose one of the characters from the play and on their own complete the character analysis process used above. Students fill in a character analysis diagram for their character. In the middle of the diagram is written their character, then the four character traits are drawn in circles flowing out of the center, then come out the proof is drawn in circles coming out of the traits. An example of what this diagram looks like is at:  
<http://www.enchantedlearning.com/graphicorganizers/cloud/43.shtml>

3. Students think about what their character wants in the play. It should be expressed in the form of a “to” verb. This is the character’s objective. Their objective should encompass what drives them through the whole play.

4. Students write: My name is \_\_\_\_\_ (Fill in name of character.) I want to \_\_\_\_\_. (Fill in what the character wants in the overall play.)

5. Students use the character’s objective as a jumping off point to write a short monologue from their character’s point of view. The monologue should start with their completed sentence, I want \_\_\_\_\_. The rest should tell how they go about getting what they want or not. Or why they want it so much and why is it important to them.

**Drama Extension:** Students perform their monologues for the class.

### **Additional resources/ Sources for this study guide**

Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan: [www.shakespearesask.com](http://www.shakespearesask.com)

Royal Shakespeare Company, *Macbeth*: <https://www.rsc.org.uk/macbeth>

Royal Shakespeare Company, *Macbeth* Learning Zone:  
<https://www.rsc.org.uk/shakespeare-learning-zone/macbeth>

Royal Shakespeare Company, *Macbeth* Teacher Pack:  
<https://cdn2.rsc.org.uk/sitefinity/education-pdfs/teacher-packs/edu-macbeth-teacherpack-2018.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

Utah Shakespeare Festival, *Macbeth* study guide:  
<https://www.bard.org/study-guides/macbeth-study-guide>