

Macbeth KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER

Context – The play was written by William Shakespeare, and was first performed around 1606

Shakespeare's Time – Shakespeare wrote at the time of two monarchs: Queen Elizabeth I and James I. The plays that he wrote during the period of Queen Elizabeth are generally happy and joyful, reflecting the mood at the time. However, darker plays such as Macbeth were written in the era of James I, which was far more unstable. For example, the gunpowder plot was the year before.



James I – 1606 was early in the reign of James I, who was an admirer of Shakespeare's plays, and a patron of his acting company. It is doubtless, therefore, that Shakespeare had the king in mind when writing a play about Macbeth, a figure from Scottish ancestry. Furthermore, King James's family claimed to have descended from a historical figure named Banquo.



The Divine Right of Kings – Divine Right asserts that monarchs were appointed from God above, and that any attempt to question them was to question God himself. This was a widely-held view at the time. King James I often quoted divine right to cement his place on the throne. A play involving a good, 'God-given' king, and the demise of a king-slayer would no doubt have gone down well with King James at the time.



The Role of Women – Despite the strength of Elizabeth I's reign, society at the time was patriarchal – women were considered inferior to men. Women belonged to their fathers (or brothers if their fathers had died) and then their husbands. They were not permitted to own land or enter most professions. They were instead expected to bear children, and be gentle and womanly. Lady Macbeth would therefore be at odds with what was expected of women.



Witches and the Supernatural – At the time of Shakespeare, the belief in witches and the supernatural was extremely strong, and many so-called 'witches' were burnt at the stake. There is no doubt, therefore, that some of the ideas in the play would have been taken very seriously, such as the witches' prophecies, Macbeth being seemingly 'possessed' and his vivid hallucinations.



Healthcare and Medicine – Healthcare and medicine were not as advanced in Shakespeare's age as they are today – there were numerous ailments and diseases that were not yet understood. Furthermore, there were a many wars in which scores of men were killed. Therefore, death was a much more frequent thought for people at the time. The high death count in the play would therefore seem slightly more ordinary!



Main Characters – Consider what Shakespeare intended through his characterisation of each of the below...

Macbeth – Macbeth is the lead protagonist of the play. He is introduced as a Scottish general who is thought to be a brave and strong soldier. However, he is easily persuaded to commit the murder of a king that he loves. He becomes a tyrannical and destructive king, who responds to all threats (including his own insecurities) through violence and murder.

Lady Macbeth – Macbeth's wife, an extremely ambitious woman who lusts for power. At the beginning of the play, she seems stronger than Macbeth, urging and aiding him to kill Duncan. Later in the play, however, she becomes racked with guilt and madness, proving unable to come to terms with what they have done. Her conscience affects her to such a degree that she eventually commits suicide.

First Scene: Act I Scene III **Final Scene:** Act V Scene VIII

Duncan – Duncan is the kind and loved King of Scotland who Macbeth murders in order to fulfil his ambition and the witches' prophecy. Duncan is a virtuous King, who is both compassionate and rational – he forms a stark contrast with Macbeth as king. When Duncan dies, order in Scotland is shattered. It is only restored when his son, Malcolm eventually takes the throne.

Macduff – A Scottish nobleman who is dubious and hostile towards Macbeth's reign from the beginning. His wife and young son are murdered by Macbeth. Macduff leads the battle against Macbeth's tyrannical reign, eventually becoming the man who kills Macbeth (in line with the witch's prophecy as he was not of 'woman born.') In doing so, he helps Malcolm to the throne.

First Scene: Act I Scene II **Final Scene:** Act II Scene I

The Three Witches – The witches represent trickery, manipulation and the supernatural. They use charms, spells and prophecies to prompt Macbeth into murdering Duncan. There is some ambivalence over how much of their power comes from supernatural abilities, as opposed to knowing the weaknesses of their victim. In any case, they take pleasure in toying with human lives and emotions.

Banquo – Banquo is a brave and noble gentleman who is a friend and fellow soldier to Macbeth. Banquo is also given prophecies by the witches, but unlike Macbeth, he chooses not to act on them. After being murdered, Banquo's ghost returns to haunt Macbeth, causing him a great deal of fright, and reminding him of the path he chose not to take. In accordance with the witches' prophecies, Banquo's descendants later take their place on the throne.

First Scene: Act I Scene I **Final Scene:** Act IV Scene I

First Scene: Act I Scene III **Final Scene:** Act III Scene IV

Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

Unchecked Ambition – The tale of Macbeth ruthlessly exposes the dangers of ambition when it is not held by moral constraints. Ambition turns Macbeth from a brave and loyal Scottish general into a murderous tyrant. Lady Macbeth is another example of this theme, as she is unable to deal with the acts that she and Macbeth have committed to fuel their ambition, and so commits suicide.



Fate vs Free Will – Throughout the play, the audience is frequently forced to question the notion of fate vs free will – does the story pan out the way that it does because it was pre-ordained, or because of the actions that Macbeth chose to take? Macbeth fervently attempts to fight the negative aspects of his fate, and yet it is these very actions (his free will) that cause the predetermined downfall (fate)

Gender, Masculinity and Femininity – Lady Macbeth manipulates her husband by questioning his masculinity, as he originally declines to murder King Duncan for the throne. She states that she wishes she could be 'unsexed' so as to give her bravery to commit the deed. Masculinity is frequently associated with raw aggression, and femininity with weakness and kindness.



Inversion of the Natural Order – Wherever the natural order is disturbed in Macbeth (the three supernatural witches, the murder of a king) disorder and chaos soon follow. There is only peace when the natural order is restored (Malcolm is seated on the throne). In line with the beliefs of King James, through Macbeth Shakespeare expresses that the inversion of the natural order is dangerous and destructive.

Scene-by-Scene Summary – Take note of the key quotations from each scene.

Act 1 Scene 1	Three witches meet on a heath. They plot to trick Macbeth at a later time.	<i>Fair is foul and foul is fair, Hover through the fog and filthy air.</i>
Act 1 Scene 2	King Duncan is told of Macbeth's bravery in battle. He tells a messenger to award him Thane of Cawdor.	<i>No more that thane of Cawdor shall deceive... ...And with his former title greet Macbeth.</i>
Act 1 Scene 3	The witches confront Macbeth and Banquo and deliver their prophecies. The messenger arrives to tell Macbeth that he is the Thane of Cawdor.	<i>All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Glamis! All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, thane of Cawdor! All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter!</i>
Act 1 Scene 4	At the Kings' Palace, Duncan names Malcolm (his eldest son) as his successor.	<i>The Prince of Cumberland! that is a step On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,</i>
Act 1 Scene 5	At Macbeth's castle, Lady Macbeth receives a letter from Macbeth detailing the witches' prophecies. She plans Duncan's murder, but fears that Macbeth is too kind to fulfil his ambition.	<i>You spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty.</i>
Act 1 Scene 6	Duncan arrives at Macbeth's castle. He professes his love for Macbeth as a dear friend.	<i>Conduct me to mine host: we love him highly, And shall continue our graces towards him.</i>
Act 1 Scene 7	Macbeth has doubts about the assassination. Lady Macbeth tells him of the plot and he then agrees to it.	<i>If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well It were done quickly . . .</i>
Act 2 Scene 1	Banquo and Fleance arrive. When they depart to bed, Macbeth sees a vision of a dagger leading him towards Duncan's chamber.	<i>Is this a dagger which I see before me, The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.</i>
Act 2 Scene 2	Macbeth emerges from the chamber, visibly shaken. He has forgotten to place the daggers with the chamberlains to absolve the blame. Lady Macbeth must return them.	<i>Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood Clean from my hand? Sleep no more, / Macbeth does murder sleep</i>
Act 2 Scene 3	Macduff arrives and finds Duncan dead. Macbeth explains that he killed the chamberlains in rage. Duncan's sons flee.	<i>O horror, horror, horror! Tongue nor heart Cannot conceive nor name thee!</i>
Act 2 Scene 4	Macduff tells Ross, a thane, that Macbeth has been named King.	<i>The sovereignty will fall upon Macbeth.</i>
Act 3 Scene 1	Macbeth, fearing the witches' prophecies about Banquo's descendants sitting on the throne, arranges to have Banquo and Fleance killed.	<i>It is concluded. Banquo, thy soul's flight, If it find heaven, must find it out to-night.</i>
Act 3 Scenes 2-3	Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth of his plan to kill Banquo. Elsewhere, the murderers kill Banquo, but Fleance escapes.	<i>O, treachery! Fly, good Fleance, fly, fly, fly! Thou mayst revenge. O slave!</i>
Act 3 Scene 4	Macbeth holds a banquet. He sees the ghost of Banquo and becomes hysterical. The guests are eventually asked to leave by Lady Macbeth.	<i>I pray you, speak not; he grows worse and worse; Question enrages him. At once, good night:</i>
Act 3 Scenes 5-6	The witches are scolded by Hecate for their meddling. Elsewhere, Lennox tells of Macduff gathering an army to fight Macbeth.	<i>May soon return to this our suffering country Under a hand accursed!</i>
Act 4 Scene 1	Macbeth again visits the witches, and through terrible apparitions is given several new prophecies regarding his fate. The witches then vanish.	<i>beware Macduff...none of woman born/Shall harm Macbeth...Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill Shall come against him.</i>
Act 4 Scenes 2-3	Macduff's wife and children are murdered by Macbeth's assassins. Macduff and Malcolm unite in order to fight Macbeth.	<i>Macbeth/Is ripe for shaking, and the powers above Put on their instruments.</i>
Act 5 Scene 1	A doctor and gentlewoman watch Lady Macbeth sleepwalk. She talks of the murders of Duncan and Banquo, and imagines stubborn blood on her hands.	<i>Out, damned spot; out, I say. . . . Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?</i>
Act 5 Scene 2	Lords discuss how the rebel army will gather at Birnam Wood.	<i>Make we our march towards Birnam.</i>
Act 5 Scenes 3-4	Inside, Macbeth boasts that none of woman born can harm him. Macduff and co gather at Birnam Wood	<i>I will not be afraid of death and bane, Till Birnam forest come to Dunsinane.</i>
Act 5 Scene 5	A scream is heard at Macbeth's castle. It is announced that Lady Macbeth is dead (suicide). Macbeth reacts numbly. A messenger reveals that the trees of Birnam Wood are advancing.	<i>Life is "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing"</i>
Act 5 Scenes 6-7	The battle begins. Macbeth fights without fear, as he believes no man born of woman can harm him. The castle is breached.	<i>But swords I smile at, weapons laugh to scorn, Brandish'd by man that's of a woman born.</i>
Act 5 Scene 8	Macbeth and Macduff finally meet. Macduff reveals that he was born by caesarean section (not 'by woman born.') He kills Macbeth. Malcolm is proclaimed King.	<i>Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb Untimely ripp'd. Hail, King of Scotland!</i>

Dramatic Devices in Macbeth

Features of a Tragedy in Macbeth

Dramatic Irony	<i>'t is a peerless kinsman.</i> Duncan trusts Macbeth. The audience knows that Macbeth is plotting Duncan's murder.	Tragic Hero – A main character cursed by fate and possessed of a tragic flaw (Macbeth).
Soliloquy	<i>This supernatural soliciting cannot be ill, cannot be good.</i> Macbeth's soliloquy reveals his inner torment.	Hamartia – The fatal character flaw of the tragic hero (ambition).
Aside	<i>The Prince of Cumberland, that is a step that I must fall down.</i> Macbeth reveals his ambition through an aside.	Catharsis – The release of the audience's emotions through empathy with the characters.
Rhyming Couplets	<i>Away and mock the time, with fairest show/ False face must hide what the heart doth know.</i>	Internal Conflict – The struggle the hero engages in with his/her fatal flaw.