



## Shakespeare (1564-1616)

William Shakespeare, often called England's national poet, is considered the greatest dramatist of all time.

## Historical Background

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 Macbeth were written in the era of James I, which was far more unstable. For example, the gunpowder plot was the year before.

## Character – 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.

## Character – 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.

## Character – The 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.

## Character – 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.

## Character – 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.

## Drama Terms

**Protagonist** A protagonist is the main character of a story. The protagonist is at the center of the story, makes the key decisions, and experiences the consequences of those decisions. The protagonist is the primary agent propelling the story forward, and is often the character who faces the most significant obstacles.

## Drama Terms

**Dramatic irony** an audience's awareness of the situation differs from that of the characters', and the words and actions of the characters therefore take on a different meaning for the audience than they have for the character