

INTRODUCING SHAKESPEARE

MACBETH

As a preparation, read the story in Leon Garfield's 'Shakespeare Stories' and/or Charles Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare.

Read the historical and literary notes in the text book (pages 109-116 and p. xxviii in the Oxford School Shakespeare 2009 edition).

ACT 1

Act 1 Scene 1

1. Where are the witches meeting?
2. Who are Graymalkin and Paddock?
3. What strikes you about the very first mention of Macbeth's name, in terms of how the lines of speech are written? (Read lines 1-10 aloud and see what happens!)
4. Copy lines 12-13. This paradox is a recurring theme (a '**LEITMOTIF**') - things are not what they seem. Can you think of one character from the play to whom these words might apply?

NB use of a repeated consonant is referred to as **ALLITERATION**

Act 1 Scene 2

1. How is Macbeth first described? (ll 15-23)
2. How does the King first describe him?
3. Who is the 'Norwegian lord'?
4. How is the Thane of Cawdor first described? (l 52)
5. Who is 'Bellona's bridegroom'? Explain the term.
6. Why does the King give Macbeth the Thane of Cawdor's title? Copy line 67. Note the dramatic significance, that the audience knows Macbeth will be given the title before he himself knows it.

Act 1 Scene 3

1. We are shown the witches describing how they wreck men's lives. What is the dramatic irony here given the imminent entrance of Macbeth?
2. What is the dramatic significance of Macbeth's first words? (line 36)
3. Why is Macbeth Thane of Glamis? (NB the pronunciation of 'Glamis')
4. What do the witches predict for Banquo?
5. Note Macbeth's reaction to the news of his new title (ll 116-7). Describe his reaction in your own words – would you say, for example, that his words indicated that he thought he would be king?
6. Note Banquo's reaction to the same news (ll 121-5). How does this fit in with his language in line 106?
N.B. As Banquo speaks to the others, Macbeth speaks 'aside'. This is known as a **SOLILOQUY**, in which one character speaks as if to himself (i.e. not to any other character). It is a dramatic device whereby the audience can know the thoughts of a character.
7. What is the 'horrid image' of line 134?
8. Briefly summarize the difference between Banquo and Macbeth's reaction to the witches' message.

Act 1 Scene 4

1. This scene opens with a description of the execution of the Thane of Cawdor. Copy the famous words in line 7-8 'Nothing... of it'.
Note the contrast with Macbeth's death at the end of the play, when Macduff declares, 'We'll have thee...painted upon a pole and underwrit,

'Here may you see the tyrant.' (Act 5 Scene 8, l 26)

2. Duncan's response to this news is also famous: copy his words in ll 11-12 ('There's...face.'). Explain the irony in this and the following line.
Note the dramatic significance of Macbeth's entry at this very point.

Note: Macbeth gives an excellent description of what the perfect, loyal subject should be like. This makes his treachery seem even worse – he knows exactly what he *should* be!

3. In which town does Macbeth live?
4. Read lines 48 – 53:
 - (i) Who is the Prince of Cumberland, and what does the title signify?
 - (ii) Why is Macbeth surprised at the news? (see page 113, and the Commentary page XIII in Oxford School Shakespeare)
 - (iii) When Macbeth talks of a 'step' which he must 'o'erleap', what is he already planning?
 - (iv) What is this kind of aside called? (when the audience hears but the other players do not).
 - (v) What do you notice about the way these lines are written (how do they differ from those preceding and following)? Why do you think Shakespeare does this (i.e. what effect does it have)?
5. What has Banquo been talking about with the King while Macbeth is speaking alone? You can work it out from Duncan's response in line 54.
Note the dramatic effect of this praise, coming straight after Macbeth's treacherous aside (which we have heard but Duncan has not). And finally, note the emphasis placed on Duncan's words, 'It is a peerless kinsman,' by their being placed at the very end of the scene. You couldn't really miss all that irony!

Act 1 Scene 5

1. Here we meet Lady Macbeth for the first time. It is quite clear that having read in Macbeth's letter of the witches' prophecy, she has already decided that Duncan must be killed. Explain in your own words what she means by:
 - (i) 'the nearest way'
 - (ii) "(thou) Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it."
 - (iii) 'the golden round'
 - (iv) 'fate and metaphysical aid.'
2. In her next soliloquy, ll38-53, Lady Macbeth calls on evil spirits to help her fulfill her wicked purpose:
'And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull
Of direst cruelty" (l39)

At this point, Macbeth enters. What is significant about the manner of Lady

Macbeth's greeting – do you think Shakespeare intends to remind the audience of another greeting? And in the light of this, with whom is Lady Macbeth (probably unintentionally) identifying herself here?

3. Macbeth barely speaks in this scene, so the little he does say carries greater significance. Line 70, 'We will speak further' is ambiguous: what two possible (and contrasting) meanings might it have? Given Lady Macbeth's final response (ll 71-73), how do you think she interprets his words?

Act 1 Scene 6

1. What are 'hautboys' ? The word is derived from the French and is often written as 'hautbois' (haut is pronounced like a long 'o' with a silent h and t; 'bois is pronounced 'bwa' with a silent s. So, 'hautbois/hautboys' is pronounced 'o-bwa'.).

2. Duncan and Banquo both go to some lengths to praise the healthfulness of the air at Macbeth's castle:

“...the air
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
Unto our gentle senses.”

What do you think Shakespeare's purpose is here?

3. What do think Lady Macbeth's words '*twice done and then done double*' are meant to remind you of? How do they reinforce the link already made in Act 1 Scene 5 line 54?
4. What strikes you about Duncan's description of Lady Macbeth (l 25)?

Act 1 Scene 7

1. Read the stage directions at the opening of this scene (what is a sewer?). Where is Macbeth at this point?
2. Macbeth's soliloquy here is one of the most important in the play. He enunciates all the reasonable arguments against the action he's proposing. He starts by wishing he could kill Duncan quickly and have it over and done with, and with no consequence, but he knows this is not realistic. What this does show is that he acts in full knowledge – he is not ignorant of the wrongness of what he is proposing. (Note: Shakespeare probably originated the phrase 'the be all and end all' which is now proverbial.)
 - i) What is the 'double trust' of line 12? Which theme (or 'leitmotif') of the play does it reflect?
 - ii) Give one other reason Macbeth cites against his murdering Duncan.
 - iii) What image is suggested by Macbeth's description of his

'Vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself
And falls on th'other.' ?

3. Lady Macbeth interrupts him and calls him a coward – she questions his manliness. This is a successful tactic as he changes swiftly from 'We will proceed no further in this business' (l 32) to 'If we should fail?' (l 58)

Look at lines 60-61: 'But screw your courage to the sticking place,
And we'll not fail.'

What does she mean, and what literary device is used here? (see notes on text if you are not sure)

4. What is a limbeck (l 67)?
5. Shakespeare often ends a scene or a significant speech with two lines which rhyme – this is known as a **RHYMING COUPLET**. As well as summing up neatly what the character wants to say, it signals to the audience that this part of the play is finished and we are moving on. Copy Macbeth's rhyming couplet into your book. Which prominent theme of the play is vividly reflected here?

Act 2

Act 2 Scene 1

1. It is past midnight in Macbeth's castle. Banquo chats to his son and dwells on how generous the king has been to Macbeth and his family and staff, and relates that the king has gone to bed very contented. When Macbeth enters, they speak of the witches.
 - (i) Macbeth suggests that if Banquo goes along with him in the business of the witches, he will gain honour. Do you think Macbeth is implying anything here about his hopes/plans for the future?
 - (ii) Briefly summarise Banquo's reply in your own words, showing what Banquo's main concern in this business is (ll 26-28)
2. This scene contains one of the most famous soliloquies of the play ('Is this a dagger which I see before me?'). Read it through (preferably aloud!), checking the notes at the side so that you can understand the references. We see here that the act of murder, not as yet executed, is preying on Macbeth's mind and confusing his thoughts. He does not know what is real and what is unreal.
 - (i) "Dagger of the mind" can read in two ways. First, there is the literal contrast of tangible reality and Macbeth's imagination, but what might the dagger also be a metaphor for? (Think about why he is seeing the dagger in the first place.)

- (ii) The theme of double meaning and falseness recurs: 'false' obviously refers to the 'un-realness' of the dagger, but what else does it bring to mind?
 - (iii) One critic wrote, "The dagger of the mind is as potent a killer as the dagger Macbeth wields in murder" What do you think this means?
 - (iv) Can you find a stage direction hidden in this speech? (try Line 41!)
3. Do you remember the proper term for the two rhyming lines which often end a scene (such as those used here, ll63-64)?

Act 2 Scene 2

1. Lady Macbeth earlier upbraided Macbeth for his lack of courage and manliness, but when it comes to the deed, she cannot do it herself. What reason does she give for this? (cf line 12)
2. Macbeth immediately realises the impact of what he has done: Which words of Lady Macbeth on page 27 are prophetic?
3. The theme of sleep recurs here. Macbeth recognises that the innocent can sleep in peace but the guilty cannot.
4. Macbeth grasps straight away the implications of what he has done. Lady Macbeth either does not grasp them or denies them to herself. She seems to believe that they can murder with impunity as long as they are not found out; she mocks Macbeth for being childish. He has a much more realistic/mature understanding.

(i) Lady Macbeth says, 'A little water clears us of this deed-
How easy it is then.'

What is the irony in this given what she will later be found doing, and what will happen to her?

(ii) Copy Macbeth's famous line about his bloodied hands (ll63-66) and try to learn it by heart.

5. This scene ends with Macbeth already expressing regret at what he has done. He wishes the deed undone:

'Wake Duncan with thy knocking: I would thou couldst.'

This is quite a moving line – do you think Shakespeare intends us to feel pity for Macbeth? Do you feel at all sorry for him?

Act 2 Scene 3

1. The porter scene is essentially a bit of humour for the 'groundlings', the common people who liked a bit of slapstick, rudeness and topical humour (much like pantomime today). But what do you think is the dramatic purpose of the porter scene, i.e. what is the reason for putting it here in terms of the action of the play? Think about what Macbeth is doing while this scene takes place (delaying the entry of the visitors and the discovery of the deed).
2. What is the meaning of Macbeth's self correction/clarification in his reply to Lennox' harmless question about the king (l 48)?
3. Explain the meaning of Macduff's words in line 63:

“Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope
The Lord's anointed temple..’

Why 'sacrilegious'? Why 'anointed'?

4. Note Macbeth's speech on 'hearing' the news of the murder, lines 87-92
Our first reaction is that he is acting a part, like Lady Macbeth ('What, in our house?' feigning surprise). Do you think it is false, or are his words true? Explain your answer.
5. One of Shakespeare's famous images is given to Donaldbain, 'There's daggers in men's smiles'. Can you explain why this image works so well? (An image is meant to produce a picture in your mind - the more effectively it does this, the better the image.)

Act 2 Scene 4

1. Give three examples given in this scene which show how nature has become disordered/corrupted/inverted by the unnatural murder of the king.
2. What do you think is the meaning implied by Macduff's avoidance of Macbeth's coronation at Scone (pronounced 'Scoone')? Does his comment in line 38 'Lest our old robes sit easier than our new' give a clue to how he feels about the whole business?

ACT 3

Act 3 scene 1

1. To whom is Banquo speaking in the opening speech?

2. Banquo clearly suspects Macbeth of murdering Duncan but seems primarily concerned with wondering if the witches' predictions about him will come true. Given what you know is about to happen in this scene, what might you have expected him to be more concerned with?
3. Macbeth tells Banquo that he expects him to be at the evening banquet (knowing he is planning to have him killed). Is there anything ironic about Banquo's reply that his duties to Macbeth
 "Are with a most indissoluble tie
 Forever knit."?
4. Here we have another important soliloquy from Macbeth which reveals much about his state of mind. Explain in your own words the following:
 - (i) "Upon my head they plac'd a fruitless crown
 And put a barren sceptre in my grasp."
 - (ii) "For Banquo's issue I have 'filed my mind.'
 - (iii) ...and mine eternal jewel
 Given to the common enemy of man."
5. What reason does Macbeth give for not killing Banquo himself? (ll 120-125)

Act 3 Scene 2

1. Here we see both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth expressing their realisation that they can have no peace ('content') since the murder. Read Lady Macbeth's words in ll 6-7 and Macbeth's words in ll 19-22. They are both effectively saying the same thing - what?
 (Note that despite her privately expressed despairing words, when Macbeth enters she chides him for having the same thoughts, 'What's done is done.')
2. (i) How effective do you think is the image in line 34 -35?
 (ii) How effective do you think is the image in line 36?
3. Using the side-notes, explain in your own words lines 46-50

Act 3 scene 3 (no questions)

This scene simply serves to let the audience know the significant outcome that Fleance has survived the murder attempt, and so Macbeth's hopes of 'comfort' in stopping the witches' predictions for Banquo from coming true have failed. This fact could have simply been reported in the next scene (as in fact it is) and is probably included simply to add a bit of

excitement and action after all the talking.

Act 3 Scene 4

1. Macbeth is informed that Fleance is fled. What is the literary device Shakespeare employs in Macbeth's reaction in line 24?
2. Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost - it is very important to note that no-one else sees it. Lady Macbeth mocks him, 'This is the air-drawn dagger', 'You look but on a stool.' If the ghost were real, wouldn't the others see it? Do you think Shakespeare is suggesting that it is indeed a figment of Macbeth's troubled imagination?
3. Copy the well-known words in which Macbeth tells the ghost to go away .
4. The state banquet is meant to be glorious but ends in disorder (symbolised by the guests leaving in no particular order),
"Stand not upon the order of your going
But go at once."

What is this disorder at the meal symbolic of?

5. Read lines 135 -140. What do these tell us about Macbeth's state of mind and intentions?

Act 3 Scene 5 (not normally included/studied as most likely not original)

Act 3 Scene 6

1. This scene tells us what has been happening elsewhere. Lennox seems to exonerate Macbeth of wrongdoing, but do you think he is being ironic? If so, what gives you a clue? (e.g. line 22)

Act 4

Act 4 scene 1

1. After the very famous rhyme,
 'By the pricking of my thumbs,
 Something wicked this way comes,'
we have Macbeth's equally well-known response: 'How now, you secret, black and midnight hags!'
Notice the way in which he addresses them - he is no longer in awe; rather, he *demand*s an answer. In response, the witches summon their 'masters.'

List the three apparitions and their respective warnings.

2. Macbeth demands to know if Banquo's heirs will rule. He sees eight kings, all descended from Banquo. Why do the later kings 'twofold balls and treble sceptres carry'?
3. Macbeth is amazed yet the witches mock his surprise - had they not foretold to him that this would happen? What two very different effects do the witches prophecies produce in Macbeth?

Clue: (i) the advice of the apparitions brings an increase in c.....
but (ii) the vision of Banquo's heirs brings a deepening sense of d.....

4. On hearing that Macduff is fled to England, Macbeth resolves to murder all in his castle.

Read line 145- 148 and lines 152- 153.

What is the main difference here with the Macbeth we saw first contemplating the murder of Duncan?

Act 4 Scene 2

1. Lady Macduff accuses her husband of being a traitor because he has abandoned her. Ross says in Macduff's defence,

'....cruel are the times when we are traitors
 And we do not know ourselves,'

Lady Macduff protests her innocence, but then reflects,

'...I am in this earthly world where to do harm
 Is often laudable, to do good sometime
 Accounted a dangerous folly.'

Explain briefly how these two observations fit in with the 'foul is fair' theme of the play.

2. It has been suggested that this scene exists essentially to provide a female character who may serve as a foil to Lady Macbeth. What would you say are the main ways in which Lady Macduff offers a contrast to Lady Macbeth?
3. What is significant about the Macduff family murders - what makes them different from the other murders Macbeth has committed so far? How would you say these events affect Macduff's character and actions? See ll 235 f

Act 4 Scene 3

1. Malcolm says he cannot trust Macduff as Macbeth ‘Hath not touched him yet, and because Macduff apparently feels it is safe to leave his family behind unprotected. What is Malcom’s reasoning here? What is ironic about his comments, bearing in mind that neither he nor Macduff know what has occurred in the last scene?
2. Malcolm tries to convince Macduff that he is even more wicked than Macbeth. Why does he do this?
3. Note Malcom’s list of ‘king-becoming graces.’ ll 91ff
Did Macbeth have any of these virtues at the beginning of the play? Does he have any of them at this point? In which is he most clearly lacking?
4. What does Ross mean by these words, used in telling Macduff the awful news,
‘To relate the manner
Were on the quarry of these murdered deer
To add the death of you’? (ll 208 ff)

ACT 5

Act 5 Scene 1

1. This scene gives us a glimpse of Lady Macbeth's madness. It is the last time we see her in the play - her suicide is reported later by another character.

Which earlier words do her famous words in lines 44-45 ironically and tragically recall?

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2. In this scene, Lady Macbeth is finally realising the impact of her actions, and she is crushed by it. How does this contrast with her original attitude? How does it contrast both with Macbeth's initial understanding of the consequences of his actions, and his response to that understanding?

Act 5 Scene 2

1. How is Macbeth's treachery described in line 18? Is this use of a double - word reminiscent of an older poetic form you are familiar with?
2. Explain the meaning of lines 20-22. What literary device is employed in this description?

Act 5 Scene 3

1. What is the name of Macbeth's stronghold?
2. We see Macbeth repeating the witches' prophecies as if to reassure himself - he mocks and abuses the boy who informs him that the English are approaching but

clearly his confidence is shaken. Which two lines of his speech here betray this?

3. What has Macbeth forfeited (l 25)? What has he earned (l 27)? Do you feel any pity for him here?
4. Read lines 42 -46. Macbeth's. Is Macbeth here only describing Lady Macbeth's maladies of the mind? Explain your answer. What suggests that the doctor knows Macbeth is not referring only to Lady Macbeth (l 46-7)?

Act 5 Scene 4

This scene simply informs us of the manner in which the first of Macbeth's much-prized charms will fail to protect him. But, why *do* the English cut Burnham's boughs?

Act 5 Scene 5

1. What reason does Macbeth give for not being startled by the cry of the women? (quote his words directly from l 13-15).
2. Macbeth's soliloquy in response to hearing of his wife's death is arguably the most famous in the play.

This speech offers a very depressing estimation by Macbeth of where his life has reached at this point, and where it is headed. He reflects that life is a slow relentless march towards a fruitless demise. This speech is particularly effective because of the acting imagery which Shakespeare employs. A person's life is like a bad actor in a bad play (which must have been one of Shakespeare's worst nightmares and so one of his truest expressions of futility). The 'play' (the life) is so badly written and performed that the thing is without meaning and will fade into obscurity – no-one will even remember it. "It is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/signifying nothing."

Note the following parallels with images from the Old Testament (with which Shakespeare would certainly have been familiar):

- Psalm 22.15: "Thou hast brought me into the **dust of death.**"

- Job 18.5-6: "The light of the wicked shall be quenched...and **his candle shall be out** with him."

- Psalm 90.9, addressing the transience of life: "we spend our years as a **tale that is told.**"

What do you think Macbeth means here when he says of Lady Macbeth, 'She should have died hereafter' (there is no correct answer to this, as critics disagree over this question themselves)?

3. Which memorable words, describing the 'fiend', in Macbeth's next soliloquy here

recall the theme of double-dealing/ fair is foul? (l 43)

4. Which statement towards the end of this second soliloquy expresses Macbeth's increasing sense of hopelessness despite the bravado of his final rhyming couplet?

Act 5 Scene 6

1. How does Malcolm here colourfully describe the trumpets?
2. What does the stage direction 'Alarums continued' mean? (Note that in some editions of this play, scene 6 is the last scene whereas in others - as here - the action is separated into scenes 6, 7, 8 and 9).

Act 5 Scene 7

1. This scene is very neatly constructed: Macbeth enters, repeating the prophecy about 'man born of woman'. He kills young Siward (a man born of woman). He repeats the phrase twice more then exits. What effect or impression to you think Shakespeare is trying to achieve here?
2. Why does Macduff hope that Macbeth has not been killed?

Act 5 Scene 8

1. Why specifically is Macbeth nervous about Macduff:

"Of all men else I have avoided thee."?

For what reason is he loathe to fight and possibly kill Macduff?
2. Copy the famous words in which Macduff tells Macbeth that he is not 'of woman born.'
3. What is Macbeth's final reference to the double-speak of the witches?

Act 5 Scene 9

1. Why, do you think, does Siward ask if his son's wounds were 'before', ie. on his front?
2. Thinking back to the witches' prophecies, what is significant about Macduff cutting off and displaying Macbeth's (possibly still helmeted) head?
3. What are the final, memorable descriptions of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth given by Malcolm? How does Macbeth's end compare with the death of the Thane of Cawdor at the opening of the play?

4. Macbeth is a tragedy; as such it is meant to fill us with pity and pathos. Do you think our pity is meant to be only directed at the innocents who suffer (Duncan, Lady Macduff, Siward etc) or do you think a tragedy is more effective/successful if we feel at least some pity for the main protagonists? Do you think Shakespeare achieves this in this play?

In drawing our minds right at the end to the contrast between the good death of the traitor Cawdor and the bad death of the traitor Macbeth, do you think Shakespeare wants us to reflect on what might have been?

Does the tragedy of Macbeth lie primarily in the ruin of a once good man who could even until the end have repented and died in the grace of God and men?

Write a short paragraph giving your own thoughts on the tragedy of Macbeth.