

'Macbeth' by William Shakespeare: A Knowledge Organiser



Characters		
Macbeth	A loyal warrior who becomes obsessed with the witches' prophecies of power.	Loyal, Fearsome, Violent, Ambitious, Contemplative, Duplicious, Tyrannical, Emaculate, Weak, Desirous, Psychotic, Dualistic, Rigidial
Lady Macbeth	Macbeth's wife who drives his ambition in the beginning but loses her control by the end.	Sycophantic, Manipulative, Persuasive, Ambitious, Strong, Ruthless, Sensual, Subversive, Dominant, Action-oriented, Powerful, Willful, Aggressive, Purposeful, Anarchic
Banquo	Macbeth's close friend and ally who also receives prophecies from the witches.	Brave, Loyal, Diplomatic, Virtuous, Friendly, Insightful, Astute, Shrewd, Sceptical, Apprehensive, Cynical
Duncan	King of Scotland at the beginning of the play who is portrayed as a strong and respected leader.	Fair, Respected, Naïve, Trusting, Happy, Jolly, Jovial, Optimistic, Meek, Moral, Panglossian
Macduff	A brave warrior who is loyal to Duncan and is consistently suspicious of Macbeth.	Emotional, Courageous, Strong-willed, Righteous, Justice-oriented, Focused, Deliberate, Heroic, Responsive, Intuitive
Malcolm	Duncan's son and next in line to the throne.	Naïve (at first), Dignified, Honest, Suspicious, Clever, Brave, Flexible, Open-minded
The Three Witches	Portrayed as forces of nature that seem to know the future and are fascinating to Macbeth.	Sinister, Evil, Supernatural, Unearthly, Eerie, Loud, Prophetic, Cryptic, Manipulative, Omniscient

Significant Aspects of Writer's Craft		
Iambic Pentameter	The noble characters mostly speak in unrhymed iambic pentameter, like this: <i>ba-DUM, ba-DUM, ba-DUM, ba-DUM, ba-DUM</i> . It's the most common in English poetry. It doesn't rhyme, which is why it's referred to as blank verse. It tends to connote power, control, status and authority.	
Trochaic tetrameter	Trochaic tetrameter is a rhythmic pattern that consist of four "trochees" per line. It sounds like this: <i>DUM-da, DUM-da, DUM-da, DUM-da</i> . The Witches speak in this verse, making it sound like an eerie chanting, e.g. <i>DOUBLE, DOUBLE, TOIL and TROUBLE / FIRE BURN and CAULdron BUBble</i> .	
Prose	Commoners, or people who lack status, often speak in unrestrained prose. It sets them apart from the noble characters. These characters often discuss low and base content, such as sex and debauchery!	
Soliloquy	These are speeches but they are meant to be heard only by the audience. They tell us directly about a character's thoughts and feelings and they are very important in Macbeth, because we can understand exactly what is going through a character's mind.	
Symbolism	Blood	The image of blood runs through the play, both literally and imagined. Blood comes to symbolise Macbeth's growing guilt and is also a reminder of man's mortality. Blood, or menstruation, represents Lady Macbeth's rejection of her femininity – her womanhood.
	Dead children	This rather unpleasant theme has two purposes. Firstly, it symbolises how family lines come to an end. In this case, Macbeth tries to extinguish the family lines of his enemies. It reminds us of the shocking depths to which Macbeth allows himself to fall. Secondly, it supports the unnaturalness of Lady Macbeth's rejection of her own compassionate and maternal instincts.
	Light/Dark	Simply put, light is used to represent goodness, godliness and all things innocent and pure. Darkness carries the opposite connotations: evil, betrayal, death.

Social, Historical and Literary Context	
Macbeth: The Play	The plot is partly based on fact. Macbeth was a real 11C king who reigned Scotland from 1040-1057. Shakespeare's version of the story originates from the Chronicles of Holinshed , a well known historian. The play was written in 1606 – the year after the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 – and reflects the insecurities of Jacobean politics.
Shakespeare's Scotland (and England)	Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603, and King James VI of Scotland was crowned King James I of England. Women were entirely under the power of their husbands. Superstition was widespread and astrology was a legitimate science.
Belief in the supernatural	In Shakespeare's England, anxiety about witchcraft and belief in magic and the supernatural were not limited to the lower or uneducated classes. While king of Scotland, James VI became utterly convinced about the reality of witchcraft and its great danger to him, leading to trials that began in 1591.
Shakespearean Tragedy	Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's Tragedies and follows specific conventions. The climax must end in a tremendous catastrophe involving the death of the main character; the character's death is caused by their own flaw(s) (hamartia); yet, the character has something the audience can identify with.
The Great Chain of Being/ The Divine Right of Kings	The Great Chain of Being , a strict, religious hierarchical structure of all matter and life, believed to have been decreed by God, dominated Elizabethan beliefs. Divine right says that a Monarch is not subject to earthly authority, and that they have the right to rule directly from the will of God. The action of killing a King is called regicide .

Plot	
Act 1	This Act opens with the three Weird Sisters setting up the entire theme of the play: Fair is foul and foul is fair. A war is taking place against Scotland (the setting of the play) and Norway. Scotland is victorious due to the valiant efforts of Macbeth. The traitorous Thane of Cawdor is captured and executed. King Duncan rewards Macbeth with the title of Thane of Cawdor. The three Weird Sisters confront Macbeth and Banquo, telling Macbeth that he will become Thane of Cawdor, Glamis and eventually king . Macbeth soon learns of his new title fulfilling the first part of the prophecy and sends word to his wife. Duncan plans on staying the night at Macbeth's castle in Inverness . Lady Macbeth receives the news and immediately plots the death of King Duncan so her husband will be king. Lady Macbeth manipulates Macbeth into following her plans, and he reluctantly agrees to murder Duncan. By the end of Act 1, Macbeth is determined to follow through with the plan.
Act 2	Macbeth again has some doubts (and visions) but he talks himself into following through with the murder. Macbeth is so scared Lady Macbeth must finish the rest of the plan by wiping blood on the drunk guards. The next morning, Macduff and Lennox arrive at Macbeth's and Macduff discovers the dead body of King Duncan. The guards are immediately suspects and Macbeth kills them. Malcolm and Donalbain , the King's sons, flee the castle because they are afraid that they will be blamed for the murder of their father. The King is soon buried.
Act 3	Banquo begins to suspect Macbeth for the murder of King Duncan and Macbeth in turn feels that Banquo will reveal that it was he that killed the King. Therefore, Macbeth sends out some thugs to murder Banquo and his son, Fleance . Banquo is murdered, but Fleance escapes. Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Lennox , Ross , and other lords attend a banquet. The ghost of Banquo presents itself to Macbeth. Macbeth begins to rant and rave, making the other guests uneasy. Lady Macbeth tries to cover up the situation by saying Macbeth is prone to fits. By the end of this Act, we learn that Macduff has not attended the banquet because he has gone to England, looking for help because he is suspicious of Macbeth.
Act 4	Macbeth confronts the three Weird Sisters and they show him more visions. The visions lead Macbeth to believe that he cannot be killed by any man, giving him a false sense of security. He then plans to send murderers to the castle of Macduff (who is in England) in order to kill his family. Meanwhile, Macduff is in England begging Malcolm to return to Scotland and seize the throne from Macbeth, who has become a tyrant. Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty to Scotland and himself and after being satisfied with Macduff's responses, he agrees to wage war against Macbeth. Malcolm's uncle, Seward , will also aid in the attack.
Act 5	Lady Macbeth has finally gone mad with guilt over the murders. The once strong and ruthless woman is now a scared child. Doctors are unable to help her. Some of the Scottish lords are discussing Macbeth's state of mind and have come to the conclusion that they will help Malcolm and Macduff fight against Macbeth. Of course, Macbeth isn't really concerned because he believes the prophecy ensures that he cannot be killed by any man born of woman. Macbeth soon confronts at Dunsinane . Macduff and learns that Macduff was ripped from his mother's side and not born naturally. Macbeth and Macduff fight and the natural order is restored by the end of the play.

Key concepts and themes: Think about...	
Masculinity, Femininity and Identity	Over and over again in Macbeth, characters discuss or debate about manhood; Lady Macbeth challenges Macbeth when he decides not to kill Duncan. Banquo refuses to join Macbeth in his plot, Lady Macduff questions Macduff's decision to go to England, etc. Through these challenges, Macbeth questions and examines manhood itself. Does a true man take what he wants no matter what it is? Or does a real man have the strength to restrain his desires? Lady Macbeth subverts the expectation of what it was to be a woman: all struggle to accept their true identities.
Order, Disorder, Inversion and Conflict	The play subverts the natural order of the world. Macbeth's actions are based on a supernatural belief in a prophecy. It depicts an anarchic world; Macbeth inverts the order of royal succession; his wife inverts the patriarchal hierarchy; the unnatural world disrupts the natural. This disruption underpins the conflict that is not only external and violent, but internal as Macbeth and his wife battle to absorb what they have done.
The Natural, Unnatural and Supernatural Order	In medieval times, it was believed that the health of a country was directly related to the goodness and moral legitimacy of its king. If the King was good and just, then the nation would have good harvests and good weather. If there was political order, then there would be natural order. Macbeth shows this connection between the political and natural world: when Macbeth disrupts the social and political order by murdering Duncan and usurping the throne, nature goes haywire. Incredible storms rage, the earth tremors, animals go insane and eat each other. The unnatural events of the physical world emphasize the horror of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's acts, and mirrors the warping of their souls by ambition.
Ambition, Hubris and Power	Macbeth is a play about ambition run amok. The weird sisters' prophecies spur both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to try to fulfil their ambitions, but the witches never make Macbeth or his wife do anything. Macbeth and his wife act on their own to fulfil their deepest desires. Macbeth's hubris overwhelms him and he becomes a murdering, paranoid maniac. Lady Macbeth, once she begins to put into actions the once-hidden thoughts of her mind, is crushed by guilt. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth want to be great and powerful, and sacrifice their morals to achieve that goal.
Good, Evil and Insanity	Macbeth and his wife have to choose between good and evil. Their evil actions are often viewed as madness; certainly they both suffer from a paranoid psychosis as a consequence of their actions. The witches are the incarnation of evil, and may be seen as representing the evil in human nature. Evil characters are routinely juxtaposed by virtuous ones, such as Banquo, Duncan and Macduff.
Trust, Betrayal, Guilt and Rejection	Duncan trusts the wrong men with disastrous consequences. Macbeth trusts the witches, and ultimately they destroy him. Lady Macbeth manipulates her husband's trust and both are tormented by their own guilt and driven to their doom, terrified by their own sense of sin. Macbeth and his wife reject their place in the world, desirous of a greater station. Lady Macbeth rejects her womanhood and her soul as she bargains with the darkness.