

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Macbeth

by

### William Shakespeare

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### Book Information

William Shakespeare, Macbeth  
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Beguiled by the prophecies of the "weird sisters," and urged on by his wife, Macbeth acts on his intense political ambition, with tragic consequences.

**Topics:** Arts, Theater/Plays; Classics, Classics (All); Mysteries, Murder; Popular Groupings, College Bound

### Main Characters

Banquo Macbeth's friend, also a Scottish nobleman

Duncan the King of Scotland

Lady Macbeth Macbeth's wife

Macbeth the Thane of Glamis, who becomes successively Thane of Cawdor and King

Macduff the Thane of Fife

Malcolm and Donalbain Duncan's sons

### Vocabulary

**augurs** auguries, or predictions taken from omens

**chamberlains** attendants at a bedchamber

**epicures** persons devoted to luxury or sensual pleasures

**incarnadine** to make red

**jocund** displaying high spirits or great mirth

**thane** title denoting Scottish nobility

### Synopsis

As the play opens, Scotland has been invaded by forces from abroad. The invasions are swiftly repulsed in savage fighting, with Macbeth's hand reported to be most valiant in the slaughter. Before Duncan, King of Scotland, can convey his gratitude, Macbeth and his companion, Banquo, encounter three witches. They prophesize Macbeth's

ascension to the throne, and Banquo's fathering of a line of heirs. By the time Duncan bestows his honors on Macbeth for valor, the seed of ambition has already sprouted images of regicide within Macbeth.

Opportunity swiftly follows temptation. Duncan will follow Macbeth from the battle to Dunsinane, the honored thane's castle. Lady Macbeth, already informed of the prophecies, urges her husband to act upon his murderous ambitions and plots the deed for him. Her resoluteness trumps his indecision. The pair murder Duncan in his bed, planting the deadly daggers on the king's chamberlains. Malcolm and Donalbain, Duncan's sons, flee and are suspected of the crime. Macbeth is crowned king.

Just as he acted to bring about the witches' prophecy of his throne, Macbeth sets out to prevent their prophecies against his inheritors. He sends assassins to murder Banquo and his son, but Fleance escapes. The ghost of Banquo arrives at that evening's banquet, and the sight unnerves Macbeth before his court. He realizes that his deeds and fate have brought him a "fruitless crown."

Malcolm has meanwhile enjoyed sanctuary in England, where the king has offered troops to assist him in overthrowing Macbeth, by now an obvious tyrant under whom Scotland suffers. With him is Macduff, who does not guess that in his absence from Scotland, Macbeth will have his wife and children slaughtered. No amount of blood brings Macbeth the security he seeks. He consults the three witches a second time, and once again is given false hope, as he is told "none of woman born" shall harm him, nor shall he be vanquished until "Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill/ Shall come against him."

As Macbeth grows rasher in his deeds, Lady Macbeth descends into a kind of mad guilt. Malcolm's troops arrive, holding boughs from Birnam Wood before them as they approach. Lady Macbeth apparently takes her own life. Macbeth straps on his armor to face his fate, clinging to the last of his deceptive prophecies, until Macduff confronts him

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and announces he was "untimely ripped" from his mother's womb, and so not literally "born." Rather than be displayed as a monster before the rabble, Macbeth does battle with Macduff with his last illusion of hope plucked from him. Macbeth is slain. Malcolm is hailed as king, and order is declared reinstated.

### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

#### Inferential Comprehension

Compare the perspectives of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth toward the murder of Duncan.

*From her plea for the forces of evil to "unsex her," to her plot to drug the king's chamberlains, and up to the act of laying out those attendants' daggers for the act Macbeth commits, Lady Macbeth grows only bolder and more resolute in their course of treachery. Macbeth "sees" the ghostly dagger before he commits the act, dripping gore, and cannot tell if it his warning or his invitation. From the murder, he returns to their chamber bloodied and in horror -- so much so, he dares not go back to place the incriminating daggers in the sleeping chamberlains' laps. Lady Macbeth is cool-headed and hard-hearted enough to do so, and returns to tell her husband, "My hands are of your color, but I shame/ To wear a heart so white." Macbeth literally "sees" the horror of their act, as his wife does not. Her only glint of moral imagination comes when she first lays out the daggers. She would have killed the king herself, she reports, "Had he not resembled/ My father as he slept..."*

#### Inferential Comprehension

Compare Malcolm's report of Cawdor's execution to the scene in which Macbeth faces his death. Can the Prince's words of praise for Cawdor be applied to Macbeth?

*Malcolm, in fact, gives both their epitaphs, saying of Cawdor, "Nothing in his life/ Became him like the leaving it," and dismissing Macbeth as "...this dead butcher..." The dichotomy is justified by the contrition of Cawdor compared to Macbeth's continued defiance. Malcolm, as king, would "restore order" so that foul and fair do not commingle. But at the deeper level of tragic vision, nothing in Macbeth's life did indeed become him like his leaving it. He sees there is no choice to turn his evil back into an active moral good. He knows his sins enough to wish to spare Macduff, when he believes himself invulnerable. When instantly he learns instead that he is damned, Macbeth thrusts his entire being at the void. Not what he does, but what he knows, makes his "foul fair."*

#### Constructing Meaning

How does the witches' chant "Fair is foul, foul is fair" apply to the character of Macbeth?

*The chant signifies the reversal of nature's order by the influence of evil in the world. At the simplest level, Macbeth is a "fair" or noble man who turns "foul" by the evil acts he undertakes. But what made him "fair"? The same savage recklessness and murderous intensity as a soldier that he later deploys so "foully" toward his king and country. When his own head is severed for display, that fearsome deed is hailed by the play's representatives of good order as fair indeed. The more realistic the production, the fouler that sight must also seem. In this play, no one's hands are truly clean, nor truly can be.*

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#### Constructing Meaning

What distinguishes Macbeth from Shakespeare's other tragic heroes?

*Hamlet, Lear, and Othello are each mitigated in their undoings by forces or circumstances beyond their direct control. Hamlet did not kill his father; Lear did not invent Regan's and Goneril's ingratitude; Othello did not script Iago's lies. Macbeth, however, actively creates the evil into which he descends. Yet he remains a "tragic hero," not to be confused with a simple "villain." The difference between him and the other heroes is one of degree. Macbeth seemingly most controls his own fate by his choices. He is also most completely entrapped by them.*

#### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Literary Features** *Macbeth* is obviously a perfect occasion for outlining the features that "tragedy" embodies. But it is also thought by many scholars to be the culminating work in Shakespeare's portfolio of tragedies. Suppose they are right. Once the general features of tragedy are understood, ask students to speculate how *Macbeth* might stand as the last, or "ultimate," tragedy. Their arguments might deal with the play's formal "perfections," or the depth of its credible bleakness, or its success at making Macbeth so equally monstrous and human.

#### Understanding the Author's Craft

Shakespeare's poetry is woven with uncanny thread. To help students appreciate his craftsmanship, ask them to select a word, image, or idea that struck them on a first reading. Where in the play does that word, image, or idea recur? Several choices will echo for them on second readings. References to manhood reverberate in this way, from Lady Macbeth's "unsex me," to Macbeth's self-fulfilling "Who dares do more is none." The image of blood stains their hands, then progressively seeps into their minds. Even a common word, such as "tomorrow," becomes a knell at each of Macbeth's thwarted stabs at deliverance, culminating in the famous "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow..."

**Comparing and Contrasting** Shakespeare's plays often vary an identifiable set of ideas, themes, and conflicts. Students' appreciation of these variations can be helped by asking them to compare characters from different plays. For example, Iago and Lady Macbeth are both instrumental in leading a tragic hero to his own undoing. How are their motives, methods, and characters different or alike? Macbeth and Richard III would bear the same form of critical comparison. A slightly different focus would be the use of ghosts to illuminate a hero's inner conflicts. For example, how does Hamlet's relationship to his father's ghost compare to Macbeth's relationship to Banquo's, or to the ghost-like witches who guide his choices?

**Responding to Literature** Most readers sympathize with the character of Macbeth to a surprising degree. Sympathy may diminish when their focus shifts to Lady Macbeth, but her character remains at least as compelling. Explore this strange mixture of feelings with students by asking them to share their personal reactions to the play's main characters. It may help to raise the issue of Malcolm's view of the play's events. His perspective, the so-called "just" one, completely circumnavigates the depths of helplessness and abyss into which Macbeth's evil plunges him. Discussion might be provoked by posing the question, "In whose world do we live, Malcolm's or Macbeth's?"