
The Meanings of 'Macbeth'

The Cambridge Guide: Review of the Play

There is no single 'right' way of thinking about or performing *Macbeth*. It has been hugely popular for almost four hundred years, performed many thousands of times in very different versions. Millions of words have been written about it since Shakespeare's time. It is impossible to reach a final answer to the question 'What is *Macbeth* about?' Because the play works on so many different levels, a multitude of interpretations are possible—all with a claim to truth.

following pages give possible starting points for thought and activity. All are invitations to explore further on your own or in a group, and so help you bring the play alive in your own imagination. The play is like a kaleidoscope. Every time it is performed or read, it reveals different shapes, patterns, meanings, interpretations. For example, *Macbeth* is:

- a. _____: a fast-moving action-packed murder story showing that crime does not pay.
- b. _____: Macbeth constantly reveals his inmost thoughts.
- c. _____: showing how an oppressive hierarchical society systematically produces corrupt individuals.
- d. _____: showing the effect on human beings of the mysterious or supernatural (the Witches, the dagger, and so on).
- e. _____: for example, 'appearance and reality'.
- f. _____: showing how a poet of genius uses language and imagery to great imaginative effect.
- g. _____: the portrayal of the fall of a great man because of a fatal flaw in his character (Macbeth's ambition causes his death).

Major concepts in “Macbeth”

Themes are ideas or concepts of fundamental importance that recur throughout the play, linking together plot, characters and language. Themes echo, reinforce, and comment upon each other and the whole play. Some major concepts in Macbeth that could easily be turned into themes include the following:

_____ : ruthless seeking after power by Macbeth, urged on by his wife. It is the tragic flaw that causes his downfall ('I have no spur/To prick the sides of my intent, but only/Vaulting ambition').

_____ : the urge to destroy whatever is good; the brooding presence of murderous intention and action ('Fair is foul, and foul is fair').

_____ : the struggle to maintain or destroy social and natural bonds; the destruction of morality and mutual trust ('Uproar the universal peace, confound/All unity on earth').

_____ : evil lurks behind fair looks. Deceit and hypocrisy mean that appearances cannot be trusted (Lady Macbeth's 'Look like th' innocent flower,/But be the serpent under 't').

_____ : telling deliberately misleading half-truths ('th' equivocation of the fiend/That lies like truth').

_____ : warfare, destruction and oppression recur throughout the play ('pour the sweet milk of concord into hell').

_____ : Macbeth knows that what he does is wrong. He does it none the less, and suffers agonies of conscience as a result ('O, full of scorpions is my mind').

_____ : the violent cut-throat feudal society of hierarchical male power breeds bloody stereotypes of what it is to be a man. 'I dare do all that may become a man', says Macbeth, contemplating murder. However, the play offers other visions of manhood: 'But I must also feel it as a man', cries Macduff, weeping at news of his family's murder.

Imagery in 'Macbeth'

Macbeth is rich in imagery: vivid words and phrases that conjure up emotionally charged mental pictures. They carry powerful significance, far deeper than their surface meanings.

'Dark night strangles the travelling lamp'; 'Come, thick night.

The word 'blood' occurs frequently throughout the play. Babies and children: signifying vulnerability and innocence.

Scotland is sick under Macbeth's rule, and individuals are corrupted ('brain-sickly'). But individuals and societies may be cured ('med'cine of the sickly weal').

Eating together is a sign of friendship and community. Macbeth's disrupted banquet signifies the moral dissolution of both himself and Scotland.

The Macbeths lack the healing balm of sleep ('these terrible dreams/That shake us nightly'; Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking).

The many references to ominous creatures heighten the destructive, fearful atmosphere (for example, the cauldron scene).

Macbeth's usurpation of the throne of Scotland dresses him in 'borrowed robes' (illustrating the theme of deceptive appearances).

acting and theatre ('a poor player'); eyes ('the eye of childhood'); hunting and 'sport' ('bear-like I must fight the course'); hands ('will these hands ne'er be clean?').

History into Drama

Eleventh-century Scotland was a violent and troubled country. Feuding families and clans fought to control trade and territory. The castle was the power base of each rival war-lord (thane). Political murder and revenge killings were commonplace. Marauding Vikings and Norsemen raided constantly.

Macbeth was born into this violent world in 1005, son of the great family that ruled Moray and Ross. His own father was murdered by his cousins. Macbeth married Gruach, granddaughter to a High King of Scotland. They had no children of their own. There is no historical evidence about Lady Macbeth's influence on her husband.

Duncan's rule had been ineffectual and unpopular. He was thirty-eight when he was killed, possibly by Macbeth, who was elected High King of Scotland in 1040. Macbeth ruled for seventeen years—for the first ten as a competent, reforming king. He gave Scotland a long period of comparative peace and stability. There is no evidence that Macbeth dabbled in witchcraft; indeed, he was a strong supporter of the Church.

Duncan's son Malcolm invaded Scotland in 1054, supported by the English King, Edward the Confessor. Macbeth was killed on 15 August 1057 at Peel Ring, Lumphanan in Mar. He was buried at Tona, the sacred burial place of the Kings of Scotland.

Holinshed's Macbeth: Shakespeare was a playwright, not a historian. But he knew that history provided splendid material for plays: war, conflict, ambition, the downfall of great rulers. Earlier in his career he had written his English history plays drawing on the stories in Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1587). Holinshed made uncritical use of earlier historians and believed that Tudor monarchy was the best form of government. His story of Macbeth now fired Shakespeare's imagination.

But Shakespeare never slavishly followed any source. He selected, altered and added to

achieve maximum dramatic effect. He invented Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking and death, the banquet scene and Banquo's Ghost, and most of the cauldron scene. Shakespeare changed Duncan from an ineffectual king into an old and revered ruler, and omitted Macbeth's ten years of good rule.