



MACBETH

SCENE SUMMARIES

Act I Cian Hogan English Notes 2012

ACT ONE

Act I is vital to our understanding of the play. In this act we are introduced to all the major characters, themes and patterns of imagery that will dominate this compelling work of drama. In particular, by the end of Act I we understand that Macbeth is a talented, but deeply flawed man, and that the forces of evil have the ability to tempt anyone.



Scene One

An open place. Thunder and Lightning.

The play opens on a barren heath in Scotland. There is thunder and lightning and three witches appear on stage. They discuss when and where they are next to meet and in what sort of weather. They decide it will be after the battle which is now being fought and which they know will be over before sunset. The ominous atmosphere is enhanced by an approaching thunder storm and by way in which the three Witches speak: Their promise that "*Fair is foul, and foul is fair,*" captures the paradoxical nature of these supernatural creatures.

Scene Two

We move to the Scottish military's situation room, where the King, Duncan, learns of the events of the battle from a wounded Captain that has just returned from the battlefield. The Captain informs Duncan that Macbeth has defeated Macdonwald, the Norwegian army, and the Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth is reported to be brave and fearless. The Captain states the conflict was resolved by Macbeth. The King orders the immediate execution of the traitorous Thane of Cawdor and names Macbeth as the new Thane of Cawdor. Duncan sends Ross to inform Macbeth of what has happened and to request that he meet with Duncan.

Scene Three

We return to the Witches who are sharing stories of the evil they have been doing. The First Witch tells her sisters that she had a disagreement with a sailor's wife because the wife would not give her any of the chestnuts she was eating. This angers the Witches and they decide to torture the woman's husband by creating a windstorm that will blow his ship to all points on the compass. The storm will be so intense he will not be able to rest. The first Witch says, "***I'll drain him dry as hay.***" She then brags about the "***pilot's thumb,***" or small bone, she has as a charm. The Witches hear a drum and the approach of Macbeth.

Macbeth and Banquo enter the stage and are unaware of the Witches at first. Macbeth's first line in the play, "***So foul and fair a day I have not seen,***" echoes the initial chanting of the Three Witches. Banquo then addresses the Witches, but he is unable to determine if they are men or women: "***You should be women, and yet your beards forbid me to interpret that you are so.***" The Witches then greet Macbeth with his current title, Thane of Glamis, and two titles he is yet to receive, Thane of Cawdor and King. Macbeth is initially startled and then perplexed by their greeting because he knows that both the Thane of Cawdor and King are still alive.

Banquo then inquires as to his own fate. The Witches inform him that he will be lesser and yet greater than Macbeth and that even though he will never be king, he will give birth to a line of Kings. The Witches then dissolve into the air, leaving Banquo to wonder if they were real or just an hallucination.

Ross and Angus arrive and greet them with the news that Macbeth has been named Thane of Cawdor by Duncan. Banquo and Macbeth are surprised and they contemplate the evil nature of the Witches.

Scene Four

Duncan inquires if the Thane of Cawdor has been executed and expresses regret over having to carry out such a sentence. Macbeth enters and they warmly exchange curtsies. Duncan then names his own son, Malcolm to succeed him as king. This announcement troubles Macbeth as he privately concedes that Malcolm is another obstacle that he will have to overcome if he is ensure the fulfillment the Witches' prophecies.

*The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step
On which I must fall down or else o'erleap
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires;
Let no light see my black and deep desires.*

Duncan then announces his plans to visit Inverness, Macbeth's castle, and the scene ends with Macbeth leaving in a hurry in order to prepare for Duncan's visit.

Scene Five

Lady Macbeth has received a letter from Macbeth stating that he has been named Thane of Cawdor. The letter reveals his ambition to be king and the details of the prophecy given by the Witches. Lady Macbeth discloses her ambitious nature and vows to help Macbeth succeed in his ambition to be crowned King. She receives word that King Duncan will be arriving soon and is perplexed because Macbeth has not informed her himself. However, she now feels that fate has conspired to provide them both with the perfect opportunity to realise their shared dream of power and privilege:

Come, you spirits

Thast tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here

And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full

Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood...

Macbeth arrives and they agree at Lady Macbeth's urging that they will discuss the possibility of killing Duncan. Lady Macbeth tells her husband that their success depends on appearing welcoming and hospitable.

Scene Six

Duncan's character contrasts sharply with the with the Witches. He speaks of growth, trust and a shared future based on prosperity. Whereas the Witches represent a barren sterility.



Duncan arrives with his entourage and Lady Macbeth welcomes him upon his arrival. Duncan is eager to meet with Macbeth as he and Lady Macbeth exchange greetings.

Scene Seven

Macbeth holds a state banquet for Duncan that evening. During the dinner, Macbeth leaves and begins to contemplate the plan that he and Lady Macbeth have discussed. He struggles with his conscience and the fear of eternal damnation if he murders Duncan. This internal conflict is reinforced because Macbeth is Duncan's cousin, he is a beloved king, and Duncan is a guest in his home:

*First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself.*

Lady Macbeth calls Macbeth a coward and implies that he is less than a man for faltering in his plan to murder Duncan. Her resolute desire and quest for power sway Macbeth to agree with her and he decides to go through with the plan.



“ Fair is foul, and foul is fair: Hover through the fog and filthy air. ”



Act I Commentary

Act I opens in a highly dramatic fashion. The appearance of the Witches sets the tone for much of the play. According to Jennifer Riedel:

The belief in the existence and power of witches was widely held in Shakespeare's day, as demonstrated by the European witch craze, during which an estimated nine million women were put to death for being

perceived as witches (The Burning Times). The practice of witchcraft was seen to subvert the established order of religion and society, and hence was not tolerated. Witch hunting was a respectable, moral, and highly intellectual pursuit through much of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. The intensity of this tragedy is dependent on

Act I scenes i to vii

Commentary

whether the witches are perceived to be able to control the otherwise innocent Macbeth's actions, or if he is entirely responsible for his own demise.

We learn a great deal about the Witches from this first encounter. They appear to have the ability to control the elements and or predict future atmospheric conditions. They are enigmatic creatures whose very existence, much like the evil they symbolise, remains a complete mystery. Vitally, the final tercet that they speak in the first scene, embodies the notion of paradox that is so central to our reading of their characters:

Paddock calls: — anon: —

Fair is foul, and foul is fair

Hover through the fog and filthy air.

The Witches in Macbeth speak in trochaic tetrameter with rhymed couplets for the entirety of the play. This sounds complicated, but is in fact very simple.

A trochee is a group of two syllables in which the first syllable is accented. Tetra means four, so tetrameter means four trochees per line, and therefore eight syllables. The rhythm of such goes as follows:

DUM-dum, DUM-dum, DUM-dum, DUM-dum

Because the Witches speak in such a different and unusual metre to the regular iambic pentameter used by the other characters, everything they say is memorable.

Act I, scene ii, takes us to Duncan's situation room where reports are arriving in of the battle that is being waged against the invading Norwegians. These reports emphasise the courage, daring and ruthlessness of Macbeth's defence of the realm:

but all's too weak:

Act I scenes i to vii

Commentary

*For brave Macbeth — well he deserves that name —
 Disdaining fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
 Which smoked with bloody execution,
 Like valour's minion carved out his passage
 Till he faced the slave;
 Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
 Till he unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps,
 And fix'd his head upon our battlements.*

The “*merciless Macdowald*” is killed by Macbeth in a ferocious manner that leaves us in no doubt about his prowess as a warrior. Duncan, who is delighted by Macbeth's bravery, and by the news that Banquo and Macbeth repelled a subsequent counter attack by the Norwegians, has enough compassion to show concern for the bleeding captain. This is in keeping with what we will come to associate with Duncan's character. He is a caring man, who embodies all that is good about the monarchy. Kingship is an important theme in this play and you should pay close attention to how the theme is developed over the course of the next five Acts. Duncan also shows us that he is capable of taking decisive, and if necessary, ruthless action when the need arises. He pronounces a death sentence on the traitorous Thane of Cawdor and awards Macbeth his title:

*No more that thane of Cawdor shall deceive
 Our bosom interest: go pronounce his present death,
 And with his former title
 greet Macbeth.*

Scene iii, takes us back to the barren heath and the three Witches. This second brief appearance provides us with further interesting insights into these disturbing characters. The first Witch describes an encounter that she has just had with a sailor's wife:

A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,

Act I scenes i to vii

Commentary

And munch'd, and munch'd, and munch'd:—

'Give me,' quoth I:

'Aroint thee, witch!' the rump-fed ronyon cries.

Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o' the Tiger:

But in a sieve I'll thither sail,

And, like a rat without a tail,

I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.

Because this women failed to provide her with the chestnuts that she desired, the Witch intends to do her husband harm. The petty and vindictive nature of these creatures is further underscored by the willingness of her sisters to aid her in her spiteful pursuit of this women's husband. The second Witch promises her sister the aid of the winds. Importantly however, the first Witch stresses the degree to which her powers are circumscribed. Thanking her sisters for their help, she informs them that she intends to deny the sailor sleep and thereby “*drain him dry as hay*” (sleep will become a recurring motif in this play) but she stresses that she cannot murder him:

Though his bark cannot be lost,

Yet it shall be tempest-tost.

These supernatural creatures are limited in their power to interfere with the lives of mortals. This important fact is emphasised just before Macbeth and Banquo arrive on stage.

The first words that Macbeth speaks echo the Witches, and in the process, remind us that a metaphysical link exists between them and him. Banquo notices the Witches first and, in his address to them, he emphasises their ugliness and disturbing androgyny:

You seem to understand me,

By each at once her chappy finger laying

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*Upon her skinny lips: you should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so.*

Ignoring Banquo, they turn their attention to Macbeth successively hailing him as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor and a future king of Scotland. Importantly, they never mention Duncan or even murder. However, Macbeth's startled reaction is very significant. The initial reports of his battlefield prowess emphasise his ruthless and courageous pursuit of his enemies. Yet, the Witches seemingly innocuous predictions of future greatness, frighten Macbeth. The only logical reason for this reaction lies in the fact that he must have thought about this before. In Duncan's Scotland, there is no place for the self-made man, and if Macbeth has indeed thought about becoming king, he must have realised that the only way to gain the throne is to take it. And the only way to take it is to murder Duncan. This explains both his startled reaction to what the Witches say, and the rapidity with which he begins to succumb to the evil that they represent. The arrival of Ross and Angus confirms to Macbeth and Banquo that the Witches have more than mortal knowledge of future events. Interestingly, neither Macbeth nor Banquo share the details of their encounter with their fellow kinsmen. Instead, Macbeth becomes rapt by thoughts of future greatness and he ignores Banquo's prescient observation that:

*oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence.*

Macbeth chooses to engage in a kind of inner moral debate whose only goal is to justify the attractiveness of what the Witches prophesied. Although he acknowledges the frightening potential for evil contained in the "**suggestion**" that he may become King, Macbeth's moral principles have already been deeply compromised. Viewing the Witches and not Duncan as responsible for his recent success, he ends his inner debate by claiming that he will trust in "**chance**" to "**crown**" him without his "**stir**". It is

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Commentary

difficult not to see his parting request to Banquo that they discuss what has transpired, as being anything other than conspiratorial.

Scene iv, takes us back to Forres, where Duncan is discussing the execution of Cawdor. There is an obvious irony to the fact that his remarks about there being “*no art to find the mind’s construction in the face*” are spoken just as Macbeth enters his presence. Duncan speaks openly and warmly to Macbeth and Banquo, and is lavish in his praise of his kinsmen. Notice how, when he speaks, Duncan is positive and describes the future in language that draws heavily on nature imagery. If words such as “*harvest*” and “*grow*” remind us of the role that the monarchy has to play in the natural cycle of life, they also underline the barren emptiness of what the Witches represent. Duncan’s language changes sharply when announcing his successor. The investiture of Malcolm, as Prince of Cumberland, is a formal act of the sovereign that guarantees Scotland a sense of continuity. In accordance with what one would expect from such an official pronouncement, Duncan employs the royal plural to emphasize his authority. Later, when Macbeth has stolen the throne, he also employs the royal plural but his attempts to sound kingly, always seem contrived and forced. No sooner has Macbeth left Duncan’s company than we notice a sharp change in his thinking that is matched by a corresponding change in his tone of voice. Privately, he views Malcolm as an obstacle that needs to be overcome, and acknowledging the need to

Deception

The theme of deception is central to any reading of Macbeth. You should pay close attention to the manner in which Shakespeare develops this theme.



conceal his inner thoughts, he makes the first in a series of troubling invocations to the night:

*Stars, hide your fires;
Let not light see my black
and deep desires:*

Later in the play, you will see how something evil answers this dark prayer.

In the next scene, we meet Lady Macbeth for the first time. For many readers, she is the most interesting character in the play. Yet despite the fascination that her character holds, she is often misread and misunderstood. As she reads her husband's letter, we first notice that they are an incredibly close couple. Macbeth is eager for his wife to share in his recent success and he even goes so far as to call her



his "*dearest partner of greatness*". Once she has finished reading Macbeth's account of the day's events, she immediately demonstrates her determination to ensure that her husband will take what has been promised him by the Weird Sisters.

*Glamis thou art, and
Cawdor; and shalt be
What thou art promised: yet
do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' the milk of
human kindness*

“*Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my
spirits in thine ear;
And chastise with the
valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee
from the golden round,
Which fate and
metaphysical aid doth
seem To have thee
crown'd withal*”

*To catch the nearest way:
thou wouldst be great;
Art not without ambition,
but without The illness
should attend it:*

Reading what she says a little more closely, one is struck by the complete inversion of accepted moral norms that seems to inform her reasoning. Goodness for her involves the attainment of the throne, and evil is defined as anything that stands in her way. She "*fears*" her husband's kindness and

determines to remove any obstacle that "*impeeds [him] from the golden round*". The entrance of a messenger, who brings news of Duncan's imminent arrival, changes everything. Lady Macbeth now knows that fate has conspired to provide her with an opportunity to have Duncan murdered "*under her battlements*". This speech has often been misread by students. Of course, it reveals Lady Macbeth's terrifying determination to do whatever is necessary to obtain the throne, but if read more closely, what she says also hints at an underlying vulnerability present in her character. Calling on the forces of evil, those "*spirits*" of the night that "*tend on mortal thoughts*", to unsex her and fill her "*full of the direst cruelty*", Lady Macbeth betrays her fears that she may not be cruel enough to carry out this awful crime. Interestingly, both the tone and the substance of her words echo the Witches. When she calls for her milk to be turned to gall, it is difficult not to recall the disturbing androgyny of the Weird Sisters, whose "*beards*" and choppy fingers are emphasised by Banquo earlier in Act I, scene iii. Just as Macbeth had done previously, she ends her soliloquy by calling on night to conceal her murderous thoughts:

*Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry 'Hold, hold!'*

When Macbeth enters the scene, the excitement and energy caused by the promise of a shared future of power and privilege is almost palpable. Ignoring his wife's joyful reference to the Witches' prophecies, he rushes to inform her that Duncan is coming to stay with them that very night. When she enquires about when Duncan plans to leave, Macbeth informs his wife that the King's intention is to leave the next day. The word murder hangs in the air, but Lady Macbeth is the first to say what they are both thinking:

*O, never
Shall sun that morrow see!*

Macbeth's shocked reaction to what his wife has just said prompts her to remind him of the importance of maintaining a false face to the wider world. The theme of appearance and reality is vital to any reading of *Macbeth* and you should keep a close

eye on any reference to it as you read the play. Notice also, when Lady Macbeth warns her husband of the need to “*look like the innocent flower, | But be the serpent under’t*”, how we see the first of many references to venomous creatures. It is as if the imagery used by Shakespeare is intended to reflect how poisoned Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s thinking has become. In an extension of the inverted moral reasoning that we saw in her soliloquy, Lady Macbeth characterises the plan to murder Duncan as the “*night’s great business*”. However, it is very interesting that she should avoid mentioning Duncan by name. This is just one of many subtle clues that hint at the vulnerability belying Lady Macbeth’s cold exterior. Scene vi, underlines further the theme of appearance and reality. As Banquo and Duncan arrive at Inverness, they are struck by the warm and welcoming appearance of Macbeth’s castle. It is as if the castle has become a metaphor for the people that inhabit it:

*This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
Unto our gentle senses.*

The theme is underscored further when Duncan enters the castle and is greeted in the warmest possible manner by Lady Macbeth. Scene vii, takes us inside the castle as Macbeth, in soliloquy, paces back and forth. What emerges, as he considers the murder of Duncan, is a profoundly deep and searching examination of the morality of his actions. To begin with, Macbeth reasons that if it were possible to guarantee that no further complications arise from the murder, and that the whole matter could be neatly concluded, then it would be best to kill Duncan and kill him quickly. However, one of the most remarkable qualities of Macbeth is his refusal to evade moral responsibility for his actions. He admits that there is a very high possibility that, “*even handed justice*”, as he puts it, may catch up with him in this life. Yet, it is not the possibility of being caught that occupies Macbeth’s thoughts. Instead, he chooses to focus on the moral reasons for not killing Duncan. He correctly identifies the bonds of kinship and trust that exist between them and he emphasises the duty of care that he owes his King. Furthermore, he admits that he likes Duncan and that he has been an excellent King who is much loved by the people of Scotland:

*Duncan | Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against*

*The deep damnation of his taking-off,
 And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
 Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed
 Upon the sightless couriers or the air,
 Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
 That tears shall drown the wind.*

It is not the terror of human or even divine judgment that Macbeth fears, but the terror of moral isolation. The image of pity, in the form of a "**new-born babe**", so poignantly evoked by Macbeth, is a powerful symbol for the loss of innocence that this crime will cause. Macbeth concludes his soliloquy by admitting that he has no valid reason for killing Duncan other than his "**vaulting ambition**". At this point, Lady Macbeth enters the stage. Immediately, Macbeth claims that they should no longer proceed with the plan to kill Duncan. She however counters this suggestion with a fearsome tirade that includes some of the most memorable, if not disturbing, imagery in all of Shakespeare. She undermines his sense of himself as a man by calling him a coward and, then, in a truly shocking moment, she claims that she would willingly have "**pluck'd her nipple**" from the "**boneless gums**" of her baby and "**dash'd his brains out**" in order to prove her commitment to this plan. Notice how Lady Macbeth once again employs a type of imagery that inverts commonly accepted notions of femininity. This, of course, recalls the repulsive type of androgyny that we associate with the Witches. The only opposition that Macbeth offers to this shockingly powerful speech is to suggest meekly that they might fail. Sensing that she has convinced him, Lady Macbeth assures him that if he "**screw[s] his courage to the sticking-place**" they will "**not fail**." She then outlines the details of what can only be described as a very limited and simplistic plan to lay the blame on Duncan's chamberlains whom she intends to drug. Macbeth is swept away on the tide of her energetic enthusiasm and marvels at her strength of character and determination:

*Bring forth men-children only,
 For thy undaunted mettle should compose
 Nothing but males.*

When Macbeth questions her on the implausibility of the plan, we get the first glimpse of the type of Scotland that they envisage once they take power:

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Who dares receive it other

The scene concludes with Macbeth vowing that he is committed to carrying out this "**terrible feat**." He explains that in order for them to succeed it will be necessary to present a "**false face**" to the world.

Night & Day

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth separately make a series of invocations to the spirits of the night to cast the country into darkness. Notice how their prayers are answered.

