

## Shakespearean Theatre

- Playhouses offered something for everyone in Shakespeare's England. The plays covered a variety of themes that were not dissimilar to today's soap operas.
- When permanent playhouses first appeared, civic leaders and church authorities did not want them because of the threat of plague, riots and even rebellion.
- The playhouses provided just one of many colourful spectacles for the audience of the time; they also enjoyed public executions, bear baiting, fencing and public processions through the streets.
- Shakespeare's audience would have been hardened to acts of violence in many ways. Public executions were crowd-pleasers and theatre-goers would most likely have seen bodies swinging from gallows as a warning to others not to break the law, for example. What we would consider unbearable cruelty would have been considered entertainment by the audience of the time.
- It was lucky for playwrights in Shakespeare's time that the royals enjoyed the theatre - this fact made their plays far more popular than they might otherwise have been.
- The Globe Theatre was the artistic and creative home for Shakespeare and his acting troupe.
- The Globe was built in about 1598 in London's Bankside district by Shakespeare's theatre company, The Lord Chamberlain's Men.
- It could hold up to 3,000 spectators.
- In 1613, during a performance of Henry VIII, a misfired canon ball set the Globe on fire. In less than two hours it burned to the ground but fortunately many of the props and costumes were saved. The theatre was rebuilt, this time with a tiled roof instead of a thatched one.
- In 1644, Puritans demolished the theatre and built housing on the site.
- The roof did not fully cover the theatre as plays took place during the day and depended on daylight for illumination.
- The sets were very simple with little or nothing by way of effects, so it fell to the

playwright to use words to create the images for the audience.

- *Macbeth* was not premiered at the Globe, although it was performed there after its initial performance. It was first performed in August 1606 at Hampton Court for King James the 1<sup>st</sup>, where it was performed at night and lit by candles, which was most unusual. It allowed Shakespeare to incorporate light and shade in a way that would not have been possible in his other plays. This would have lent the play an eerie atmosphere.
- *Macbeth* is set in 1040, when the Viking, Sweno, is attacking the north of Scotland.

## *Trivia: Did You Know?*

- In 1572 the Poor Law classed actors in the same section as vagabonds, rogues and wandering beggars.
- Actors had to be good as audiences booed and hissed and even threw rotten vegetables at the stage if they didn't like what they saw. Women did not act; their parts were taken by young boys whose voices had not yet broken. Many of these boy actors died of poisoning because of the lead in their make-up.
- There was no copyright; a play was produced as soon as it was written and would be attended by scribes who would copy the play to be sold on to other theatre companies and shown elsewhere.
- There was very little rehearsal time and no breaks between scenes.
- The majority of plays in the Globe were shown in the summer because the stage was so open to the elements.
- Elizabethans said, 'I'm going to hear a play,' as opposed to, 'I'm going to see a play'.



## Characters



### *Macbeth*

#### Violent and Terrifying but also Brave and Noble

Macbeth is established as a terrifying killer before we ever meet him. The sergeant in Act 1 Scene II tells us that he killed Macdonwald by slicing him in half from his groin to his jaw: **'he unseam'd him from the nave to the chops'**, before hacking off his head and placing it on the battlements. We are also told that Macbeth and Banquo's redoubled attack on the Norwegian lord was so violent that the sergeant could not tell if they wanted to **'bathe in reeking wounds / Or memorise another Golgotha'**. Golgotha is 'The Place of the Skull' where the Romans crucified the Jews and left piles of bodies on the hillside. This is a powerful image as it also brings to mind Christ being killed at that place. Another side of Macbeth's nature is shown when the Sergeant compares him to an eagle and a lion, giving an impression of nobility.

Thus we are left with two images of Macbeth before we ever meet him: on the one hand a terrifying, savage, violent figure and on the other a valiant soldier who behaves nobly in battle.

Macbeth is an interesting tragic hero. We may admire his strength of leadership in battle and the certain amount of nobility he possesses, but he does not excite our admiration in the way one might expect of such a hero. He is an awe-inspiring figure when at his best, but not a man who shows any qualities that inspire us to empathise with him.

Macbeth is a great warrior at a time when such men are valued. Duncan is too old to lead his army into battle. It is Macbeth who leads the Scottish army against the enemy and therefore he might be forgiven for hoping that Duncan would reward him by making him his successor. This was possible at the time as Scottish kings were chosen and did not simply inherit the title.

#### Seeds of Evil: Physically Strong but Morally Weak

Macbeth's first words in the play echo the witches'. They said 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair', he opens with **'So foul and fair a day I have not seen'**. This links him to them and shows

how their evil lurks within him. When Macbeth talks to Banquo about the witches' prophecies, he hones in on the fact that Banquo's children shall be kings. Does he already see Banquo as a threat?

Macbeth is less perceptive than Banquo. When Macbeth learns he has been awarded the title of Thane of Cawdor, his mind immediately flies to the witches' prophecy that he would be king. He asks Banquo if he now hopes his children will be kings, given that the prophecies are coming true. Warily, Banquo says that we can be lured into evil by such temptation:

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

Macbeth sees the **'two truths'** he has been told as **'happy prologues to the swelling act'** and admits that he is already thinking murderous thoughts as a result of them. He recognises his capacity for evil and the horror of it makes his hair stand on end and his heart race with fear.

What Macbeth would like best is to become king without having to kill Duncan: **'If chance will have me King, why, chance may crown me / Without my stir'**.

We see now that although Macbeth may be physically strong, he is morally weak. He is already contemplating murdering the king.

### Does Not Lack Pity

Macbeth may be ambitious, but he is not entirely ruthless at the start of the play. His wife says he is **'too full of the milk of human kindness'** and accuses him of having ambition but being **'without / The illness should attend it.'**

This is an interesting point. Lady Macbeth does not seem to know her husband as well as she should, in that she has no real idea of the brutal savagery that lie within him, waiting to be unleashed. So far, he has kept this ferocity for the field of battle, and that is a sphere in which Lady Macbeth has never seen him act. She works hard to make him ruthless (pitiless) and is then horrified to see what she has unleashed.

### No Good Reason to Kill Duncan

One of the great ironies in *Macbeth* is that the greatest praise of the king comes from the man who will kill him. Macbeth has no good reason for killing Duncan, something he freely acknowledges. The only reason he could possibly have is his self-serving desire to be kin

**I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
Vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself  
And falls on th'other**

### Morally Weak

Macbeth is undoubtedly a brave soldier, but when it comes to killing an unarmed man who is the guest in his castle (not to mention his king) he balks. He knows that it is the wrong thing to do, and is prepared to tell his wife as much. However, he is not prepared for the vehemence of his response, and he is bowled over by the strength of her conviction.

She goads him, calling him a coward and comparing him to **'the poor cat i' the adage'**. Macbeth's spirited response, that he dares **'do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none'** cuts no ice with his wife. She is set upon this task and makes good her earlier promise to **'chastise [him] with the valour of my tongue'**. She judges well. Her claim that she would have snatched her nursing child from her breast and **'dash'd the brains out had I sworn to do so'** moves Macbeth to prove himself even more determined than she. He subjugates his honour, morality, pity, doubts and fears and agrees to become the man she wants him to be. Ironically, in acceding to her demands, he is about to undertake a task that will irreparably damage their relationship.

### Tormented by Guilt

Initially, Macbeth is tormented by the murder of Duncan. Even before he kills the king, he sees the illusion of the dagger before him. When he has Banquo murdered, he sees his ghost. What is interesting about this is that Macbeth's imagination is a mirror of his better self. When he allows it free rein it shows him the horror of what he is planning to do or has done. However, as he increases in tyranny, he suppresses this expression of his subconscious and goes on to commit the most appalling of crimes, such as the slaughter of Macduff's family.

Macbeth is self-aware enough to realise that by murdering Duncan he has saddled himself with the burden of mental anguish. He will never know peace again:

**Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more:  
Macbeth does murder sleep', the innocent sleep,  
Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care'.**

## Drawn into the Witches' Equivocal World

Once Macbeth has decided to kill the king, his way of speaking changes. He hides his true feelings from those around him, and his words are full of double-meaning and falsehoods. He tells Banquo that he never thinks of the witches, but immediately shows this not to be true by asking Banquo to spare him some time to discuss them at a later date. When Banquo agrees, Macbeth tells him that **'If you cleave to my consent, when 'tis, / Or shall make honour for you'**. There is a hint of both a promise and a threat here: Macbeth seems to be saying that Banquo would do well to show loyalty to Macbeth as his future success or failure may depend on it.

Macbeth's speech on the discovery of Duncan's body is interesting. On the one hand, it is certainly meant to deceive those listening into believing that he had nothing to do with the murder and mourns Duncan's death every bit as much as they do, but it also expresses his innermost thoughts.

**Had I but died an hour before this chance,  
I had lived a blessed time; for from this instant  
There's nothing serious in mortality:  
All is but toys: renown and grace is dead;  
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees  
Is left this vault to brag of**

Further evidence of Macbeth's equivocation is seen when he questions Banquo about his plans so that he may arrange to have him murdered.

## Desensitised to Murder

Macbeth calls on the forces of evil to help him suppress any of his finer feelings:

**Come, seeing night,  
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day  
And with thy bloody and invisible hand  
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond  
Which keeps me pale.**

The 'bond' to which Macbeth refers is his link to humanity and his conscience. Part of what makes Macbeth a tragic hero is that he never loses sight of what he is doing. He knows that he has become evil and yet becomes ever more determined to act in defiance of his conscience.

Macbeth succeeds in desensitising himself to the horror of murder. In Act 5 he is unmoved by the screams of women, saying that he has **'supped full with horrors'** and is now incapable of being startled or distressed by such sounds.

When he hears of his wife's death, Macbeth does not react with great sadness, merely seeing it as further proof that the world is cruel and existence pointless.

## Tyrant

Macbeth submits to darkness and evil with astonishing rapidity once the ghost of Banquo has appeared to him. Murdering Banquo – and trying to murder Fleance – was the final straw. Now Macbeth believes that he is **'in blood / Stepped so far that should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er'**.

Chillingly, he tells his wife that he is **'but young in deed'** and that the appearance of Banquo's ghost merely proves that he needs more practice at murder if he is to avoid being plagued by his conscience.

Macbeth knows only too well that a king can be killed and his throne taken, and he becomes increasingly paranoid as the play progresses. He places spies in the houses of all the noble families and orders the death of anyone who may pose a threat to him. The most shocking murders of all are, of course, Macduff's wife and children. They are wholly innocent of any wrongdoing, and their vulnerability – Macduff is away from home – highlights how evil the act is. This slaying is but a microcosm of the suffering that is going on throughout the realm. Macduff says that **'each new morn / New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows / Strike Heaven on the face'**.

## Tormented

Kingship brings no joy to Macbeth. He is paranoid and insecure, and destined never to enjoy inner peace again. He says his mind is **'full of scorpions'** and goes so far as to say that he envies Duncan the peaceful sleep of death.

Macbeth has 'supped' too many horrors and sees no point to existence any more. Interestingly, he no longer wants the world itself to continue if he cannot live in happiness.

**I 'gin to be aweary of the sun,  
And wish th' estate o' the world were now undone.**

## Final Impression

Whether or not you believe Macbeth is redeemed at the end of the play rather depends on your impression of him at the start. Certainly, if you viewed him at that point as simply a brave warrior, then he does at least decide to die in his battle armour, fighting to the end. But is that enough to redeem him? We may also feel some sympathy for the position in which Macbeth finds himself, but we should not overlook the fact that he does not repent. He sees himself as cornered like a bear hounded by dogs. He considers suicide, but decides against it, judging it better to keep on killing than to kill himself. This is far from noble.

**Why should I play the Roman fool, and die  
On mine own sword? Whiles I see lives, the gashes  
Do better on them.**

When he realises – too late – that the witches have played him like a fool, Macbeth admits to Macduff that he is now afraid, saying Macduff's revelation about his birth has '**cowed my better part of man**'. He is roused to fight on, however, when taunted by Macduff. His death at Macduff's hands is greeted with relief, and Malcolm promises to undo the damage wrought by '**this dead butcher**'. That, then, is Macbeth's final legacy: a feared and despised tyrant whose passing is not mourned by anyone.



*Lady Macbeth*

Ambitious

The moment Lady Macbeth reads the letter from her husband, she is determined that the prophecy will come true and he will be king. She will see to it that Macbeth '**shalt be / What thou art promised**'.

She wants to act quickly to ensure that the prophecy is fulfilled, and decides to '**catch the nearest way**' to the throne. This means murdering Duncan and seizing the throne. Lady Macbeth believes she is aware of her husband's weakness and she resolves to take charge in order to ensure that the act is done.



It is interesting to note the words Lady Macbeth uses when she speaks of the murder at first.

**The raven himself is hoarse  
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan  
Under my battlements.**

The word 'my' in the last line shows that Lady Macbeth is willing to take responsibility for the task at this point. However, she withdraws more from this as the moment of truth nears, and speaks of herself and Macbeth as acting together.

### Not Without Pity

The moment Macbeth arrives home, Lady Macbeth begins to talk to him about the murder. She speaks of the deed as if it were something wonderful and almost noble, calling it **'this night's great business'**. It appears that Lady Macbeth is so caught up in the thought of the power she and Macbeth will have that she has almost persuaded herself that the murder of Duncan will be somehow an heroic act. Of course, it is not and the reality of the situation as it unfolds after the murder proves too much for Lady Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth knows that she possesses finer feelings and so does her best to suppress them. She calls on the evil spirits to unsex her and make her more like a man than a woman. She wants her femininity and her gentler side to be replaced with **'direst cruelty'** and invites **'murdering ministers'** to nurse her and swap her milk for gall. (Gall was believed to be one of the 'humours' of the human body and an excess of it made the person ruthless.) By renouncing her femininity, Lady Macbeth hopes to be strong enough to focus on planning Duncan's murder and seeing it through to the bitter end.

### Manipulative

When Macbeth resists, his wife is more than ready for him. She suggests he is a coward who is afraid **'To be the same in thine own act and valour, / As thou art in desire'**. She twists words and logic, persuading Macbeth that not to murder the king would be unmanly: **'When thou durst do it, then you were a man'**. This is an extraordinary idea, yet Macbeth rises to her bait nonetheless, never questioning the skewed logic. Lady Macbeth taunts her husband by saying that he has made a vow, and so must stick to it. Again, this is very twisted logic. Surely there would be less dishonour in breaking a vow than there would be in murdering a king. Lady Macbeth, however, claims that if she had promised to kill her own baby she would do so rather than break a vow. Nothing Lady Macbeth says in her efforts to bring her husband around to her way of thinking stand up to scrutiny, but they

work on Macbeth nonetheless. Even when his wife says **'Such I account thy love'**, thereby effectively saying 'If you loved me, you'd kill the king', Macbeth does not point out how ridiculous such she sounds. Instead, he is won over completely and tells her admiringly that she should only have sons since she has such a strong character.

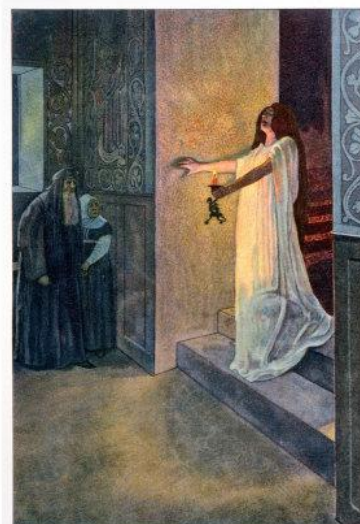
### Dominant When Macbeth is Weak

In the early stages of the play, Lady Macbeth is undoubtedly the dominant partner in the marriage. She tells Macbeth exactly how the murder is to be carried out, and keeps her head when Macbeth loses his in the aftermath of the murder. When Macbeth is weak, she is strong. However, she has made a fatal mistake in encouraging her husband to become a ruthless murderer and as he gains in tyrannical strength, so she fades from the action of the play.

### A Victim of the Evil She Embraces

Of course, evil ultimately consumes all those who embrace it. Lady Macbeth is the first to fall. Almost immediately after the murder of Duncan, her strength begins to fail. Neither she nor Macbeth ever enjoy inner peace again. She and her husband drift apart, and she observes sadly that **'Nought's had, all's spent / Where our desire is got without content'**.

As her husband matures in evil, so she dwindles. Her life becomes a nightmare and she suffers hellish torment, haunted by the evil she has helped to unleash: **'The thane of Fife had a wife, where is she now?'** Darkness, which she had earlier called on to hide the actions of herself and her husband, now terrifies her and she must have a light with her at all times. The image of Lady Macbeth wandering the halls of the castle in anguish until she is driven to take her own life is a frightening portrayal of the way evil cannot be controlled or contained by those who have made a conscious commitment to it.





## *The Witches*

### Evil and Terrifying

The witches provide us with an exciting opening to the play, something Shakespeare's audience would have demanded.

They would have found the witches terrifying and not at all ridiculous.

### Not of this World

The witches talk in tetrameter – four stresses per line – while the rest of the play is written in iambic pentameter. This sets the witches apart from the other characters. 'When shall we three meet again?' - Four stresses.

They choose Macbeth, planning to meet him on the heath. This reflects a Protestant belief called the doctrine of voluntary assent: spirits from hell are sent to get you if your soul is weak. The witches tempt Macbeth and Banquo, but only Macbeth succumbs.

### 'Imperfect Speakers'

The witches' incantations are equivocal. Their meaning is uncertain and open to different interpretations. This is how they operate, as they cannot directly force a person to act as they wish. All they can do is use false appearance to present Macbeth with what appears to be a tempting vision of the future, and see if he acts on them. He does, and puts faith in the witches' promises that he can only be killed when Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane, or when he is confronted by a man not born of woman. In the event, both of these things occur, but the way they are presented to Macbeth by the witches makes him believe that they are simply a way of telling him that he is invincible.

The witches' evil lurks in the words of other characters in the play, even though those characters do not realise it. In Act 1 Scene II the witches plan to meet again '**When the battle's lost and won**'. These words are reflected by Duncan in the next scene when he instructs Ross to make Macbeth Thane of Cawdor, saying '**What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won**'. Macbeth's first words in the play echo the witches'. They said '**Fair is foul, and foul is fair**'; he opens with '**So foul and fair a day I have not seen**'.



## *Banquo*

### Perceptive / Not Initially Tempted by the Witches

At the time the play was written, it was widely believed that King James was a direct descendant of Banquo. Therefore, Banquo is portrayed as a noble, strong character who resists temptation when Macbeth does not.

Banquo is far more perceptive than Macbeth. When Macbeth learns he has been awarded the title of Thane of Cawdor, his mind immediately flies to the witches' prophecy that he would be king. He asks Banquo if he now hopes his children will be kings, given that the prophecies are coming true. Warily, Banquo says that we can be lured into evil by such temptation:

**And 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 –**

### Morally Compromised

At the start of Act 2, Banquo is finding it harder to resist temptation. He prays to the '**merciful powers**' to help him. He admits to Fleance that he is struggling to restrain '**cursed thoughts**' which prevent him from sleeping. He obviously suspects Macbeth of Duncan's murder, but does nothing about it. Why? Is it because he hopes that the last part of the prophecy may now come true and his children may be kings? His reluctance to face facts and confront the tyrant Macbeth ultimately costs Banquo his life and is almost responsible for his son's death too.

### *Blood*

Did you notice that there are only two colours repeated throughout the play? Those are blood red and black. This links blood and darkness (evil).

Macbeth is established as a terrifying killer before we ever meet him. The Sergeant in Act 1 Scene II tells us that he killed Macdonwald by slicing him in half from his groin to his jaw: **'he unseam'd him from the nave to the chops'**, before hacking off his head and placing it on the battlements.

The Sergeant himself is a **'bloody man'** who describes in horrifying detail the carnage on the battlefield.

The Sergeant says that Macbeth and Banquo's redoubled attack on the Norwegian lord was so violent that he could not tell if they wanted to **'bathe in reeking wounds / Or memorise another Golgotha'**. (The word 'memorise' means 'recreate' here.) Golgotha is 'The Place of the Skull' where the Romans crucified the Jews and left piles of bodies on the hillside. This is a powerful image as it also brings to mind Christ being killed at that place.

Lady Macbeth calls for her blood to be made so thick that she will feel no pity or remorse. Of course, she fails and proves incapable of ridding herself of the vision of Duncan's blood on her hands.

Duncan's murder is a bloody one. Macbeth hallucinates and sees a dagger with 'gouts of blood' on the blade and handle. After he has murdered Duncan, Macbeth is appalled by the amount of blood on his hands, calling it **'a sorry sight'**. He believes that if he were to dip his hands in the seas, they would turn red: **'This my hand will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine / Turning the green one red'**.

Banquo's blood-covered ghost appears at the banquet, shaking its **'gory locks'**, unnerving Macbeth and causing him to tell his wife that **'blood will have blood'**. By this he means that he who sheds blood will have his own blood spilt.

Scotland under Macbeth is described as a country bleeding from new wounds received every day. Macbeth himself admits his part in this, saying that he has committed so many murders

that he might as well carry on. He claims he is **‘in blood / Stepped so far that should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o’er’**.

The most famous reference to blood is probably Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking scene. She is tormented by the memory of Duncan’s blood on her hands. This is despite her saying at the time that **‘a little water clears us of this deed’**. Now no amount of water can make the blood vanish from her imagination. She believes she will never be rid of it: **‘Here’s the smell of blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand’**. She wanders through the castle in a somnambulistic state, vainly trying to scrub the stain away: **‘Out, damned spot! Out, I say!’**

These are just a few of the blood images in the play, making it clear why *Macbeth* is often described as a play ‘drenched in blood’.

## *Darkness*

The play takes place almost entirely at night and this reflects the darkness of the evil deeds that take place in this tragedy. The most significant actions: the vision of the dagger, the murders of Duncan and Banquo, Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking, all occur during the night. The witches are called **‘black and midnight hags’** and they meet Macbeth in a dark cave. When Macbeth hears that Duncan has named Malcom his heir, he realises that the crown will not now come to him unless he makes it happen. He calls on darkness to hide his evil thoughts:

**Stars, hide your fires:  
Let not light see my black and deep desires.  
The eye wink at the hand: yet let that be  
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.**

Lady Macbeth, when she hears that Duncan is coming to spend the night at the Macbeth’s castle, calls on darkness to hide the deed she plans to commit:

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

Macbeth bids the stars hide their fires that his 'black' desires may be concealed; Lady Macbeth calls on thick night to come, palled in the dunnest smoke of hell. The moon is down and no stars shine when Banquo, dreading the dreams of the night, goes unwillingly to bed, and leaves Macbeth to wait for the summons of the little bell. When the next day should dawn, its light is '**stranded,**' and '**darkness does the face of earth entomb.**' The sun only seems to shine twice in the play: first when Duncan ironically admires the beauty and peacefulness of the Macbeths' seat, and once again when Malcom's army defeats Macbeth and his followers.

After the moon has gone down on the night in which Macbeth kills King Duncan, Banquo says to Fleance, '**There's husbandry in heaven; / Their candles are all out**'. This was exactly the sort of night for which Macbeth had been hoping, so he could hide his dreadful deed even from himself.

After he has arranged for the murder of Banquo, Macbeth tells his wife that their problems will be solved by a deed to be done at nightfall. He doesn't tell her exactly what he has planned, but he very much wants night to come, and he falls into a kind of reverie in which he speaks to the night. In the reverie Macbeth mentions a "great bond," which is usually explained as Banquo's lease on life, so Macbeth is asking the night to take away Banquo's life, because Banquo makes Macbeth 'pale' with fear:

**Come, seeling night,  
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day;  
And with thy bloody and invisible hand  
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond  
Which keeps me pale!**

In Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene she enters holding a candle, and the doctor asks her gentlewoman how the lady happens to have the candle. The gentlewoman replies, '**Why, it stood by her: she has light by her continually; 'tis her command**'. The doctor then points out, '**You see, her eyes are open**', and the gentlewoman replies, '**Ay, but their sense is shut**'. Thus we see that Lady Macbeth, who called on darkness to hide her acts, is ultimately tormented by darkness and has to have a light with her at all times.

Light and darkness in the play underscore the conflict between good and evil.

## *Nature | The Unnatural*

The Greek philosopher Aristotle first had the idea that nature has pathos or feelings for the actions of characters and reflects their emotional state. This is known as pathetic fallacy. The opening scene, therefore, gives us an indication of the witches' nature and intentions. It is set on a blasted heath in a foul mist. **'When shall we three meet again? / In thunder, lightning or in rain?'** Stormy weather is a sign that evil is afoot.

When the Sergeant is describing the battle to Duncan in Act 1 Scene ii, he also uses storm imagery:

**As whence the sun 'gins his reflection  
Shipwrecking storms and direful thunders break,  
So from that spring whence comfort seem'd to come  
Discomfort swells.**

When Macbeth explains why he killed King Duncan's grooms, he describes the horrifying sight of the dead king's body: **'And his gash'd stabs look'd like a breach in nature / For ruin's wasteful entrance'**. Macbeth is lying about his motives, but his sense of horror may be genuine. Perhaps the king's wounds did indeed look like a great, gaping hole in life itself, a hole that lets in death and destruction.

Immediately after the scene in which King Duncan's body is discovered, there is a dialogue entirely devoted to the unnaturalness of the night of the murder. Ross is speaking with an Old Man. The Old Man's memories go back seventy years, but nothing he can remember compares to what has happened during this night: **'I have seen / Hours dreadful and things strange; but this sore night / Hath trifled former knowings'**. Ross replies **'Ah, good father, / Thou seest, the heavens, as troubled with man's act, / Threaten his bloody stage'**. The 'heavens' are the heavens above, where God lives, and they are also the upper regions of Shakespeare's Globe theatre. Ross is saying that the heavens frown angrily as they look down upon man playing his part on the stage of life, which has been made bloody by the murder of King Duncan.

King Duncan should have been honoured and loved, so his murder was unnatural, and Ross and the Old Man go on to tell each other of all the unnatural things that have been happening lately. They do not know that Macbeth is the murderer, but as they speak we can see the parallels to Macbeth's unnatural acts.



Ross points out that though the clock says it's time for the sun to shine, it's still dark. Ross thinks that maybe this terrible night is stronger than day, or maybe the day is ashamed to see what has been done in the night. We are reminded that Macbeth wanted a very dark night for the murder, one in which he wouldn't have to look at what he was doing, and he got such a night. Now that night has lingered into the day. The Old Man comments, **'Tis unnatural, / Even like the deed that's done'**.

The Old Man goes on to say that other unnatural things have been happening, too: **'On Tuesday last, / A falcon, towering in her pride of place, / Was by a mousing owl hawk'd at and kill'd'**. The falcon's 'pride of place' is the highest point of its flight. And the owl, which usually catches mice on the ground, went up instead of down, and killed a falcon. Also, a falcon is a day creature, and a royal companion, while the owl is an untameable bird of night and death. If things in nature stands for things in human life, King Duncan was the falcon, and Macbeth the owl.

Even worse, King Duncan's horses, **'Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race, / Turn'd wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out, / Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would make / War with mankind.'** A 'minion' is someone's favourite. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth were King Duncan's minions. The King showered them with honours and gifts, but they turned wild and made war on their master.

All of this unnaturalness is self-destructive. In the end, the horses ate each other. At their ends, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are eaten up from inside, Macbeth by despair and Lady Macbeth by madness.

## *Birds / Animals*

Macbeth and Banquo are compared to eagles and lions in Act 1 Scene ii when the Sergeant is recounting the events of the battle. This comparison is a positive one which implies bravery and nobility.

In Act 1 Scene ii, the First Witch tells her sisters that she was **'Killing swine'**. In Shakespeare's time, it was believed that swine fever was caused by witches, yet another reason for people to fear and hate them.

Later in the same scene, the First Witch compares herself to a **'rat without a tail'**. The animal imagery linked to the witches is consistently negative.

As the play progresses, this negative animal imagery also comes to be associated with Macbeth: his loss of nobility and increasing evil is reflected in these comparisons.

Immediately after Lady Macbeth reads her husband's letter about the witches' prophecies, a messenger come with the news that King Duncan is coming to spend the night at her castle. After the messenger has left, the first thing Lady Macbeth says is, **'The raven himself is hoarse / That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan / Under my battlements'**. The raven is a bird of ill omen, and Lady Macbeth means that the raven is hoarse from saying again and again that King Duncan must die.

When King Duncan comes to Macbeth's castle, he remarks how sweet the air is. Banquo agrees, and adds:

**This guest of summer,  
The temple-haunting martlet, does approve,  
By his loved mansionry, that the heaven's breath  
Smells wooingly here: no jutting, frieze,  
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird  
Hath made his pendant bed and procreant cradle.**

A 'martlet' is a martin (a kind of swallow), who is 'temple-haunting' because it likes to build its nests high on the walls of tall buildings. ('Haunting' doesn't have any ghostly connotations.) When Lady Macbeth heard that King Duncan was coming for the night, she imagined a raven under her battlements, foretelling the death of the King. Instead, as the King looks up to those battlements, he sees swallows gliding to and fro on the breath of heaven. The birds in each case reflect the natures of the characters.

While Macbeth goes to murder King Duncan, Lady Macbeth waits and listens very carefully. In the following passage, she hears something, then tells herself to be quiet and decides that she heard a screech owl: **'Hark! Peace! / It was the owl that shriek'd, the fatal bellman, / Which gives the stern'st good-night. He is about it'**. The cry of a screech owl was thought to announce a death, and a 'fatal bellman' was a night watchman who rang a bell to call a prisoner to his hanging. Lady Macbeth is glad to hear the cry of the screech owl, because it means that Macbeth is murdering King Duncan.

As Macduff is going in to say good morning to King Duncan, Lennox tells Macbeth about the rough night. Chimneys were blown down, lamentings and screams were heard in the air, and **'the obscure bird / Clamour'd the livelong night'**. The owl is the 'obscure bird,'

because it flies in the night and can't be seen. Perhaps that owl was the same one that Lady Macbeth heard when Macbeth was killing King Duncan. Just after Lennox finishes this speech, Macduff comes rushing in with the news that King Duncan has been murdered.

The morning after the murder of King Duncan, Ross and an Old Man are discussing the other unnatural things that have been happening. One of them is described by the Old Man: **'On Tuesday last / A falcon, towering in her pride of place, / Was by a mousing owl hawk'd at and kill'd'**. The falcon's 'pride of place' is the highest point of its flight. And the owl, which usually catches mice on the ground, went up instead of down, and killed a falcon. Also, a falcon is a day creature, and a royal companion, while the owl is an untameable bird of night and death. If things in nature stands for things in human life, King Duncan was the falcon, and Macbeth the owl.

After he has arranged for the murder of Banquo, Macbeth boasts to his wife that a terrible deed will be done which will solve their problems. The deed is to be done at nightfall, and Macbeth imagines the night coming on: **'Light thickens; and the crow / Makes wing to the rooky wood: / Good things of day begin to droop and drowse; / While night's black agents to their preys do rouse'**. 'Night's black agents' are all things that hunt and kill in the dark, including birds of prey.

After the first appearance of the Ghost of Banquo, Macbeth says **'If charnel-houses and our graves must send / Those that we bury back, our monuments / Shall be the maws of kites'**. 'Monuments,' like 'charnel-houses' and 'graves,' are the places where the dead belong. 'Kites' are hawks, and their 'maws' are their entire eating apparatuses -- beaks, gullets, and stomachs. An ancient fear was that a person who was not properly buried would have his bones picked clean by birds. Macbeth thinks that the dead ought to stay where they belong; if the graves are going to send the bodies back, the kites, with their maws full of human flesh, are going to be the only real graves.

Later in the same scene, after Macbeth has finally driven away the Ghost of Banquo, he reflects that a murder will always be discovered, sometimes in strange ways: **'Stones have been known to move and trees to speak; / Augurs and understood relations have / By magot-pies and choughs and rooks brought forth / The secret'st man of blood'**. Magot-pies (magpies), choughs (jackdaws), and rooks are all birds that can be taught to speak a few words. And of course, Macbeth himself is a secret man of blood, a murderer.

In her shock at learning that her husband has fled from Scotland, Lady Macduff accuses her husband of running away because he is afraid. She thinks he should have stayed to protect his family, and she says, **‘He loves us not; / He wants the natural touch: for the poor wren, / The most diminutive of birds, will fight, / Her young ones in her nest, against the owl’.**

When Ross tells Macduff of the slaughter of his wife and children, Macduff cries out in passionate grief: **‘All my pretty ones? / Did you say all? O hell-kite! All? / What, all my pretty chickens and their dam / At one fell swoop?’** The ‘hell-kite’ is Macbeth, who has killed all the ‘pretty chickens’ in one murderous dive (fell swoop).

## *Clothing*

There are between thirty and forty clothing images in Macbeth. (Feel free to count them yourself if you have time!)

When Ross hails Macbeth as Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth asks **‘Why do you dress me in borrowed robes?’** Shakespeare uses clothing as a way of talking about appearance versus reality. Dressing someone as a king does not make them a king. The repetition of this image drives the idea home in our mind.

Banquo notices Macbeth is distracted when he is named Thane of Cawdor, and he observes to Ross that **‘New honours come upon him, / Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mould / But with the aid of use.’** Banquo is saying that Macbeth is mentally trying on his new ‘honours,’ his title of Thane of Cawdor, but the title doesn't quite fit, and won't, until Macbeth gets used to it.

Shortly before Macbeth is to kill King Duncan, he has serious second thoughts, and he tells his wife they won't kill the King after all, saying, **‘He hath honour'd me of late; and I have bought / Golden opinions from all sorts of people, / Which would be worn now in their newest gloss, / Not cast aside so soon’.** Macbeth imagines his fame to be a kind of glorious new coat, which he will enjoy wearing. In her sarcastic reply, Lady Macbeth also uses a clothing metaphor, asking her husband, **‘Was the hope drunk / Wherein you dress'd yourself?’**

The morning after the night that King Duncan is murdered, Ross and Macduff discuss the question of who did the murder. Their guarded words suggests that they have serious doubts about the idea that the grooms killed King Duncan and were bribed to do so by Malcolm and Donalbain. Also, Macduff, unlike Ross, is not going to go to see Macbeth crowned, and his farewell to Ross is: **'Well, may you see things well done there: adieu! / Lest our old robes sit easier than our new!'** The 'old robes' were the royal garments of King Duncan; the new robes will be Macbeth's. The metaphor implies that Macbeth may not know how to wear his new robes. In addition, they are 'our' robes; everyone in Scotland will be affected by the way in which the new king handles his powers.

As the Scottish forces march to join the English army before Macbeth's castle, various Scotsmen comment on Macbeth's desperate situation. Angus says, **'Those he commands move only in command, / Nothing in love: now does he feel his title / Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe / Upon a dwarfish thief'**

After receiving the news that none of his thanes will fight for him, and that an English army of ten thousand is approaching, Macbeth is defiant. He says to an attendant, **'I'll fight till from my bones my flesh be hack'd. / Give me my armour'**. The attendant tells him that there's no need to don armour just now, but Macbeth insists. Apparently he wants to feel like the warrior he used to be. For the rest of the scene -- as he is speaking of the sickness of his wife and his country -- Macbeth puts on the armour. At the end of the scene he still doesn't have it all on, but he tells the attendant to follow him with the rest.

When Macbeth comes to realize that his situation is hopeless -- after his wife's death and after he has learned that Birnam wood is moving toward Dunsinane -- he determines to fight on, saying, **'Blow, wind! come, wrack! / At least we'll die with harness on our back'**. In this context, 'harness' means armour.

## *Children / Babies*

Children represent the future. They also represent the fealty subjects owe to their king. When King Duncan thanks Macbeth for his heroic service in battle, Macbeth replies that **'Your highness' part / Is to receive our duties; and our duties / Are to your throne and state children and servants'**. Macbeth's metaphor expresses a common idea of the time: A King cares for his people as a father cares for his children; and the people are supposed to act like obedient children.

When Macbeth is thinking about what's going to happen after he has killed King Duncan, he says that **'pity, like a naked new-born babe, / Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubins, horsed / Upon the sightless couriers of the air, / Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye, / That tears shall drown the wind'** . 'Cherubins' are small angels, portrayed as chubby, naked children; we call them 'cherubs.' And **'the sightless couriers of the air'** are the winds, imagined as invisible horses. Duncan is an innocent and his murder will bring tears to the eyes in much the same way as a stinging wind might do.

Later in the scene, Lady Macbeth shames her husband into sticking with the plan to kill Duncan. To shame Macbeth, she calls him a coward, questions his manhood, and tells him that he should be as tough as she is. She says:

**I have given suck, and know  
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:  
I would, while it was smiling in my face,  
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,  
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you  
Have done to this.**

She, too, seems to view a baby as a symbol of innocence, but innocence isn't something she values very much.

Lady Macbeth's reference to child abuse is one of many in the play, and it is a potent example of the way in which evil reverses the natural order of things and removes all that is humane and decent in those who give into its temptations. It also shows the way in which evil eliminates hope, as children represent the future. So images of child-slaying are doubly horrifying to an audience, and their appearance at several different stages in the play highlights the depravity and immorality of Macbeth's rule. He orders the murder of Fleance, and of Macduff's entire family, and the only person we see him kill in battle is Young Siward. The senselessness of the slaughter of Macduff's children in particular highlights the idea that evil, once unleashed, will consume everything.

As the witches wait for Macbeth to visit them again, they concoct a vile potion. One of the last ingredients they put into the cauldron is **'Finger of birth-strangled babe / Ditch-deliver'd by a drab'**. This is an appalling image because it represents the murder of a newborn baby by its own mother. A 'drab' is a prostitute, and 'ditch-delivered' means that the mother gave birth over a ditch, strangling the baby as it emerged and presumably dropping its corpse into the muddy waters at the bottom of the ditch.

One of Macbeth's greatest, and most senseless, acts of cruelty is the murder of Macduff's innocent wife and children. He gains nothing from their deaths, yet declares that he will seize Macduff's castle and **'give to the edge o' the sword / His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls / That trace him in his line'**.

Macduff, when he hears of the murder and is urged by Malcolm to take his revenge on Macbeth, points out that the tyrant has no children. Because he does not, and because the witches' prophecy said that Banquo's children should be kings, Macbeth hates the future and wishes to destroy it. Murdering children is a sure-fire way to end all hope of a future.

During the final battle, Macbeth kills Young Siward. Later, Ross gives Siward the news of his son's death, in a speech which emphasizes Young Siward's youth:

**Your son, my lord, has paid a soldier's debt:  
He only lived but till he was a man;  
The which no sooner had his prowess confirm'd  
In the unshrinking station where he fought,  
But like a man he died.**

The killing of Young Siward once again reinforces Macbeth's destroying the future. It also paints him in a poor light. At the start of the play we heard what a brave soldier he was, but now he is cutting down a boy who is barely old enough to fight.

## *Sleep*

Sleep is linked to well-being and a clear conscience. Without it, a person can be driven to madness and despair.

In Act 1 Scene II, the First Witch tells her sisters that in order to punish a woman who refused to give her a chestnut, she will deprive him of sleep: **'Sleep shall neither night nor day / Hang upon his penthouse lid'**. (Penthouse lid means the upper eyelid.) This is a context-specific reference in that it can later be linked to Macbeth's inability to sleep after he has become involved with the witches.

On the night that Macbeth murders King Duncan, Banquo says to Fleance, **'A heavy summons lies like lead upon me, / And yet I would not sleep: merciful powers, / Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose!'** Banquo doesn't give any details about the thoughts that are disturbing his sleep, but it is likely he is troubled by and brooding over the witches' prophecies. Later in the same scene, Macbeth

implies that he could reward Banquo if Banquo would somehow support him in something connected with the witches' prophecies. Banquo appears suspicious of Macbeth's motives, and Macbeth ends the conversation by wishing Banquo **'Good repose'**, a good night's sleep.

When Banquo has gone to bed, Macbeth hallucinates and sees a bloody dagger. Night is the time for such dreadful visions: **'Now o'er the one half-world / Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse / The curtain'd sleep'**. Even in sleep, there is no rest for some people.

After Macbeth murders King Duncan, he's so unnerved that he can't move. Staring at his bloody hands, he tells his wife that as he left the King's chamber, he heard two men in another room: **'There's one did laugh in's sleep, and one cried "Murder!"'**. It seems to him as though those men, even in their sleep, could see his bloody murderer's hands.

Moments later, still talking about the frightening things that happened to him, Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth that he thought he heard a voice telling him that he would never sleep again. The speech is one of the most famous in *Macbeth*:

**Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more!  
Macbeth does murder sleep,' the innocent sleep,  
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,  
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,  
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,  
Chief nourisher in life's feast.**

A "ravell'd sleeve" is a tangled skein of thread or yarn. Macbeth uses it as a metaphor for the kind of frustration we experience when we have so many problems that we can't see the end to any of them. In such a case, we often say that we want to "sleep on it" in order to get everything straight. Macbeth also compares sleep to a soothing bath after a day of hard work, and to the main course of a feast. To Macbeth, sleep is not only a necessity of life, but something that makes life worth living, and he feels that when he murdered his King in his sleep, he murdered sleep itself.

Just after he sends the two murderers out to kill Banquo, we see that Macbeth can sleep no more. He tells his wife that he will tear the world apart rather than continue to **'eat our meal in fear and sleep / In the affliction of these terrible dreams / That shake us nightly'**. He goes on to say that it would better to be dead than **'on the torture of the mind to lie / In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave; / After life's fitful**



**fever he sleeps well**'. Here, 'ecstasy' doesn't mean pleasure of any kind. The word refers to a sense of leaving the body, such as we often mean when we say that someone 'loses it.' Macbeth has terrible dreams, can't sleep, and feels like he's going crazy.

At the end of the scene in which the Ghost of Banquo is an uninvited guest at Macbeth's banquet, Lady Macbeth says to her husband, **'You lack the season of all natures, sleep'**. A 'season' in this sense is a preservative, and 'natures' are different varieties of human nature. She is saying that without sleep anyone will go mad, and Macbeth hasn't been getting his sleep. Earlier in the scene she had accused her husband of being unmanly, but now she's willing to attribute his strange behaviour to a lack of sleep.

When he is told that he must beware Macduff, Macbeth swears that Macduff **'shalt not live; / That I may tell pale-hearted fear it lies / And sleep in spite of thunder'**. Thunder represents vengeance for the murders he has committed. Because of his fear of that vengeance, he has not been able to sleep, but now he thinks that one more murder will fix everything.

In the scene in which Lady Macbeth sleepwalks, her waiting gentlewoman explains to a doctor that she has seen the lady **'rise from her bed, throw her night-gown upon her, unlock her closet, take forth paper, fold it, write upon't, read it, afterwards seal it, and again return to bed; yet all this while in a most fast sleep'**. The doctor comments, **'A great perturbation in nature, to receive at once the benefit of sleep, and do the effects of watching!'** The doctor simply means that the lady must be very troubled to act as though she is awake while she sleeps, but it's a significant observation. Lady Macbeth is not getting any sleep while she sleeps. Instead she relives the horrors of King Duncan's murder and of the visit of Banquo's ghost. **'Macbeth does murder sleep,'** a voice cried out to Macbeth as he was about to kill King Duncan. The voice was right.

## Approaching the Essay

- Your answer should be four to six pages in length. This includes an introduction and a conclusion.
- If possible, move through the play in a logical order. This is easiest in questions about character as you can go through the events of the play in chronological order.
- Think about the way a character/relationship develops as the play progresses. Most character/relationship questions will focus on the changes the character/relationship undergoes throughout the play or on the role a certain character plays in the play.
- Write a brief plan for your essay. This need only make sense to you, so don't worry about keeping it neat. Key words and abbreviations are fine. It is important to make a plan as you may find that a question looks attractive but does not suit your style of answering when it comes to writing an essay on it. It is best to discover this at the planning stage, abandon it and look at the other option rather than discover after two pages of writing that you have nothing more to say.
- Before you begin writing your answer, check the plan again. Look at each point you are intending to make and see if it answers the question. Now look at the order in which the points are made. Could they be better organised? If so, draw arrows and number each point accordingly.
- Look at your plan again. What is the overriding point of view? Is it positive or negative, for example? Could you sum up all the points you are intending to make in one short paragraph? You need to be able to do so if you are to write a strong introduction and conclusion.
- Once you have decided on your approach, you can start writing.
- Try to begin each paragraph with a topic sentence. This is a sentence which encapsulates the point of the paragraph and which will be developed / supported with suitable quotation or reference as the paragraph progresses.
- Keep referring back to the question. Remember that the examiner will be coding your answer every time you refer to the key words / phrases in the question, so make sure you are giving them plenty of relevant material.

- Make sure that every quotation you use is relevant. Don't include one just because you have learned it off and are keen to use it.
- Quotations should not be left hanging but should be woven into the fabric of the paragraph.
- Each quotation should be preceded or followed by an evaluation or comment which links it back to the question.