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Mr Bruff's Study Guide To WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S MACBETH



THE COMPLETE PLAY WITH
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AND ANALYSIS

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SAMPLE

Character Analyses

Macbeth

The character of Macbeth may be understood in a number of different ways. On the first level, we can see Macbeth as a character who is destroyed by having too much ambition. He is already a thane, he is the King's most trusted general and yet he is not happy. He wants the crown for himself and all it takes is a prophecy from the "weird sisters" to set him off. In pursuing that ambition, he ends up destroying himself, his family, everything. To look at Macbeth in this way is to take Shakespeare's message to be a warning of the dangers of being over ambitious.

"Brave Macbeth" to a "dead butcher"

Shakespeare makes it clear the impact that this surplus of ambition has on Macbeth. At the beginning, he is portrayed as a brave, noble warrior. He is described as "brave Macbeth", by the Bloody Sergeant and "valiant cousin, worthy gentleman" by King Duncan in Act 1 Scene 2 but over the course of the play he changes completely so that by the end, in Act 5 Scene 8 the epithet Malcolm uses to describe him is "dead butcher". He undergoes a transformation from Act 1 to Act 5 and we see this play out before our very eyes. Macbeth wants to be king, he is aware of the ambition within him. In Act 1 Scene 7 he says, "I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent but only vaulting ambition...". Here he acknowledges that there's no reason for him to kill Duncan but his own ambition. There is a remarkable passage before this quote where he goes through all of the reasons why he *shouldn't* kill the king. Shakespeare is painting a picture of a man who is at war with himself. He has the ambition within him but logic and reason, his own mind, is telling him not to do it.

Predictably, after Macbeth carries out the murder, he begins to suffer the consequences almost immediately. He is frightened and rambling in his speech when he tries to speak with his wife, a direct contrast with the experienced and skilled warrior on the battlefield described in Act 1 Scene 2 and the well-spoken, eloquent Macbeth we see just one scene earlier. He believes that he has "murdered sleep" and even heard a voice call out that "Macbeth shall sleep no more". When we consider sleep as a symbol of peace of mind, it's clear that Shakespeare is showing us that Macbeth's deeds, in the name of ambition, have destroyed his conscience and he will no longer have peace of mind. He has destroyed that part of himself. This is clearly a huge price to pay for an ambitious nature and many people have interpreted this as Shakespeare's warning about the cost of being over ambitious.

Another consequence of Macbeth's actions is his descent into blood and further murders. It's a path that he cannot turn back on once he has begun and he makes this clear in Act 3 Scene 4 when he says "blood will have blood". The spilling of blood simply leads to more blood being spilt. Later in the same scene, Macbeth says, "I am in blood stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er." This is a poignant image of Macbeth, wading through a river of blood and realising that he may as well keep going as returning to what he was before. Again, Shakespeare is showing the consequences of unchecked ambition.

Ultimately, Macbeth undergoes a brief revival at the end of the play. For this play to be a tragedy, the main protagonist or central character must be a tragic hero and fall from a high position (socially) because of some tragic flaw (hamartia) within themselves. In *Macbeth*, the main protagonist decides to kill the king to fulfill his ambitions and this leads to his downfall.

These elements of tragedy and the tragic hero stem from Aristotle's *Poetics* and were developed by the critic A.C. Bradley to further explore Shakespeare's tragedies and tragic heroes in particular. In order to fit the mould of a tragic hero then, it's important that Shakespeare creates some sympathy for Macbeth, some re-establishing of his former glory before he dies. He does this through showing Macbeth in Act 5 deciding to fight against the invading English army despite the fact that he is woefully outnumbered and destined to fail. It is this bravery, in the face of certain defeat that restores Macbeth in some people's eyes to his former glory. It is very difficult, as a modern audience, to ignore all of Macbeth's evil deeds throughout the course of the play but, if you consider it from an Elizabethan and Jacobean perspective, there is glory in his refusal to give in and allow "the rabble" to bait him. He is noble after all and not a commoner and his line in Act 5 Scene 5, "Blow, wind! Come, wrack! At least we'll die with harness on our back" is fitting of a tragic hero.

Aside from seeing the play *Macbeth* as a cautionary tale about the dangers of ambition, there are other ways of looking at the character of Macbeth, especially if we consider Shakespeare's intentions when writing the play. As we know from the Introduction, the play was written in the same year that the Gunpowder Plot (a plot to assassinate King James I) was foiled. Shakespeare, as one of the King's Men and a servant to the court, wrote a play that supports the traditions and the established hierarchies of the court and the crown. As you will remember from the introduction also, Shakespeare was writing at a time of change when ideas about authority, rules and man's place within the world were changing. From this perspective, we can see Macbeth as an example of what happens when you try to take fate into your own hands and go against the chain of being and established order.

Macbeth, as a Thane and one of Duncan's most trusted generals, has a very privileged position. Generally, the crown passed down to a King's eldest son. In Scotland, as a consequence of bloody wars, there was an exception made and a King was allowed to choose his successor – it didn't have to be his son. Macbeth expects Duncan to choose him and, when he doesn't, plots to kill him. Shakespeare is writing the play in support of the monarchy and in support of the idea of Kingship and so, he makes an example of Macbeth and shows what happens when you step outside of your pre-ordained role within society. Macbeth has contravened the established rules and traditions. He is not being loyal to his king or his country, he is simply being loyal to his own ambition, something that Shakespeare cannot condone.

Looking at Macbeth in this light, we see that all the things that befall him are the consequences of his individualism and his selfishness. In Act 3 Scene 4 he says, "for mine own good / All causes shall give way". Life, Shakespeare appears to be saying, has meaning only within the roles decided for us by god and, by extension, the King. Macbeth cannot be happy once he steps outside his position. To go against the establishment for selfish individualism is to open the door to chaos, evil and, ultimately, death.

Finally, another way to look at the character of Macbeth is as an exploration of masculinity. We have, at the beginning, the presentation of Macbeth in stereotypically masculine terms. He is described as "carving" his way through the men on the battlefield and "unseaming" the rebel lord, Macdonwald. Macbeth is powerful, warrior-like and manly. The closeness exhibited with his wife in the letter she reads in Act 1 Scene 5 as well as the dominance she shows in their subsequent scenes together changes the picture somewhat. How can Macbeth be presented as a warrior on one hand and yet almost afraid of his wife on the other? His reluctance to kill the king, indecision before the act and his suffering afterwards are all signs of his weakness or as Lady Macbeth puts it, his excess of "human kindness". So within Macbeth there are two types of masculinity. The stereotypical one that surrounds ideas of violence and cruelty. When Lady Macbeth asks the spirits to "unsex her" and fill her with "direst cruelty" it's so that she

can be manly enough to kill Duncan. When Macbeth is trying to encourage the murderers to kill Banquo, they respond with “we are men my liege”.

When Macbeth is trying to fend off his wife’s bullying he says “I dare do all that may become a man” and when Lady Macbeth is trying to goad her husband into killing Duncan, she attacks his manhood: “Are you a man?” and “When you durst do it, then you were a man”. And the other type of masculinity that is rational, kind and decent. This is exhibited when Macbeth lists the reasons he shouldn’t kill the King. Chief among them is that he is a man, not simply that he is the king. We also see this side of Macbeth in his closeness with his wife as well as his regrets in Act 5.

Macbeth then is torn between these competing types of masculinity. He eventually goes against the kindness in his own heart and resorts to the stereotypical presentation of masculinity and this ends up being his downfall.