

Macbeth

First performed in 1606, Macbeth is a very popular play created by the famous playwright, William Shakespeare. Several of Shakespeare's plays are witty comedies, but Macbeth is a dark and terrible story, and is an example of a tragic play. The story is set in wild and war-torn Scotland around the same time the Vikings existed. Imagine yourself in a theatre. As the audience grows quiet and the lights become dim, the stage curtain rises. Everything begins with three mysterious witches...

'When shall we three meet again; in thunder, lightning or in rain?'

A roll of thunder booms and a fork of lightning flashes brightly in the darkness. In a secret and lonely place the trio of cackling witches gather. They seek Macbeth.

'We will wait until the warrior's battles are lost and won,' they quickly decide, 'before the setting of the sun, we will approach him as he travels homeward.'

Macbeth and his loyal friend, Banquo, are both experienced generals in King Duncan's Scottish army. They have been bravely fighting in two long wars against Irish and Norwegian invaders, and they have finally been victorious! Weary and battle-scarred, but pleased with their success, they are slowly heading home. A mysterious and dark storm swirls strangely around them, soaking them to the skin and nearly blinding them. As they continue to trudge through the bitterly heavy rain, they catch sight of three shapes slowly appearing in front of them. Finally the shapes become clear... The three witches have arrived.

'Greetings to Macbeth, soon to be Lord of Cawdor!' one of the ugly witches announces shrilly to the soldiers and the storm.

'Greetings to Macbeth, who will be King soon after!' cries another cackling voice through the rain.

Macbeth and Banquo look at each other, puzzled. Who on earth are these witches? How could they possibly know the future? Will their predictions actually prove to be true? Macbeth is so astounded by their claims, that for a moment, he is speechless! Banquo, however, is bolder. Intrigued, he steps forward bravely.

'And what about me, you weird witches?' demands Banquo, eagerly. 'If you really can predict the future, tell me what lies ahead for me! I am not afraid.'

Did you know?

It is thought to be unlucky to say the word 'Macbeth' in a theatre. People call it 'The Scottish Play' instead!

'Your future... Hmm... Not so happy but also much happier!' proclaim the witches cryptically. 'You shall never be King, but your family will rule Scotland!'

Macbeth drags himself out of his shocked silence, desperate to ask more questions. But like smoke caught in the wind, the witches quickly vanish

without another word, and Macbeth's cries for answers are lost in the storm. Wondering at what they have just encountered, the two baffled men begin to march home again.

Distracted by the questions flashing through their minds, they nearly miss the sound of approaching horses. Messengers from King Duncan arrive with some incredible news; the King has replaced the traitorous old Lord of Cawdor with Macbeth! Macbeth is completely astounded - the wild and weird witches are right! Will all their predictions come true? Will he actually be crowned as King? Macbeth hastily scribbles a brief letter to his wife to explain the astonishing situation.

'Is this a dagger which I see before me, the handle toward my hand?'

A little while later, Macbeth and Banquo return triumphantly to the gates of Macbeth's home, with King Duncan as their honoured guest. But the welcome is not as pleasant as it first appears. Lady Macbeth has read the letter and is consumed by evil desires, which she secretly explains to Macbeth.

'Kill Duncan tonight and claim the throne!' she whispers urgently. 'Don't hesitate. No one will uncover the truth if we are careful, and you will be crowned as King!'

At first, Macbeth is unsure and resists the idea, but his wife keeps pressuring him and eventually, he agrees to murder the King. Macbeth and his wife create an evil and cunning plot, and despite seeing a worrying vision of a bloody dagger, Macbeth decides to put the plan into action. Lady Macbeth gets the King's servants drunk, and once they are asleep Macbeth creeps silently into the slumbering King's bedroom like a hunter stalking his prey. Tightly grasping the servants' knives, Macbeth stands ready over the King's bed. An owl shrieks in the night. The King takes one...last... breath...

When the body is discovered, Macbeth immediately declares the guilt of the two servants and kills them, pretending he is outraged at Duncan's death. The murdered King has two sons called Malcolm and Donalbain who fear for their lives and quickly flee to England and Ireland, respectively. With no heir to claim King Duncan's throne, Macbeth is crowned as the new King of Scotland! The witches are right a second time! Rather than celebrating, however, Macbeth is more worried than ever. If the witches were right about him, could they be right about Banquo's children ruling over Scotland? Will they challenge or even kill Macbeth? Terrified, Macbeth hires some tough men to ambush Banquo and his son Fleance on the way to a feast. Banquo is killed but Fleance escapes. When he finds out his plan has failed, Macbeth is even more scared and soon comes face to face with the grisly sight of Banquo's ghost! His guests begin to wonder if he is losing his mind.

'Double, double toil and trouble; fire burn and cauldron bubble.'

Macbeth is now desperately seeking help and advice. Searching for answers, he hurries to find the three witches, finally discovering them in a huge cave which gapes like a dark mouth in the side of a mountain. The gruesome trio are busily chanting and throwing strange ingredients into a mysterious, bubbling cauldron.

'Help me!' begs Macbeth breathlessly, his wide eyes reflecting the witches' flickering fire. Slowly and carefully, the witches add yet more disgusting items to their potion. Colourful smoke begins to pour from the pot as one by one, three strange creatures rise from it. Each one delivers Macbeth a different message.

'Beware Macduff, the Lord of Fife!' moans the first creature loudly. Macbeth is worried and rushes to ask a question, but he is instantly silenced by the witches.

'You can't be hurt by any man who has been born from a woman!' screeches the second creature as it appears with a hiss from the hot liquid. Macbeth is understandably pleased. Surely this means he will never be hurt or killed! Whom should he fear now? Let Macduff do what he pleases!

'You are safe until the forest marches to your castle!' laughs the third creature wildly, and Macbeth is happier still. Everybody knows that trees do not move!

But his happiness is short lived. Before he can protest, the witches produce a vision of many golden-crowned kings in a line, followed by Banquo's grinning ghost. These are the rulers of Scotland who will come from Banquo's family! Macbeth becomes bitter and angry, shouting at the witches as they vanish, cursing his terrible visit. His rage grows quickly, burning like a forest fire until it consumes him. He orders that Macduff's home be attacked and everyone found there, killed.

Did you know?

Shakespeare wrote 'Macbeth' when King James I ruled England and Scotland. King James thought he was descended from Banquo.

Could King James be one of the kings shown by the witches? Some people think Shakespeare put that vision in the play to make himself popular with the King!

Macduff, meanwhile, has seen how evil and dangerous Macbeth has become and without suspecting what Macbeth has planned, he flees to England to find an army. He plans to make Scotland safe again by killing Macbeth. Soon he reaches Duncan's son, Malcolm, who is living as a guest of King Edward (of England) and has gathered an army with the help of an English lord. While the two of them are talking, however, a sorrowful messenger arrives bearing terrible news. Macduff's family have been captured and horribly murdered by Macbeth's soldiers.

'Macbeth deserves to die for all the evil deeds he has done!' cries Malcolm angrily. 'Let your grief drive you to kill him!'

'We will fight Macbeth together!' howls Macduff, tears of rage and sorrow filling his eyes. The pair set out, hungry for revenge, marching swiftly with thousands of hard men to Scotland, to fight Macbeth.

'Behold, where stands the usurper's cursed head'

Macbeth remains in Scotland, waiting for his enemies and improving his strong castle. Lady Macbeth is consumed with worries that their crimes will be discovered and avenged, and soon her anxiety drives her mad. She is seen sleepwalking, muttering fearfully to herself and scrubbing at her hands, convinced they are covered in bloodstains which she cannot wash off. Full of pain and guilt, she dies, and when Macbeth hears what has happened he is almost overcome by hopelessness, wondering if there is any point in being alive. But he is still brave and refuses to give in, certain that the witches' messages mean he will survive.

Then, in the distance, a sight is seen which terrifies the murderous King. Beating drums and pounding footsteps begin to shake the ground. Malcolm and Macduff are leading their huge army towards Macbeth's fortress. To disguise how many soldiers are with them, the two leaders have cut down some nearby woodland and insisted that every man carry a leafy tree branch in front of them. The forest is advancing on Macbeth's castle! Fear feels like a cold and heavy stone in the King's chest. But still he clings to one, final hope. No man can harm him! The witches said so! They have been right about everything else!

'The only weapon which brings me any fear is the sword carried by a motherless man!' screams Macbeth desperately.

The two armies smash together in a huge and horrible battle. Macbeth is like a whirlwind, slashing, cutting, easily defeating every soldier he faces. Macduff is on the hunt, searching eagerly for him, wanting revenge. In the heart of the battle, the two enemies finally come face to face.

'Don't even bother attempting to fight me! You might as well hack at the air! I can't be wounded by any man who has been born!' laughs Macbeth confidently.

'Ha! Then now is the time for fear to fill you! I was not born the normal way!' Macduff shouts scornfully over the crashing and clashing of weapons and armour.

Macbeth's final hope is dead, and he knows that soon he will be too. With a desperate cry he charges wildly at Macduff. Their swords and shields smash together violently! Their epic fight rages all over the castle until eventually, Macduff beats Macbeth to the floor. With a howl of victory and a swing of his sword, he chops off Macbeth's head. The witches are proved right for the last time!

Macbeth

Put these events in the order that they happen in the story.

- A. Macbeth is killed.
- B. Macbeth and Banquo see the witches.
- C. Macbeth's wife goes mad.
- D. Macbeth kills the king.
- E. Macbeth sees the witches.

The witches only say one thing to Banquo, but it scares Macbeth.

1. Why would Macbeth be worried about Banquo's children becoming kings?

2. Why would Fleance's escape make Macbeth even more scared?

Why does Macbeth go to the witches for a second time?

In the whole play the witches say that six things will happen or be true in the future.

1. What is the sixth thing they say?

2. What happens which shows the sixth thing they say is true?

Macbeth is a play full of interesting characters.

1. Who do you think is the best or nicest character in the play? Why?

2. Who do you think is the worst or meanest character in the play? Why?

Two of these sentences about the story are true and two are false. Put 'True' or 'False' next to the right sentences.

- A. The story takes place in Ireland. _____
- B. William Shakespeare wrote the play. _____
- C. Macduff was not born the normal way. _____
- D. Macbeth kills Macduff. _____

In this story the writer shows that every time a person decides to do something, other things happen because of what they do. What do you think is the biggest decision made by a character in the story? Why is the decision so important? Remember to think about what the decision leads to.

Whose body is found before Macbeth blames the servants?

The text you have just read does not just tell a story. Find and explain one way that the writer has used a different type of writing.

When she is speaking to Macbeth about killing King Duncan, Macbeth's wife 'whispers' to him. What does the word 'whispers' tell you about the plan and how she is feeling?

Using the right tense is very important as a writer. Different tenses change how readers understand a text.

1. What tense has the writer used when telling the actual story of Macbeth?

2. How does using this tense help to make a reader feel like they are in a theatre watching the play?

Tick one word from the list which you think best describes Macbeth. Find and copy a sentence from the text and explain why you chose your word.

- A. cruel
- B. clever
- C. foolish
- D. weak-minded
- E. strong-minded

'Behold, where stands the usurper's cursed head'.

Read the last section of the story again. Who do you think the 'cursed head' belonged to?

What does the word 'trudge' tell you about Macbeth and Banquo as they walk through the storm?

'With no heir to claim King Duncan's throne Macbeth is crowned as the new King of Scotland!'

1. What is an 'heir'?
2. Which famous person has an heir in Britain today?

Find and explain one way which the writer creates suspense and tension when describing the scene where King Duncan is murdered.

Macbeth

Put these events in the order that they happen in the story.

- | | |
|--|---|
| A. Macbeth is killed. | 5 |
| B. Macbeth and Banquo see the witches. | 1 |
| C. Macbeth's wife goes mad. | 4 |
| D. Macbeth kills the king. | 2 |
| E. Macbeth sees the witches. | 3 |

The witches only say one thing to Banquo, but it scares Macbeth.

1. Why would Macbeth be worried about Banquo's children becoming kings? **The other things the witches said have come true. If Banquo's children are going to become kings, they will have to get rid of Macbeth and his children.**
2. Why would Fleance's escape make Macbeth even more scared? **Fleance escaping means that there is still a chance that what the witches said will come true. There is still someone from Banquo's family who could become king, and who might kill Macbeth to do it.**

Why does Macbeth go to the witches for a second time? **He needs their help and is worried.**

In the whole play the witches say that six things will happen or be true in the future.

1. What is the sixth thing they say? **That Macbeth is safe until trees move towards his castle.**
2. What happens which shows the sixth thing they say is true? **Macduff and Malcolm's army arrives at Macbeth's castle carrying tree branches.**

Macbeth is a play full of interesting characters.

1. Who do you think is the best or nicest character in the play? Why? **Various answers; must be justified.**
2. Who do you think is the worst or meanest character in the play? Why? **Various answers; must be justified.**

Two of these sentences about the story are true and two are false. Put 'True' or 'False' next to the right sentences.

- A. The story takes place in Ireland. **False**
- B. William Shakespeare wrote the play. **True**
- C. Macduff was not born the normal way. **True**
- D. Macbeth kills Macduff. **False**

In this story the writer shows that every time a person decides to do something, other things happen because of what they do. What do you think is the biggest decision made by a character in the story? Why is the decision so important? Remember to think about what the decision leads to. **Various answers; must be justified.**

Whose body is found before Macbeth blames the servants? **King Duncan's body**

The text you have just read does not just tell a story. Find and explain one way that the writer has used a different type of writing. **The writer has written a factual/non-fiction introduction before starting the fictional narrative. The writer has included quotations from the play.**

When she is speaking to Macbeth about killing King Duncan, Macbeth's wife 'whispers' to him. What does the word 'whispers' tell you about the plan and how she is feeling? **She wants the plan to remain a secret and is nervous/concerned about being overheard and discovered. She knows how terrible it would be for their treachery to be discovered.**

Using the right tense is very important as a writer. Different tenses change how readers understand a text.

1. What tense has the writer used when telling the actual story of Macbeth? **Present tense**

2. How does using this tense help to make a reader feel like they are in a theatre watching the play? **The story is presented as happening live before the reader in real time, just as the action and dialogue of a play takes place in front of an audience live.**

Tick one word from the list which you think best describes Macbeth. Find and copy a sentence from the text and explain why you chose your word.

- A. cruel
- B. clever
- C. foolish
- D. weak-minded
- E. strong-minded

Any selection is valid as long as it is justified by the copied sentence and explanation.

'Behold, where stands the usurper's cursed head'.

Read the last section of the story again. Who do you think the 'cursed head' belonged to?

Macbeth

What does the word 'trudge' tell you about Macbeth and Banquo as they walk through the storm? **Various answers possible along the lines of the following: they are tired; they are finding it slow and tedious to walk through the storm; they are discouraged by the harshness of the weather; they are determined to get home and have set their minds to keeping going in spite of their weariness and the weather.**

'With no heir to claim King Duncan's throne Macbeth is crowned as the new King of Scotland!'

- 1. What is an 'heir'? **A person who is entitled to become King or Queen when the previous monarch dies.**
- 2. Which famous person has an heir in Britain today? **The Queen**

Find and explain one way which the writer creates suspense and tension when describing the scene where King Duncan is murdered. **Various answers; must be justified. Some examples: short sentences; use of ellipses to mimic the King's breathing; others are possible.**