

SUBJECT: English Literature

UNIT: Macbeth



Context

King James I - James I had been James VI of Scotland before he succeeded to the English throne in 1603. In focusing on Macbeth, a figure from Scottish history, Shakespeare paid homage to his king's Scottish lineage. Additionally, the witches' prophecy that Banquo will found a line of kings is a clear nod to James' family's claim to have descended from the historical Banquo.

Witchcraft and Daemonologie - King James was convinced that a group of witches were plotting to bring about his death and played an active role in the North Berwick witch trials. He later published *Daemonologie* in 1597. Charges of witchcraft continued in Great Britain, with Scotland in particular experiencing a number of witch hunt crazes throughout the 17th century.

Plot

Act 1

Macbeth and Banquo meet witches, previous Cawdor executed, Lady M reads letter then manipulates husband, Duncan arrives

Act 2

Macbeth contemplates murder, sees dagger, Kills Duncan, Malcolm flees, Macbeth crowned.

Act 3

Banquo suspects Macbeth, Banquo murdered but Fleance escapes, Banquo's ghost appears at banquet

Act 4

Macbeth goes back to witches, Macduff's family murdered while Macduff is in England, Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty

Act 5

Lady M sleepwalks then commits suicide, Macbeth prepares for battle, Macduff kills Macbeth, Malcolm becomes king

Vocabulary

Macbeth: ambitious, courageous, deceitful, impulsive, ruthless, treasonous, tyrannical, zealous

Lady Macbeth: cunning, dominant, emasculating, malevolent, mutinous, powerful, scheming, vulnerable

Banquo: devoted, intuitive, loyal, trustworthy, virtuous

Duncan: benevolent, faithful, honest, naïve, sincere

Macduff: devout, fervent, heroic, merciless, patriotic, unwavering

Witches: corrupt, ignoble, manipulative, sinister, subversive

The audience feel...

Astonished

Bewildered

Disgusted

Disquieted

Distressed

Nonplussed

Perturbed

Scandalised

Surprised

Unnerved

Unsettled

Content

Key quotes

Witches: Fair is foul and foul is fair (1.1)

Macbeth: Stars, hide your fires/Let not light see my black and deep desires (1.4)

Lady Macbeth: Unsex me here (1.5)

Macbeth: Is this a dagger which I see before me? (2.1)

Lady Macbeth: My hands are of your colour but I shame to wear a heart so white (2.2)

Macbeth: Full of scorpions is my mind dear wife (3.2)

Macbeth: Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck (3.2)

Blood will have blood (3.4)

Witch: By the pricking of my thumbs/something wicked this way comes (4.1)

Malcolm: This tyrant whose sole name blisters our tongue was once thought honest (4.3)

Lady Macbeth: All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand (5.1)

Macbeth: Life's but a walking shadow (5.5)

Macbeth: I bear a charmed life (5.8)

Motifs

Blood

Sleep and dreams

Light and dark

Nature

Dramatic devices

Soliloquy – One character speaking to the audience

Dramatic irony – Audience knows more than characters

Hamartia – Fatal flaw which leads to tragic hero's downfall

Hubris – Excessive pride

Peripeteia – Sudden reversal of fortune

Themes

Fate and free will – 'If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me'

Ambition – 'vaulting ambition'

Appearance and reality – 'look like th' innocent flower, but be the serpent under't'

Supernatural – 'double double toil and trouble'