

WORK SHEET FOR MR AND MRS MACBETH

Shakespeare's source for the story:

As far as we can tell Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* between 1603 and 1606. The action of the play takes place over 500 years earlier, in around 1047.

Shakespeare borrowed the story from Holinshed's *Chronicles*, a popular history of the British Isles known to Shakespeare and his contemporaries. However *Macbeth* is viewed as a tragedy and not a history play as Shakespeare made many changes to the characters and events.

In *Chronicles*, for example, Macbeth and Banquo plot the murder of the King together. Critics think that Shakespeare made Banquo an innocent man in his version of the story because he was thought to be a direct ancestor of their current King: James the First. To portray the king's ancestor as a murderer would have risked offending the King. Secondly, Shakespeare may have altered Banquo's character simply because there was no dramatic need for another accomplice to the murder; there was, however, a need to give a contrast to Macbeth—a role which many scholars argue is filled by Banquo in the play.

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Themes:

There are many themes in the play which you can identify from the text and quote specific lines to illustrate your points. Here are just three to think about and discuss:

❖ **AMBITION**

We see ambition in both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Once Macbeth relates the witches' prophecies they are both tempted by the idea of Macbeth becoming King.

Macbeth considers just waiting to see if the prophecy is fulfilled:

"if chance will have me king then chance may crown me without my stir".

But Lady Macbeth urges him on to action. She says he is a coward if he won't do anything to bring the prophecy about. *"when you dared do it then you were a man"*.

But their ambition leads to evil. It's important to note that Macbeth is a good man and a brave soldier at the start of the play. But once the prophecies are given he falls into the trap set by the witches and considers evil deeds. The Macbeths' ambition makes them stronger and more determined to start with but in the end it destroys them.

Ambition is seen to be a bad thing when it is not governed by moral restraint.

❖ **THE SUPERNATURAL**

In the play Shakespeare explores the idea that there are mysterious forces controlling our lives. The first characters we see in the play are the witches and it is their prophecies which kick-start the action.

In Shakespeare's time people believed in witches and some people were burned at the stake after having been tortured until they confessed.

By dealing with the witches Macbeth is dealing with the forces of darkness. The audience would have taken this idea very seriously and felt that Macbeth was somehow possessed. There are lots of references to this - he is unable to say '*Amen*', he has visions, he is disturbed and even thinks no-one can kill him.

The witches prophecies are ambiguous, more like riddles. They appear to be giving Macbeth information but what they say is open to many interpretations, as Macbeth finds out to his cost. Perhaps Shakespeare is warning us that the forces of darkness are not to be trusted, they may appear to promise great things whilst in fact be working to destroy us.

❖ GUILT

Macbeth clearly suffers from guilt in the play. He is unsure before the murder and regrets it immediately after. Lady Macbeth seems to show no guilt at the time and even talks about how '*a little water*' cleans away the blood but her increasing madness later on is a sign of her guilt tormenting her as she imagines her hands to be stained with blood. They are both tortured by guilt and remorse for what they have done. Lady Macbeth ends up sleep-walking and replaying the bloody murder over and over again: "*out, out damn spot*" and Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo, the man he has just had murdered.

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Here are some important parts of the text to read and talk about:

Lady Macbeth

Come, you spirits

That 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;

Stop up the access and passage to remorse,

That no compunctious visitings of nature

Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between

The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,

And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,

Wherever in your sightless substances

You wait on nature's mischief! 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!'"

(Macbeth, Act I, Scene V)

Discussion questions:

- Why does Lady Macbeth call on the spirits to “unsex” her? Is she making a link between masculinity and aggression?
- Does her behaviour show that women can be just as ambitious and brutal as men?
- In this speech it sounds like Lady Macbeth thinks she could commit the murder herself. Why do you think she does not kill King Duncan? Why does she manipulate Macbeth into doing it? Is she a coward? Or is she constrained by society's view of what women can do?
- Do you think Shakespeare is saying that women are the cause of all the evil in the play? Would Macbeth have been fine without the interference of the witches and Lady Macbeth? Some critics have said the play is misogynist. Do you agree?

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Macbeth

*Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going;
And such an instrument I was to use.
Mine eyes are made the fools o'the other senses,
Or else worth all the rest; I see thee still,
And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,
Which was not so before. There's no such thing:
It is the bloody business which informs
Thus to mine eyes.
(Macbeth Act 2, Scene I)*

Discussion questions:

- An important technique in *Macbeth* is the use of **soliloquies**. These are speeches but they are meant to be heard only by the audience. They tell us directly about a character's inner thoughts and feelings. What does this soliloquy reveal about Macbeth's state of mind just before the murder?
- Why do you think Shakespeare wants us to know what Macbeth is thinking?

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Macduff

*The night has been unruly: where we lay,
Our chimneys were blown down; and, as they say,
Lamentings heard in the air; strange screams of death,
And prophesying with accents terrible
Of dire combustion and confused events
some say, the earth
Was feverous and did shake.
(Macbeth Act 2, Scene III)*

Discussion questions:

- Why do you think Macduff tells us this story of the horrible night?
- We know what Macduff does not when he tells us this: that Macbeth was murdering the King at the very same time. This is an example of dramatic irony. How does this make us feel?
- Is Shakespeare telling us that murdering a King is such an unnatural act that it's caused terrible upheaval in the natural world?
- How do you think Macbeth feels when he hears about these terrible and unnatural events? Do you think he should take them as a warning about the terrifying powers he has unleashed?

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Lady Macbeth

Out, damned spot! out, I say!--One: two: why, then, 'tis time to do't.--Hell is murky!--Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?--Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him.

The thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now?--What, will these hands ne'er be clean?--No more o' that, my lord, no more o' that: you mar all with this starting.

Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!

Wash your hands, put on your nightgown; look not so pale.--I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot come out on's grave.

(Macbeth Act 5, Scene I)

Discussion questions:

- Why is Lady Macbeth sleep-walking?
- What does she see on her hands?
- She talks about 3 murdered people in this speech, who are they?
- Do you feel sorry for Lady Macbeth now that she is tortured by guilt?

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Macbeth

*To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.
(Macbeth Act 5, Scene V)*

Discussion questions:

- Macbeth makes this speech when he hears that Lady Macbeth has died. What do you think he is feeling?
- Some critics think he is saying that life is futile and without meaning. Do you agree?
- If Macbeth believes that life is meaningless does that help him to excuse his horrible crimes rather than face up to them? It might be comforting to think his crimes will be forgotten.
- Macbeth says that life is just “ a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage”. Does this remind us that we are watching a play? Why do you think that Shakespeare chooses this moment to remind us that what we’re seeing is not real?