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Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Macbeth

by William Shakespeare

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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Macbeth

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. trace the development of Macbeth's character in the play. Identify how and why he changes, his motivations, and salient personality features.
2. trace the mental and emotional make-up of Lady Macbeth. Identify her actions, motivations, and personality features.
3. identify the ways Macbeth is a tragic hero. Discuss whether or not he has a tragic flaw, and identify what it is if he has one.
4. define dramatic irony and identify how it is used in the play.
5. explain the meaning of "fair is foul, and foul is fair," identify where this motif/theme arises, and explain why it is important to the play.
6. identify the various types of rulers that appear in the play, and contrast the characteristics of the good or legitimate rulers with the evil, tyrannical rule of Macbeth.
7. explain to what extent Macbeth is controlled by fate and to what extent he exercises his own free will. Give examples of where this theme arises in the text, and explain why it is important to play.
8. analyze the importance of the Witches to the play, how they contribute to the overall tone of the play, how they affect the plot, and what they symbolize.
9. identify the ways various characters define masculinity and femininity. Explain how those definitions affect each character's actions and what definition of masculinity the play seems to endorse.
10. analyze the important role of the weather in setting the tone of play and supporting various themes.
11. understand the role of women in play. Explain how various female characters influence Macbeth, and to what extent women are portrayed as the root of chaos or evil.
12. identify how Macbeth has upset the natural order by murdering the rightful king. Explain how bizarre natural occurrences support this theme.

Macbeth

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. The phrase, “Fair is foul, and foul is fair,” first used by the Witches, becomes a major theme of the play. Identify parts of the play that echo the phrase, and examine its meaning as it applies to various characters and events.
2. Explain whether Macbeth is controlled by fate or exercises his own free will. Cite examples from the text to support your conclusion.
3. Discuss the role of the Witches in the play. What is the nature of their power in regards to Macbeth’s fate? Be sure to discuss the prophecies and the ways in which they come to be fulfilled. What might the Witches symbolize?
4. Discuss how various characters define masculinity throughout the play. How and why do some characters experience a challenge to their masculinity? What conception of masculinity does the play seem to embrace?
5. What characteristics did Duncan possess that made him a great king? Which of Macbeth’s characteristics made him a tyrant? What other examples of kings arise in the play?
6. The killing of King Duncan by Macbeth is presented as an unnatural act in the play. State why the Elizabethans would have considered regicide an act against nature, and point out how this idea is reinforced by comments and incidents throughout the story.
7. Discuss the role of women in Macbeth. To what extent are women portrayed as manipulative and wicked? As good and virtuous? How do the women in the play compare with one another? How do they affect Macbeth?
8. Identify the metaphors of plants used throughout the play, and discuss their meanings. Explain how the plant metaphors specifically relate to Macbeth.
9. Discuss the irony of Macbeth becoming the Thane of Cawdor, considering the former Thane’s actions and his ultimate fate. Be sure to discuss the description of the former Thane’s death and how it relates to Macbeth’s own death.
10. Identify the various ways characters are murdered by Macbeth in the play, and how those changing methods relate to Macbeth’s evolving character.
11. Babies and children, whether real, illusory, or metaphorical, arise frequently in the play. Identify those moments when children appear and analyze their larger symbolism. What are their common points and how do they differ?

Macbeth

Act I, Scene I

Vocabulary

anon – soon
ere – before
heath – a tract of open land with sparse vegetation
hurlyburly – turmoil

1. When are the witches planning to meet again and for what purpose?

2. Describe the setting of this scene. How might it be significant considering this is the first scene of the play? What sort of mood does it create?

3. The witches say together, “Fair is foul, and foul is fair.” This is one of the most famous lines in *Macbeth*. What do you think it means?

Act I, Scene V

Vocabulary

beguile – deceive
dispatch – management
dunest – darkest
favor – facial expression
fell – cruel
gall – bile
metaphysical – supernatural
missives – messengers
pall – cover
sightless – invisible
sovereign – absolute

1. After Lady Macbeth finishes reading the letter, she says Macbeth, “shalt be” what he has been promised, meaning King of Scotland. Why is this comment significant?

2. After Lady Macbeth finishes reading the letter, what concern does she express about Macbeth?

3. Why does Lady Macbeth want her husband to hurry home?

Act II, Scene II

Vocabulary

charge – duty
confounds – ruins
constancy – strength of will
gild – to cover with gold leaf
grooms – guards
incarnadine – to make red
infirm – weakness
multitudinous – vast
possets – drinks of milk and liquor
purpose – a will
surfeited – overindulged
unbend – to loosen
watchers – awake
witness – evidence

1. What has Lady Macbeth done to the guards?

2. Why does Lady Macbeth not commit the murder when she is in the room?

3. Macbeth enters and describes what he saw and heard. She tells him, “These deeds must not be thought/After these ways.” Why?

Act IV, Scene I

Vocabulary

amazedly – entranced
anticipatest – prevents
bladed – unripe
blood-bolter'd – matted with blood
bodements – prophecies
brinded – striped
chaudron – entrails
drab – a whore
farrow – a litter
fenny – a swamp
fillet – a slice
firstlings – first thoughts
germens – seed
gibbet – the gallows
glass – a mirror
gulf – a throat
harp'd – guessed
hedge-pig – hedgehog
impress – to compel
issue – the shape
lodged – beaten down
o'ertook – accomplished
office – purpose
ravin'd – ravenous
sicken – to become engorged
slab – viscous
sliver'd – cut off
slope – to let fall
sprites – spirits
start – to burst; bulge
swelter'd – exuded
treble – triple
warders – guards
yeasty – foamy

1. How would you characterize Macbeth's behavior as he interacts with the Witches?
