

What is a witch? macbeth essay sample

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What is a witch? The Collins Gem Dictionary and Thesaurus defines a witch as a person, usually female believed to practise (black) magic. It also goes on to describe a witch to be an ugly, wicked and fascinating woman.

In most places of the world today, witches are thought to be make-believe, but in the time of Macbeth they were very much real. There were said to be two main types of witches, the first, lonely old women who made medicines from herbs and kept pets for company. The second were women who believed they had powers, and took the medicines/mixtures, therefore hallucinating, and they believed this to be the power of the devil. Many of them often believed they had had sex with the devil.

The witches play an important part in the play of “ Macbeth” and are featured in the very first scene. Act 1 Scene1 is short but gives us an introduction to the witches and the play.

The scene starts off with Witch1 saying, “ When shall we three meet again....”. This makes us think of what has been happening beforehand. Witch1 then goes on to say, “ In thunder, lightning or in rain?” This shows that the witches are always the opposite of our normal standards. I doubt any of us would want to meet in thunder lightning or in rain. They seem to speak in riddles and contradict themselves, such as, “ When the battle is lost and won.” They meet in secluded places away from normal people and they mention Macbeth before he is introduced in the play. This already links Macbeth to the witches. They mention their pets; these are usually cats or toads that are the witches’ companions and share the witches’ powers

(powers of transport). They end the scene with another contradiction and then vanish into the mist, (they do have the power to vanish).

The witches next appear in Act 1 Scene 3, and straightaway they mention “killing swine”. They probably do this for pleasure like we play golf or watch football. They then go on to talk about sinking a ship, the ship being a metaphor for Scotland. We are shown that the witches do not have the power to sink the ‘ship’ or kill the man they mention, “Though his bark cannot be lost, Yet it shall be tempest-tost.” This shows that the witches do not have supreme power; if they did they would be able to ‘sink’ the ‘ship’ and not just toss it about. They then go on to dance in a ring and continually mention the numbers three and nine, these being magic numbers, along with seven, but three and nine especially. Macbeth then enters along with Banquo.

This is the third scene and it is the first time we meet the tragic hero. Macbeth’s first line mimics that of the witches’ last line in the first scene, “So foul and fair a day I have not seen.” Yet this line is twisted and shows that Macbeth’s language is linked to the witches. Macbeth is very commanding and domineering in this scene, but at the end, he commands the witches to stay, yet they disappear. This shows that even when he is King though he isn’t yet, there are certain things he can’t control. The devil is the master of the witches. The witches hail Macbeth as thane of Glamis, of Cawdor and King hereafter. Macbeth is the thane of Glamis, but a man who is still alive holds the title of thane of Cawdor. As for being king, it is a possibility anyway, as a distant relative, but the king is erstwhile still alive and has two

sons. He is silent and stunned by these mere predictions. The witches go on to tell Banquo that though he himself won't be King, his children will be.

After the witches disappear, Macbeth is declared thane of Cawdor. He is stunned. The witches now have two out of three correct. What about three out of three?

We then meet Lady Macbeth in Act 1 Scene 5. Is she the fourth witch? I am not sure. She doesn't seem to have any reflection of God in her which indicates a lack of redemption, whereas Macbeth has his beautiful language. In this scene she shows she has a good chance of being labelled the fourth witch, when she decides that when the King visits, he will not leave alive. The raven is mentioned as it is black and its cry was meant to foretell death. She also calls upon her 'spirits'. She has quickly decided that the king won't leave alive. It is a male thing to murder which is why she says, "unsex me." She wants darkness for her murder which is why she says, "Come, thick night."

Lady Macbeth wears the trousers in this marriage, showing this when at the end of the scene she says, "Leave all the rest to me." A couple of scenes later King Duncan arrives and Lady Macbeth is on hyper drive. Macbeth does not want to commit the murder but Lady Macbeth convinces him to do it. She doesn't like failure and she immediately goes into the arrangements, as she is calculated and ready. Macbeth is very impressed. When the dead King is discovered by Macduff, the first thing Lady Macbeth says is, "What, in our house!" This is ironic because the very first thing you would naturally say would be 'By whom?' This gives the game away. I am quite convinced that

Lady Macbeth could be classed as the fourth witch, as I believe from the text that she wishes to be a witch and she bears an evil nature.

The three witches next appear in Act 3 Scene 5, and are meeting in thunder, 'Hecate', the head witch who was the goddess of witchcraft. We think this scene wasn't actually written by Shakespeare, but by someone after his time. Only one line is suspected to have been written by Shakespeare because of its sheer brilliance. The writer, momentarily, seems to have his finger on the human pulse: "And you all know security is mortals' chiefest enemy." This is spoken by Hecate in her main speech of the scene, in which she mentions Acheron, the river of the Underworld/dead. This captures perfectly people's worries and fears. It makes us feel insecure. If witches know our worries etc, they can hit us when we are down. How ironic that this brilliant line is spoken in such a dull and badly written scene! It is also ironic because today in the western world we feel insecure. We are frightened of anthrax, of terrorism, of flying. She ends her speech on a bit of a silly line, I quote, "Hark, I am called: my little spirit, see, sits in a foggy cloud, and stays for me." This feeds our main suspicion of the scene not being written by Shakespeare. The witches then exit.

The final scene in which the witches appear is Act 4 Scene 1. They rise from the midst of a fiery pit with a cauldron hanging above it. They are making a potion. Hecate then enters with the other three witches. She praises the witches for their work and tells them to sing around the cauldron and enchant the added ingredients. Her speech also does not seem to have been written by Shakespeare. There is then music and song and Hecate leaves.

The second witch then says, I quote, “ By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes.” This is similar to someone saying their ears are burning when someone is talking about them. The door opens and there stands Macbeth. They converse and they then show Macbeth four apparitions. The 1st represents Macbeth’s head at the end of the play. The 2nd Macduff’s child and children. The 3rd represents Malcolm and the fourth is only shown because Macbeth asks the witches whether Banquo will ever be King. After the 2nd apparition, the witches tell Macbeth that no man of women born shall harm him.

This makes him think he is invincible and is significant because at the end of the play, he is killed by Macduff. He did not think this could happen but Macduff was delivered by a caesarean section. The third apparition tells that Macbeth will never be vanquished until Great Birnam wood comes to high Dunsinane hill. Dunsinane hill is Macbeth’s castle, and Great Birnam wood is 10 miles away from this place. The fourth apparition shows a line of eight kings. Some of these carry two-fold balls and treble sceptres. The two-fold balls represent the uniting of England and Scotland, the treble sceptres represent England, Scotland and Wales. This also shows that James 1 descended from Banquo. James 1 would probably come to see the play, so Shakespeare is flattering him. He may be doing this to avoid persecution for being a Catholic. Shakespeare kept a low profile and carried favour with the king. The line of kings show that Banquo’s children will become kings, but none of Macbeth’s. The witches sing and dance and then vanish; are they doing this to mock Macbeth or cheer him up? I doubt the latter.

The witches play a very important part in the play of Macbeth. They give us clues to what is going to happen and they entertain us with their antics and their language. They portray a different world from ours and without them, the play would be nothing.