

# Discuss the representation of women in shakespeare's "macbeth" essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



## **Discuss the Representation of Women in Shakespeare's "Macbeth" Essay Sample**

In this assignment I'm going to present how Shakespeare represented women in Macbeth. The women that will be focusing on would be the three witches and Lady Macbeth. We will see how Shakespeare portrayed these women and how they played a significant part in Macbeth.

We are first introduced to the witches in Act 1, Scene 1 to 3. Our first impression of the witches are that they are quite powerful as they harness a lot of power as we are shown in the first scene where they have the power to control the weather. The witches are in control, the weather is changeable as one says "when shall we meet again, in thunder, lightning or in rain?" The atmosphere also reflects the witches, as the weather is very dismal with "thunder and lightning" this presents negative weather. The variable weather also suggests that they can create intense chaos. Thunder is almost an indication for the witches' entrance; as thunder implies evil and confused power. The scene starts in an open place which has no boundaries this implies that the witches have no boundaries to what they can do whereas we humans do have limits. Shakespeare portrays the witches as strange and unearthly creatures as Banquo questions them to be human as he says "that look not like th' inhabitants o' the earth". Banquo also says "upon her skinny lips: you should be women, and yet your beards forbid me to interpret" which implies that they are very unattractive and they are a subverting gender stereotypes.

The witches use rhythmic language to give extra force into what they are saying and also creates a sense of chanting but as we read on we see these chanting are like a riddle which has meaning to it " fair is foul, and foul is fair" this indicates that good is bad and bad is good. In Elizabethan times people used to believe that if you spoke in rhyming couplets then you are mad, showing possession by evil spirits. As an audience we immediately associate the witches with the devil as we know that the witches allow the devil to suck their blood for a familiar who we know is " Greymalkin" who were believed throughout Shakespeare's life that familiars were demons that helped witches with their evil work we also notice that the witches are very cunning as they are waiting to meet Macbeth meaning it was their plan to make sure that Macbeth knows about the prophecy. For Shakespeare audience, the first impression must have been shocking and they would be scared as they literally believed in witches.

Before Macbeth is introduced, the impression given is that he is a very good man indeed. It is as if he was a local hero and could do no wrong. We see that he's a celebrated and respected soldier and is worthy too. King Duncan even says himself " O valiant cousin! Worthy gentleman", He uses such masculine words to describe such a brave man like Macbeth. We also see Macbeth as a good soldier, he's fearless and very strong and he's very powerful in battle. We are first introduced to Macbeth in act 1 scene 3 where his first words " so foul and fair a day I have not seen" which is similar to the words of the witches " fair is foul, and foul is fair", suggesting that the witches and Macbeth are connected in some way.

In this scene we see how Macbeth was motivated by the witches as he was returning from the battle, Macbeth and Banquo are accosted by the witches who address Macbeth as 'thane of glamis', 'thane of cawdor' and 'King hereafter'. As the witches vanish, Rosse arrives to tell Macbeth that he has been made thane of cawdor; meanwhile Banquo question himself as he says " what! Can the devil speak true?" This indicates that the witches are aligned with the devil and that he finds it hard to believe that the witches' prophecy has come true.

Banquo warns Macbeth that the witches sometime tries to lure us to evil by winning our confidence by being honest about something small as thane of glamis to make us believe the important thing will come true as well, in order to deceive ourselves when it really matters as he says, " that, trusted home, might yet enkindle you into the crown. Besides the thane of cawdor. But't is strange: and oftentimes, to win us our harm. The instruments of darkness tell us truths. Win us in honest trifles, to betrays in deepest consequence."

Macbeth become seduced by the prophecy that he himself begins to believe that he can be King and that becomes his ambition, he also begins to think of ways of becoming king to make sure the prophecy comes true " if Good, why do I yield to that suggestions whose horrid image doth unfix my hair" This implies that if it is good thing then why do I keep thinking about something bad and the thought of it also scares him.

Lady Macbeth is first introduced to the audience in act 1, scene 5: We see Lady Macbeth as a strong woman who is determined to fulfill the prophecy that witches made. Her ambition is to be Queen and to make her love

Macbeth King and she is not prepared to wait and let fate take its place but she would like to achieve this by slaughtering the King Duncan. This shows that she is very cunning but makes us think that she's a bit evil. Lady Macbeth's relationship with Macbeth is very intimate; as The letter which Macbeth sends to Lady Macbeth as soon as he heard he had been made "Thane of Cawdor" reveals his closeness to his wife: the witches prophecy that he shall be "King hereafter" had to reach Lady Macbeth's ears immediately. He call her "my dearest partner of greatness" and "my dearest love" suggesting a close relationship and an unusual equality in their relationship.

Lady Macbeth's reaction to the letter shows determination for them to succeed. as she states "and shalt be what thou are promised". Shakespeare reveals the evil side of Lady Macbeth as she reveals her thoughts of murdering the king and presents us with the image of her being the fourth witch. Lady Macbeth is quite anxious as she knows that her husband Macbeth has a soft streak and Lady Macbeth knows this when she says "it is too full o'th' milk of human kindness" this is a metaphor as milk suggests purity and white implies that he is too good; he is not ruthless enough to do such a thing. Lady Macbeth invokes the spirits as she says "come you spirits" which is what the witches do, this implies that she wants to get rid of her mortal thoughts and replace them with immortal ones.

Lady Macbeth uses very masculine language, "valor" and "my battlements" she possess "my" with the power and control using very military language. She knows that she will have to influence him "pour my spirits in thine ear"

she wants to influence Macbeth by evil thoughts and argue away everything that stands in the way of the crown so she could force him to betray the king. Lady Macbeth also wills herself to become harder by praying to effeminized herself "unsex me here" she is saying strip me from my femininity this relates to the disorder and unnatural desires and femininity is associated with weakness. She deliberately undermines her natural womanly nature in order to be strong enough to persuade Macbeth to murder King Duncan. When Lady Macbeth says "you shall put this night's great business into my dispatch" this shows she is dominant and in control.

Soliloquy is used when one person is speaking directly to the audience; to create empathy for the character. A soliloquy makes the audience feel more involved in the play and this will make them not lose interest as it grabs their attention as they reveal their thoughts to the audience. The use of prose makes Macbeth's letter to Lady Macbeth more personal as it is a standard writing set away from poetry. The imagery of darkness adds more effect to what Lady Macbeth says "Nor heaven peep through the blanket".

This implies that she wants it to be so dark so that she can't be seen or stopped by heaven or anything else to stop her from doing such cruelty. She creates imagery of darkness and evil as she says "come thick night 'and' dunnest smokes of hell" this shows how evil Lady Macbeth is. Lady Macbeth creates disorder in the chain of being as she says "stop up th' access and pass he to remorse, that no compunctious visting of nature" this gives the impression that she doesn't want to feel guilty as she is determined to ensure that the natural order is not restored. The implied meaning of "and

when goes hence” is that she is thinking ahead and planning when to kill Duncan, she feels the sooner it is done the better.

When Duncan arrives to the thane of Cawdor castle, he is pleasantly greeted by ‘ the air nimbly and sweetly’ this ties into the theme of deception and dramatic irony. In act one scene six Lady Macbeth is the ‘ honored hostess’ and King Duncan is very thankful to her as she is his loyal subject. Lady Macbeth is cunning as she tries to be the perfect hostess to make King Duncan fall for her trap. Lady Macbeth looks loyal on the surface but in reality it’s the reverse she is treacherous and she encourages Macbeth to see things the way she does ‘ look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it’ this is a biblical allusion. Lady Macbeth is the Kings ‘ fair and noble hostess’ this is Shakespeare use of dramatic irony as Lady Macbeth is neither any of them as all this is an illusion to trick King Duncan.

Lady Macbeth’s character is developed in act one scene seven as we see the ultimate gender reversal. A woman who is so determined to help her husband, whom she regards as too soft hearted, to achieve power that she is willing to deny her own femininity. Lady Macbeth has to shame Macbeth into killing Duncan because Macbeth has realized it is morally indefensible. Lady Macbeth knows what makes a man, she knows what constitutes a manhood that is displayed as she plays on this knowledge when she says “ cowardly” this insults his masculinity. This is when she emasculates him to take away his power which makes him feel ridiculous. Macbeth tries to back himself up as he says “ I dare do all that may become a man; who dares do more is

none" this implies that it is only right to do fair and just things do more is to be a criminal or sinner.

Lady Macbeth wont except Macbeth's arguments, she is in control of the relationship as she emotionally blackmails him and at the same time emasculating him ' from this time such I account thy love' saying that if you love me then you will do this. Lady Macbeth is very dominant and corrupting as she doesn't let Macbeth get a word, she interrupts him when he raises objection " if we should fail" " we fail" lady Macbeth reminds him that he needs ' courage', like he has during battle. She then persuades Macbeth by accusing him of being a coward and saying that she would have murdered her child while it was feeding at her breast, rather than break such a promise Macbeth has done, She uses disturbing imagery as she says " I would, while it was smiling in my face...plucked my nipple from his boneless gums, and dash'd the brains out..". Lady Macbeth is subverting the relationship between a mother and a child as the last thing for a woman to do would be to kill their own baby, but if she has promised to do that as Macbeth had promised to kill Duncan, then she would do it. Macbeth again is shown to be unable to make decisions for himself and finally gives in to Lady Macbeth and agrees to kill Duncan. Without the influence of Lady Macbeth, Macbeth would never have begun to make a murder plan, but because her desire to become the queen was so great she convinced Macbeth.

In Shakespeare time people were fascinated by witches and witchcraft. Most people believed that witches had the power to predict the future, bring night at day, cause fogs and storms, kill animals and much more. It was also



believed that witches had a red mark called the ' devils mark' in their body left by Satan. In Shakespeare's time, thousands of women were tortured and executed because they were accused of being witches.

When Shakespeare wrote this play in 1600-1601, James I had been King. This play contained many echoes of James interest, as Macbeth is a story about the history of Scotland and the origin of the Stuart dynasty. James, like all kings, had a personal stake in opposing regicide (the murder of the king) and would no doubt have approved of Macbeth's ultimate downfall. Another main interest of King James was witchcraft although he was personally terrified because in 1590 it was alleged that a group of witches tries to kill him, this is now formerly known as the gunpowder plot. King James personally interrogated one of the accused witches and tortured him. He confessed and they were executed. He believed that since he was king and also Gods representative on earth then he would obviously be the main target of the devils agent.

In the 16th century, the king was seen as the closest person to God because of the feudal system which formed the social classification in this era. The king was the highest rank in the social structure, which was deemed to have been granted him by God and therefore known as rule by Divine Right. During Elizabethan times people were expected to respect those on a higher level and not hope to displace them, which amounted to treason. This disloyalty is depicted by lady's Macbeth emotionless calculation to murder the king to propel her own standing. Since kingship is created by God, Macbeth is the unnatural king as he takes on that rank himself by his own

actions. This is where the witches benefit from this act as many people felt that, if the rule of king over his people was comparable to Gods rule over earth, then witchcraft tried to turn all this upside down so that the devil rules the earth and as Macbeth is not chosen by God, then he is the representative of the witches meaning the devil does rule the earth through Macbeth which is endorsed by Macduff as he describes Macbeth as 'devilish'.

From this story we can see similarities between her and the witches as she can be seen as the fourth witch in "Macbeth" as she influences Macbeth to do evil. She thinks evil thoughts from the moment she receives Macbeth's letter. She wants to possess Macbeth. She thinks Macbeth is weak, that he's too decent so she tries hard to get him to do Evil by manipulating him into killing King Duncan. the speech said by lady Macbeth in act 1 scene 5 must have given the audience a sense of trepidation and for some an enormous sense of rage and disgust. "The raven himself is hoarse...", She uses raven which is recognized as an evil bird. "unsex me here...", she wanted all the characteristics a woman had to have in those days, removed from her.

Women were expected to be meek and gentle, no matter what the husband did. So if any female protested, she was immediately branded a 'bad' woman in the minds of society. It was known that the people of Kings James lived in a patriarchy where woman had no power of their own. These women who were married to rich and superior men would often bully them for the married couple to rise in the hierarchy because that was the only way a woman could get a significant amount of power. Thus Shakespeare presented her as normal to the wealthier audience that this strong woman

was able to force her husband to commit the ultimate crime, murder.

Although some women in Shakespeare time were women who accepted the patriarchy system and did not question their husbands and were always willing to stay at the bottom of the hierarchy. These women would have found it difficult to imagine that such women as Lady Macbeth existed.

Tragedy is when a hero suffers some serious misfortune which is not accidental and consequently meaningless but significant in that the misfortune is logically connected and therefore Macbeth is responsible for his own downfall. The greatest cause of Macbeth's downfall was Ambition.

However it is not to say that ambition was the only cause of his down fall.

For, it was closely guided by two main factors in the form of the witches and Lady Macbeth. The pursuit of power and control bare a great price, Macbeth loses his integrity and honour. He is no longer happy with himself or what he has done despite the fact he gets all that he had set out to gain. In trying to acquire his idea of " everything", Macbeth tragically loses everything instead. Macbeth failed to realize that he needed to be more proud of himself than of the material things he could gain. In the end, it just wasn't worth it. It makes you sad that such a nice guy didn't know this in the beginning. Ultimately Macbeth brings about his own downfall, deliberately yielding himself to the destiny suggested by his prophetic encounter. This makes Macbeth responsible for Duncan death as it his ambition to be King to carry out the murder in the first place.

In conclusion it is clear that Shakespeare represented the women in '

Macbeth' to play an Evil influence in Macbeth's life as they play a significant

part in the plot of this story. The women in this play lead Macbeth to the position he ends up in as it is the women that motivates him to become king and to do evil in the first place. The women in this play are very dominating and influencing. They are very cunning as they know what to say to Macbeth for Macbeth to get what they want.