

# Darkness dominates macbeth

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



The play Macbeth was written in the 1600s, when magical superstition was high. The supernatural is an important aspect of the drama as in the 17th century just about everyone (including King James himself) believed in witches and their powers. By using this, before the play has even started people would think it was dramatic and dark.

The witches themselves aren't the supernatural beings; they just gained their powers by selling their souls to the Prince of Darkness (the Devil), that's what the characters in the play believe, as well as the audience of the time.

Act 1, scene 1 is a dramatic opening, making the witches the first characters you see on stage, and immediately awakening the audience by discussing where they are going to meet Macbeth, to do their evil, " Where will be the place? /Upon the heath/There to meet Macbeth".

As they are exiting the scene, they cast what can only be called a spell, but which is also a paradox, " Fair is foul, and foul is fair /hover through the fog and filthy air." This distinction between good and evil (foul and fair) is blurred throughout the whole of the play; much of it is a struggle between good evil- a struggle between light and dark.

The witches mentioning Macbeth directly by name have also linked him immediately to the dark side of the play. This may raise questions in the audience like what is going to happen between them, and if there may be some sort of link between Macbeth and the witches.

Act 1, scene 3 gives the audience Macbeth's first appearance on stage, but his first words echo the witches-" so foul and fair a day"-and seem to the

audience to connect him even deeper to the darkness and evil of the witches.

The atmosphere becomes dramatically charged as the audience anticipate the meeting of Macbeth and the witches. The desolate surrounding adding to the tension, as the audience know that there is nowhere for Macbeth and Banquo to go once the witches appear.

Once Macbeth has heard what the witches have to say, he is immediately locked in an inner struggle, between his conscience and his ambition and greed, " if good why do I yield to that suggestion/whose horrid image doth unfix my hair/and make my seated heart knock at my ribs/against the use of nature?" (lines 133-136). He has only just heard the news about the Thane of Cawdor from Ross and Angus, and the witch's predictions, yet already he is thinking of murdering Duncan-" horrid image"-and the audience is now seeing Macbeth slipping into evil, the shadows of darkness invading his mind already.

Banquo is far more controlled in his response to the witches, but is doubtful of Macbeth as he is acting suspiciously, " That trusted home/might yet enkindle you unto the crown/besides the Thane of Cawdor. But 'tis strange/and oftentimes, to win us to our harm/the instruments of darkness tell us truths/win us with honest trifles, to betray's/in deepest consequence" (lines 119-125), because he is trying to conceal his murderous thoughts from the others. Banquo uses the term " instruments of darkness" to refer to the witches, and in the last few lines of his speech, " win us with honest trifles, to

betray's/in deepest consequence", he shows that he thinks the witches could already have started to corrupt Macbeth.

Their contrasting behaviour shows that there might be a later rivalry between Macbeth and Banquo, one on the side of good and one on the side of evil. This also shows how evil the witches really are, as they have managed to corrupt Macbeth by just saying a few lines of speech to him, and it makes the audience wonder if Macbeth was really like this under the surface, and what will happen between him and Banquo.

When Macbeth meets Duncan in act1, scene 4, the audience see the seeds of darkness beginning to grow, and Macbeth's dual personality. When he is speaking directly to Duncan he is polite and respectful (lines 22-27),

" The service and loyalty I owe,

In doing it, pays itself. Your highness' part

Is to receive our duties, and our duties

Are to your throne and state, children and servants,

Which do but what they should by doing everything

Safe toward your love and honour."

He is declaring his loyalty to Duncan; the language he uses is respectful and shows no signs of his dark thoughts of murder. But his true feelings are shown in his asides,

" Stars, hide your fires

Let not light see my black and deep desires

The eye wink at the hand".

He is saying that no one should ever know about his murderous thoughts and plans for Duncan, that they should never see the light-he shouldn't put them into action, and evil is associated with darkness. The language of his asides is much different to that when he was talking to Duncan, its mainly monosyllabic, the same style as the witches. These are more reminders to the audience about the link between Macbeth, darkness and evil.

There is also the dramatic irony of Duncan talking about the Thane of Cawdor as " a gentleman on whom I built/an absolute trust", and then Macbeth entering. Duncan is talking about " absolute trust" and then the man who is thinking about murdering him enters. The effect of this dramatic irony is that the audience knows what Macbeth is plotting, and Duncan has no idea so they anticipate what could happen in the future between them and if Duncan will give Macbeth his " absolute trust".

When Lady Macbeth reads her husband's letter, in act 1 scene 5, and her thoughts also jump immediately to murdering Duncan, just like Macbeth. But she thinks that her husband is too squeamish and decent to murder Duncan, and take the crown. This shows that he hasn't communicated his thoughts to his wife in the letter, as he may be trying to avoid them or perhaps in case someone else read the letter first.

As soon as Lady Macbeth hear that Duncan is coming to stay at their castle that night, she starts to call upon evil spirits to assist her with her murderous plans. She says an incantation, which could easily be linked to the witches and evil and darkness. Her speech is filled with references to spirits and hell, " Come, you spirits", " you murd'ring ministers" and " the dunnest smoke of hell". It shows the lengths she is prepared to go to, just to get what she wants.

The scene is dramatically effective because of the way Lady Macbeth suddenly changes, in mood and stature. First she just appears as calm, reading Macbeth's letter and then thinking of murder, yet still not completely evil. But then she changes, and seems to become a " fourth witch", by asking evil spirits to help her by taking away all female feelings from her, " unsex me here".

The audience would probably react to this change with awe, and also apprehension. I think they would start wondering if Macbeth isn't going to kill Duncan after all, and Lady Macbeth might.

When she is talking to Macbeth she tells him to " look like th'innocent flower/But be the serpent under't". She is telling him to be warm and welcoming to Duncan, so as to hide his deadly intentions. This way nobody will know that it was he, when the murder is finally carried out.

In act 1 scene 7 Macbeth has a soliloquy that reveals some of his true feelings towards Duncan and the planned murder. He is struggling with his conscience, the only reason he can think of for killing Duncan is ambition,

" I have no spur

To prick the sides of my intent, but only

Vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself" (lines 25-27), and there are many against (lines 8-25). His main reasons are kinship, because Duncan is his cousin he shouldn't kill him, loyalty for the fact that you don't kill your king, and hospitality as Duncan is under his roof he should be the one protecting him from murder-not holding the knife himself.

" He's here in double trust:

First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,

Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,

Who should against the murderer shut the door,

Not bear the knife myself."

When he is saying the soliloquy his alone in the darkness having left the banquet. This heightens the drama of his moral conflict, as well as the drama of what his dinner guests might think-they could be suspicious he has left the table so early when he has the king as a guest. There is also a lot of tension created by the audience wondering if he is going to go through with the murder.

Also, when Lady Macbeth arrives to talk to him and he tells her of his decision not to murder Duncan, the audience sees more of her dark side, as she says she would rather kill her own child rather than break a promise

such as this. Her persuasion, and her saying he isn't man enough sway Macbeth into agreeing to the murder once again. This also shows us the weak side of Macbeth's character, as he puts up little resistance and doesn't argue with his wife at all.

In act 2 scene 1, Banquo is also plagued by troubles and cannot sleep. He is extremely jumpy and, even though he is in his friend's castle, he calls for his sword. But, unlike Macbeth, he resists any ambitious thoughts promoted by evil, and calls for help from heaven "merciful powers/restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature/gives way to in repose" (lines 7-9).

This proves that Macbeth and Banquo really are contrasting characters, especially after Banquo declares his allegiance to Duncan, and both represent the opposing sides in the play as a whole-Macbeth is the darkness and evil, but Banquo is the good and light.

In Macbeth's second soliloquy, he visualises a bloody dagger pointing towards his hand, and this can be seen as his grim acceptance of the horror of what he has to do. All of his moral arguments have disappeared and he focuses on the evil associations of night-"night will hide the dead". The personification of murder that Macbeth gives, "withered murder", identifies him as a bloody murderer instead of the courageous lord he was previously. The audience's reaction to this would probably be that his transition from good to evil is now complete, and he cannot go back.

The fact that he is alone in the dark would increase the dramatic effect. He is talking about the murder of Duncan where just about anyone could hear him,



yet he doesn't appear to be fearful of discovery. Though it would still be tense just in case someone did overhear him, and when Lady Macbeth walks in the audience would probably think just that.

Also, the audience would probably be expecting something like this, yet would still feel the tension mounting from the fact that Macbeth is speaking alone in the darkness, waiting to do a horrific deed and seeming to have lost his conscience by the way he accepts what he has to do. They would be able to identify his change in character from the way he was speaking, and his stature would probably change with his realisation of the power he is going to have-with just one small task to be completed before he gets it.

At the beginning of act 2, scene 2 the murder of Duncan takes place off stage. When Lady Macbeth sees Macbeth approaching her, she fears that he didn't kill Duncan and says that she would have done it herself if Duncan hadn't "resembled my father as he slept".

The conversation they have is all short sentences, or single words. This creates plenty of tension, as they are fearing discovery, and the audience is wondering if they will be discovered. Macbeth also creates tension when he describes his not being able to say "Amen" when the guards said, "God bless us", and he fears that he is already unholy and evil because of what he has done.

Also, the other words he heard saying "sleep no more: Macbeth doth murder sleep" could mean that Macbeth will no longer find sleep restful and

nurturing, but, because of his dark deed, it will provide many sleepless nights where he is carrying the guilt of what he has done.

As well as his mental images that the audience can't see, there is a lot of blood, and it is referred to, as physical evidence of what has taken place. Macbeth knows he will be able to wash the blood off his hands, but wonders if he will ever wash the blood stains off his conscience, " will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood/clean from my hands?"

It's not until the sleepwalking scene (act 5, scene 1) that Lady Macbeth's association with evil and darkness, and her guilt that has been weighing on her conscience, are portrayed properly.

The main image of guilt is the " spot" of blood that Lady Macbeth can see on her hand. She is imagining it during her sleep, and tries to wash it off as the outward sign of her guilt, but really it's her conscience catching up with her, and the " spot" represents all the murders she commissioned, or at least knew about.

Also, she has to have a light next to her continually. This shows her links with darkness, that she can't escape. And shows that only when Macbeth is overthrown can light and order be restored.

I think the audience will react with some sympathy towards her, as she can't help what has happened, not now anyway. She has started to go mad because of what she has done because her guilty conscience has caught up with her and she is finally realising what she has done. Though, I think the audience will also take the attitude that she brought it on herself. She was

greedy and ambitious, and if she had never done any of those things in the first place or wanted the murders committed, then she wouldn't be in this position now.

Thought Macbeth and Lady Macbeth reigned for a long time, they had many problems. They made many enemies through the way they reigned, because Macbeth was tyrannical and he ordered the murder of anyone who displeased him. When Macduff killed Macbeth, he was allowing Malcolm to restore light and goodness to Scotland through his reign. I think Macbeth wasn't really truly evil, at least not at first, he was just taken over by his ambition, and the ambition of his wife, and persuaded that what he was doing was the right thing-even though deep down I think he knew it was wrong.