

# Macbeth: critical essay

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



Shakespearian plays always have a tragic hero in them, and his play Macbeth is no exception. After reading William Shakespeare's Macbeth, I wondered if I should feel sorrow for the main character and tragic hero, Macbeth. Whether we should or shouldn't sympathize for Macbeth will be the topic of my essay.

The play opens with Macbeth being hailed as a heroic soldier. Three witches then prophesize three great titles for Macbeth and soon after, two of these titles are thrust upon him. The words of the witches and the pressure from his dominant wife warp his original good intentions and cause him to kill King Duncan. Now king, his insecurities then lead on to him murdering his best friend, his supposed enemies and their innocent relatives. Thinking he can trust the witches, he is tricked by their predictions that have double meanings and he believes that he is invincible. The true meaning of the witches' prophecy becomes clear and both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are defeated.

In Act 1, Scene 2, we see a sergeant in the presence of King Duncan and several other nobles, who are deliberating over Macbeth. The sergeant tells the nobles:

" For brave Macbeth -well he deserves that name

Disdaining fortune, with his brandish'd steel,

Which smoked with bloody execution" (1. 2. 19)

This shows us that Macbeth is a dedicated soldier who fights to serve his king and is willing to place his life on the line to achieve this. His intentions

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are good at this point. This saddens me to think such a good, loyal man becomes ensnared in the witches' fun.

Macbeth and Banquo are reflecting on the day's battle in Act 1, Scene 2, when they encounter the witches. The three witches greet Macbeth with the titles: Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor and King. Macbeth and Banquo are taken aback by these predictions and are sceptic. Macbeth is aware that he will become Thane of Glamis due to family relations but is sure he cannot become Thane of Cawdor or King as these roles are already taken. Moments after the witches vanish, Ross and Angus (two of Duncan's attendants), appear and award Macbeth with the title of Thane of Glamis. Macbeth has an aside and ponders about the witches predictions. This is where Macbeth's intentions start to become tainted as he says:

" I am Thane of Cawdor:

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? Present fears

Are less than horrible imaginings;

My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,

Shakes so my single state of man that function

Is smothered in surmise, nothing is

But what is not." (1. 3. 141)

This aside states that Macbeth is thinking of killing King Duncan. This unnerves him and he is disgusted at himself for even imagining such treason. Nevertheless, he cannot shake the thoughts away that have been fuelled by the witches' prediction and sparked by the enthrustment of his new title. Once more I pity Macbeth as tries to resist succumbing to his lethal thoughts unknowingly caused by the witches' prophecy.

In the fifth scene of Act 1, Lady Macbeth is introduced. She reads a letter from Macbeth describing the strange events that occurred after the battle. She also begins thinking plans to kill the king but unlike her husband, she has no conscience. When Macbeth arrives home, Lady Macbeth instantly begins plotting how to kill King Duncan and pressurizes her husband into co-operating. Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth:

" Your face, my thane, is as a book where men

May read strange matters. To beguile the time,

Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,

Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower,

But be the serpent under't." (1. 5. 63)

This is Lady Macbeth telling Macbeth to act normal during the feast the next day but to keep the bloodlust within. In this part, I lose my sorrow for

Macbeth. Yes, he has been pressurised but he does not try and fight her or the idea of killing the king.

On return of killing King Duncan, Macbeth converses with his wife. Macbeth is clearly shaken by this murder and he is beginning to regret it. Lady Macbeth remains calm and tries to soothe her husband. Macbeth says:

" Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood

Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather

The multitudinous seas incarnadine,

Making the green one red." (2. 2. 61)

Now that Macbeth has realised the monstrosity of what he has done he regrets it all. I do now once more sympathise poor Macbeth but not as much as before. After all, he has committed the crime. He regrets this not only because of what may happen to him, but because Duncan was a great king. Scotland prospered with him as king.

" Better be with the dead,

Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,

Than on the torture of the mind to lie

In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave;

After life's fitful fever he sleeps well:

Treason has done his worst; nor steel, nor poison,

Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing,

Can touch him further." (3. 2. 23 Macbeth)

Macbeth is contemplating how, because he has killed Duncan, no more harm can come to him. In a way, it is like Macbeth is thankful Duncan is dead so he cannot see how corrupt Macbeth has become. I think this is a good sign as it shows Macbeth knows what he has done is wrong and he aware he is becoming more and more sinister.

Realising Banquo had almost figured out the truth behind the murder, Macbeth ordered some murderers to kill Banquo and his son Fleance, but Fleance survives. That same night a feast had been planned by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth for all the other nobles. With everyone else seated, Macbeth tries to find a seat but to his shock, he finds the ghost of Banquo his seat. The others cannot see the ghost so are therefore worried about Macbeth. To stop suspicions, Lady Macbeth claims that Macbeth is often like this. After they send the nobles home prematurely, Lady Macbeth once more soothes Macbeth. I feel sorry for Macbeth at this moment as he is now being traumatised by his friends' murder and it may appear Lady Macbeth is being a good wife but, she is only doing this so they are not caught, not because she loves him. She says:

" You lack the season of all natures, sleep." (3. 4. 141)

We return to the witches in Act 4, where they have met with Hecate (head witch) who is angry at them for twisting the natural timeline. In order to please Hecate, the three witches begin to cast a spell for the downfall of Macbeth. They say:

" Double, double toil and trouble;

Fire burn and cauldron bubble." (4. 1. 10)

At this point I do feel sorry for Macbeth, the corrupt ruler, will have to be killed soon in order for the natural course of events to take place. I sympathise for him because he has no control over his new destiny.

In the same scene, Macbeth finds the witches and asks them to predict what the future holds for his. They cast a spell and three apparitions appear. The first is of an armed head that warns him of Macduff. The second apparition is of a bloody child. It says:

" Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn

The power of man, for none of woman born

Shall harm Macbeth." (4. 1. 79)

Macbeth falls for the witches' trickery as this prophecy has a double meaning. Macbeth believes it to mean no man can harm him, but what it really means is that a man born by a C-section will harm him. The third apparition is of a crowned child holding a branch who tells Macbeth he will never be "vanquish'd" until the "Great Birnam wood" reaches the castle.

Macbeth believes this to mean he will never be killed because it would take hundreds of years for the woods to grow up to the castle and Macbeth would be dead by then, but this too has a double meaning. I sympathize Macbeth because he is now confident he will not be killed and this cockiness will lead to his downfall.

Lady Macbeth does have a conscience which becomes clear in Act 5, Scene 1, as she suffers from sleepwalking and sleep talking. She says:

" Out, damned spot! out, I say!... Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" (5. 1. 38)

While doing this, she is accustomed to rub her hands together like she is washing them. This is clearly her conscience playing havoc with her mind. For the first time in the play, we see a humane side to Macbeth's " fiendish" wife.

Macbeth is victim to an uprising against him from England. Macbeth does not fear them though, due to the witches' prophecy. Macbeth's first fear occurs when a guard on the lookout claims to see the Great Birnam wood approaching the castle. Macbeth cannot believe it. The " moving wood" is really the uprising army holding up branches to conceal their numbers. Even though the first prophecy has become true, Macbeth is still confident in the fact that no man woman born can harm him. The next crack in Macbeth occurs when his wife dies. He seems to be more annoyed at the timing though rather than grieve the fact she has died. He says " She should have



died hereafter". I lose sympathy for Macbeth because it seems he become the evil tyrant he is named.

In the final scene of Act 5, Macbeth fights against Macduff, the man who the first apparition warned him of. Macbeth is confident he will beat Macduff until he is told by Macduff that he is in fact born by C-section. This is where reality hits Macbeth. I gain a lot of respect for Macbeth because even though he realised he was fighting for a lost cause, he continued to fight with all his might.

Now that I have studied this play, I feel that we should sympathize for Macbeth. Yes, he did become a sinister man in the course of the play but, in the end he realised what he did was wrong also, a lot was not his fault, merely his ambitions as the witches changed the natural course of events. His down fall is sad as he was a good, loyal soldier in the beginning.