

***Macbeth* by William Shakespeare: MIT Discussion Questions**

1. Macbeth receives a prophecy on the heath. Compare it with Peter's prophecy. He himself reflects that if the prophecy is valid then he need do nothing but await its coming to pass. And yet he (ultimately) acts upon the prophecy. Why does he do so? Was he wrong when he said that prophecy requires no action on one's part for its fulfilment?
2. Macbeth has been regarded by some critics as the perfect exemplification of Aristotle's notion of the tragic hero as Aristotle elaborated it in chapter thirteen of the *Poetics*. How well does the play suit Aristotle's prescription?
3. *Macbeth* is the shortest of Shakespeare's plays and the language, more than is usual, seems concentrated upon Macbeth's various states of mind, no matter who speaks or whom is being spoken of. Thus, the description of the death of the treacherous Thane of Cawdor: "Nothing became him in his life as the leaving of it. He died as one practiced in his death, to throw away the dearest thing he owned, as if it were a trifle." To what extent might these words apply to *Macbeth*? Find other instances of the same kind in the play.
4. Compare Macbeth in his play with Oedipus in his. When we meet Oedipus, the deed that undoes him is well behind him but Macbeth's lies in the future and he must knowingly embrace it. How is this difference reflected in the various ways in which each character speaks about himself?
5. A key word in *Macbeth* is "success," which in Shakespeare's day referred not only to a realization of one's ambitions but also to succession in titles and authority (succeeding to the throne, for instance) and even to the mere replacement of one thing by another, as with the passage of time (one moment succeeds another). Importantly, it carried a further possibility of meaning which has lapsed today, a development of the neutral passage of time, namely, the notion of putting the past behind you, turning a corner, starting afresh. This is one of the dominant meanings of the term in the play, especially as Macbeth contemplates the deed he is tempted to commit and wonders about his state of mind after its commission. Examine the play of meanings in the use of this word in various speeches in the play.
6. Macbeth is also concerned with the notion of "equivocation," using words with a double sense in order to deceive. He regards the witches as beings "that palter to us with a double sense," apparently quite aware that they are "servile ministers," in thrall to the force of evil and can mean no good. And yet he yields to what their words suggest, anyway. Why does he do this?
7. Macbeth and his Lady talk about ambition. What is Macbeth's ambition? Why is being king so important to him? (We might recall here Creon's speech to Oedipus, when he argues that it is better to be second in importance than to be king himself.) Why is the prize of kingship worthless without establishing a line of descent, that is, without being the founder of a dynasty?
8. A presumption of the play is that one must knowingly embrace evil to embrace evil at all. What is your view of this presumption?
9. Does Macbeth die heroically? Is he overwhelmed by his fate or does he continue to embrace it to the last?