

## 2009 Study Guide for *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare

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### Before seeing/reading the play

1. Define ambition. What are the benefits of ambition (that is, how does ambition help a person achieve goals?) What are the dangers? What are you ambitious for? What price would you be willing to pay to achieve it? What would you be willing to sacrifice? How far would you be willing to go?
2. Define conscience. Why is it important to listen to one's conscience? What is the cost of going against one's better judgment?
3. Define fate. Define free will. Make the case that life is governed by fate. Make the case that life is governed by free will. In what way can life be governed by both free will and fate? Based on your definitions of fate and free will, what would you do if you received predictions from someone who claimed to be able to see into the future? Would you trust it? Doubt it? Ignore it? Work to make the predictions come true? Wait for it to come to pass?
4. Read Act I, scene i. What information do the three witches give us? What disturbances in nature or the weather do they report? What opposites are mentioned in the scene? What do you expect from the play based on the first scene?
5. Research the history behind the story of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Create family trees for the characters in the play. In what ways is the story of Macbeth a family drama as well as a political drama? These and other websites provide information:  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/macbeth.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/macbeth.shtml)  
<http://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/Scotland-History/DuncanandMacbeth.htm>  
[http://scottishhistory.suite101.com/article.cfm/macbeth\\_104057](http://scottishhistory.suite101.com/article.cfm/macbeth_104057)

6. Research the views on witchcraft, magic and superstition held by people in Shakespeare's day. How do you think these views influenced the play? This and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-witchcraft-and-witches.htm>
7. Research the social and political structure of Medieval Scotland. What is a Thane? What power did that title hold? What was the traditional way for the next king to be chosen in Medieval Scotland? This and other websites provide information:  
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/thane>
8. What were the responsibilities and expectations of a host toward his/her guests in Medieval Scotland? What were the responsibilities and expectations of a kinsman toward his/her relatives? What were the responsibilities and expectations of a subject toward his/her king?
9. What are the qualities of a good king? What are the qualities of a tyrant? What are the qualities of a traitor?
10. What were the attitudes of the Elizabethans toward the Scottish? What was the history of the relationship between these two countries? What were the English perceptions of Scottish men? Scottish women? How did those attitudes change when James I became king? This and other websites provide information:  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/james\\_i\\_king.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/james_i_king.shtml)
11. King James I was the patron of Shakespeare's company, which was known as the King's Men. Why might Shakespeare have felt motivated to make sure *Macbeth* pleased his patron, who was also his king? How might the writing of the play been influenced by the interests of King James I? By his nationality? Which passages in the play seem intended to please him? Which might have displeased him? These and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A4455434>  
<http://www.shakespeare-online.com/faq/macbethfaq.html>

12. Research the history of theatrical productions of *Macbeth*. Who have been the great Macbeths and Lady Macbeths, and what has distinguished their performances? These and other websites provide information:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macbeth#Performance\\_history](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macbeth#Performance_history)  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady\\_Macbeth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady_Macbeth)
13. What superstitions are connected with the play *Macbeth*? What are the traditional methods of counteracting the “curse” on the play? How would this information influence your decisions about producing the play? This and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/story?oid=oid%3A78882>

## Resources

### Films:

- Macbeth*, with Orson Welles, 1948
- Macbeth*, with Ian McKellan and Judi Dench, 1978
- Macbeth*, with Anthony Sher, 2001
- Macbeth*, with Patrick Stewart, 2010

### Learn more about Shakespeare’s life and times at the following websites:

- <http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>
- <http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=865&CFID=6230886&CFTOKEN=25420173>
- <http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>
- <http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/life.htm>
- <http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>

### After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your notes on the first scene of the play: what opposites do the witches mention? Find further examples of opposites in the text. What do these opposing words and ideas reveal about the world of the play? What is the definition of equivocation? What role does equivocation play in *Macbeth*?

2. Read Act I, scene iii, the scene between Macbeth, Banquo and the witches. What do the witches prophecy for Macbeth? For Banquo? How does Macbeth react to the prophecies? How does Banquo react? What is the difference between Banquo's response to the prophecies and Macbeth's? Find further clues in the text that point out the differences between the two men.
3. Why does Macbeth think the prophecies about him are destined to come true but the prophecies about Banquo can be avoided? What other interpretations could you give to the prophecies of the witches? If Macbeth believes these prophecies are destined to come true, why doesn't he just let the future unfold? Is Macbeth a victim of fate or does he have free will to choose the outcome? How does Lady Macbeth influence Macbeth's decisions?
4. Find references in the play in which other characters describe Macbeth. What do we learn about who Macbeth is at the beginning of the play and who he becomes from the descriptions?
5. Lady Macbeth advises Macbeth to "look like the innocent flower/but be the serpent under it." How is the idea that reality can be hidden by appearances explored in the play? Find examples in the text of characters who are deceived by appearances. Find examples in the text of characters that deceive by appearing to be something they are not.
6. Refer to your research regarding the responsibilities and expectations of a host toward his/her guests in Medieval Scotland. How do Macbeth and Lady Macbeth fulfill these responsibilities and expectations? How do they violate them?
7. What price do Macbeth and Lady Macbeth pay for their ambition? Find modern husband and wife partnerships that parallel Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Find examples of modern leaders who have made questionable choices or unethical decisions to achieve and maintain power and success. What price have they paid for their ambition?
8. Plot each character's ambition: Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Banquo, Lenox, Ross, Angus, Macduff, Malcolm. Write the story from the perspective of each.

9. What are Macbeth's faults and character flaws? What are Lady Macbeth's? Make the case that Macbeth is a villain. Make the case that he is a hero with a tragic flaw. Make these two cases for Lady Macbeth.
10. Why do Macbeth and Lady Macbeth want to rule Scotland? Write a scene in which they discuss why they want to be King and Queen.
11. Write a brief history of Lady Macbeth's life prior to the events of the play including the story behind the references she makes to her father and child.
12. Why doesn't Macbeth stop killing after he has killed Duncan? Chart why every single death seems necessary to Macbeth. How does one act of evil or violence seem to demand another? At what point could Macbeth have changed the path he is going down? What does this play reveal about the psychology of evil and violence? How can this story shed light on modern acts of evil and violence? Describe modern examples.
13. Several characters express ideas about manhood in the play. Find these references and compare them. How does this society define what it is to be a man? Does Macbeth's view of manhood line up with Malcolm's? With Macduff's? With Lady Macbeth's? How does this society define what it is to be a woman? Find examples in the text.
14. *Macbeth* contains three sets of fathers and sons: Duncan and Malcolm (and Donalbain,) Banquo and Fleance, Macduff and his son. What do the fathers and sons have in common? How does each father treat his son? How does each son defend his father? Given this pattern in the play, what is the significance of the fact that Macbeth has no children?
15. Why does Macduff flee to England? What does he hope to accomplish there? Why does he leave his family behind?
16. Why is Malcolm suspicious of Macduff? What does he suspect him of? How does he test Macduff? Why does he decide to trust him? What does this interaction tell you about Malcolm and his fitness to rule Scotland?
17. In Act IV, scene iii, Malcolm lists the "king becoming graces." Which of these graces does Duncan possess? Macbeth? Malcolm himself?

18. What role do supernatural events play in this production? What is the function of the witches? Director, Gale Edwards added the three child witches to the OSF production. What effect did these child witches have? What is the function of Banquo's ghost?
19. For this production the director chose blood to be a very prominent visual image. What was your reaction to the use of blood in the production? Why do you think this choice was made? What effect did it have?
20. According to Caroline F. E. Spurgeon in her book *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us*, the rich imagery in *Macbeth* follows four major ideas. Those ideas are:
- The image of Macbeth as one whose new honors do not fit him, as if he wears a poorly fitting garment. For example: "The Thane of Cawdor lives; why do you dress me/In borrow'd robes?" Act I, scene iii, lines 108-109.
  - The image of sound echoing over vast regions, for example: "And pity, like a naked, new-born babe, /Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin horsed /Upon the sightless couriers of the air, /Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye, /That tears shall drown the wind..." Act I, scene vii, lines 21-25.
  - Light stands for goodness and darkness for evil. Two good examples are: "...signs of nobleness, like stars shall shine/On all deservers." Act I, scene iv, lines 41-42. "Stars hide your fires; /Let not light see my black and deep desires." Act I, scene iv, lines 50-51.
  - Finally, that sin is a disease, an example is: "...make us medicines of our great revenge, / To cure this deadly grief..." Act IV, scene iii, line 214-215.

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Find examples in the text of images that fit into these four categories.

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