

Macbeth Summary Notes

Macbeth Background:

- Author: William Shakespeare
- Based on a true story
- Macbeth, as a person, actually lived
- Written in 1606 in England for King James who was obsessed with witches
- Is William Shakespeare's shortest and bloodiest play.
- Takes place in Scotland (think guys in kilts ala Braveheart)
- Is a cursed play- productions of the play have been plagued with accidents and deaths.

1.1.1-11= act.scene. line-line

Reading Notes Act 1 Scene 1

The witches make plans to meet after a battle is over. They will meet at sunset, in the rain and thunder on a heath with Macbeth. (The battle is between Norway and Scotland.)

Important Lines

1.1.11 "Fair is foul and foul is fair" = a Paradox= a contradiction.

* Right from the beginning of the play, things aren't always what they appear to be

Duncan= King of Scotland (we know Macbeth is going to die, Macbeth is going to kill him)

Malcolm= Duncan's oldest son



Macbeth Summary Notes

Sergeant= wounded and bleeding from battle (this means that the king is very close to the battle) and is reporting to the king about the war

Key Words:

Thane= a nobleman

-Lennox and Ross are noblemen. So are Macbeth and Banquo

1.2 Summary

The sergeant reports that “doubtful it stood”- the battle could have gone either way. Macdonwald, a Norwegian soldier, was merciless. Macbeth “unseamed him from nave to chops and fixed his heads upon the battlement” (cut him in half and beheaded him). Macbeth is a pretty incredible soldier. Macbeth and Duncan are 1st cousins. Duncan praises Macbeth’s effort in the war. The Sergeant reports of how the battle went back and forth, but the Sergeant can’t finish his report because of his wounds. Lennox and Ross finish the report for him. They tell of the Thane of Cawdor and how he assisted the Norwegians fight against Scotland, but in the end Scotland won the war. Duncan orders the execution of the Thane of Cawdor. Duncan gives his title, money and land to Macbeth as a reward (but Macbeth doesn’t know it yet). Macbeth is already the Thane of Glamis.

1.3 Summary

The three witches are on a heath. It is thundering and lightning. They are casting a spell on a sailor because his wife wouldn’t share her chestnuts. They curse him not to sleep for 81 weeks. To top it off they curse him to sail in a ship tossed by storms that they won’t allow to sink. They won’t let him die, because torture is more evil. They are pretty bitter, cruel and angry.



Macbeth Summary Notes

Important Terms:

Aside: a part of an actor's lines supposedly not heard by others on the stage and intended only for the audience; or lines spoken to only one other character on the stage.

Thane: a nobleman

Paradox: a contradiction

Reading Notes Act 1 Scene 3:

Setting: On a heath, in a thunderstorm, after the battle.

Macbeth says “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (*paradox- foul= it is raining and he is tired from fighting in the battle; fair= they won the war*). Macbeth and Banquo meet the witches on the heath. Banquo insults the witches. Not a good idea after they just cursed someone’s husband after she didn’t share her chestnuts. He describes them as wild, bearded, alien-looking, wrinkly, creepy, thin-lipped and corpse-like. The witches make **three predictions**. They give two to Macbeth. **1:** He will become the **Thane** of Cawdor (we know that this will come true, because King Duncan has ordered the execution of the current Thane of Cawdor, but Macbeth doesn’t know this yet) **2:** Macbeth will be king (But remember Malcolm and Donalbain are in line for the throne before him). Banquo asks the witches for a prediction too. They speak in **paradoxes**. “Lesser than Macbeth and greater”, “Not so happy, yet much happier”. **3:** They tell him that he will not be king, but his sons will be kings.

The witches disappear and Ross and Angus enter. They tell Macbeth and Banquo the news of the execution of the Thane of Cawdor, and give Macbeth his title. Macbeth speaks in an **aside**. Macbeth is interested in the possibility of



Macbeth Summary Notes

becoming king. Banquo warns Macbeth that the witches may have bad intentions. Macbeth thinks about killing his way to the crown, but he doesn't want to. The thought of murdering scares him- it is different from killing in war. He decides to let fate take over- he will wait and see what happens. He decides not to kill anyone.

Reading Notes Act 1 Scene 4:

Setting: At Forres, King Duncan's castle.

The King wants to know if the Thane of Cawdor has been executed. Malcolm reports that he confessed to being a traitor- then died. Duncan said "He was a gentleman on whom I built an absolute trust." Duncan trusts Macbeth as well. Macbeth says he loves the king and lives to serve him. Malcolm is named the successor to the throne- the "crown prince". This makes the lineage to the throne official. In an **aside** Macbeth says that he has two choices 1.) give up and forget about being king or 2.) kill to be king. Macbeth has murder on his mind. Duncan, Macbeth, Malcolm, Donalbain and all the thanes plan to go to Macbeth's castle at Inverness to celebrate their recent victory.

Reading Notes Act 1 Scene 5:

Setting: At Inverness, Macbeth's castle.

Lady Macbeth is reading a letter Macbeth has written her about the witches prediction that he will be king and the prediction that he would gain the title of "Thane of Cawdor" coming true. Lady Macbeth says that Macbeth will be king, but that she thinks he is too nice to kill to get the title. Macbeth is ambitious, but she doesn't think he has the evil qualities to go with it. She wants Macbeth to come home so she can tell him what to do. Lady Macbeth "wears the pants in the relationship". She is in charge. When Duncan comes to the castle tonight she is



Macbeth Summary Notes

going to make sure he dies. She calls on the help of “spirits” to make her evil, strong and powerful (this reminds us of the witches). She wants the strength of a man. She wants to be able to kill without remorse. When Macbeth returns, she tells him of her plans and that she will take care of everything. Macbeth doesn’t want to hear of it and doesn’t want to do it. Lady Macbeth ignores him and tells him to leave everything to her.

Terms to Know:

Dramatic Irony- When we know more than the characters.

Soliloquy- a character talking to themselves/ the audience while alone on stage

1.6

Duncan and the thanes reach the castle and meet with Lady Macbeth. Duncan is respectful and nice to her. Lady Macbeth is a good faker. She puts on a false face and is polite and nice to Duncan, but we know she is planning his murder as they speak.

1.7 “The Seduction Scene”

Macbeth is torn between his loyalty to his king and family and his ambition. He wants to be king, and Lady Macbeth wants to be queen, but he is frazzled and distressed at the thought of murdering for the crown. He is struggling to determine what to do. He is worried about what might happen if he murders Duncan. He worries about his own death and karma. He knows murdering Duncan is wrong.



Macbeth Summary Notes

Macbeth's thought process:

Pros	Cons
Macbeth gets to be king	Duncan is family (his cousin)
	Macbeth is Duncan's subject and he should be loyal to him
	Macbeth is Duncan's host and he should protect him, not murder him
	Duncan is a good king
	The people of Scotland will be sad

Lady Macbeth comes in. Macbeth says he won't kill the king. Lady Macbeth taunts him. She makes fun of him. She says he is afraid and calls him a coward. She emasculates him (makes him less of a man). She insults his masculinity. She manipulates him. She says if he is king she will be impressed with him more. She reminds him that he promised to do this- she says if she promised to kill her child for him, she would. She is psychotic.

Lady Macbeth's plan:

Step 1: Get guards drunk

Step 2: Use guard's daggers to kill Duncan (frame the guards)

Step 3: Act sad when the body is discovered

What about Malcolm and Donalbain?

- They might think Malcolm did it because he just became the crown prince.



Macbeth Summary Notes

2.1 Scene before the murder

Banquo and Macbeth talk about the witches predictions. Macbeth says he hasn't thought about them- it is a lie. Macbeth running into Banquo right before he is planning to kill Duncan is a reminder that predictions were made for Banquo as well. Banquo is going to be suspicious that Macbeth killed Duncan because he knows about Macbeth's predicted to become king.

Macbeth is thinking dark thoughts. He is upset, confused and hallucinating. There is a lot of dark imagery- murder, blade, fatal vision, gouts of blood, dagger of the mind, nature seems dead, wicked dreams. Macbeth is worried about the consequences of his actions. He sees the hallucination of a dagger in front of him that is leading the way to Duncan. He is going to kill the king but he doesn't want to. He is still very much conflicted.

He hears a bell. This is his signal that the guards have passed out and everything is clear for him to go ahead with the murder. ***The murder happens offstage...***

Recap of the plan:

- 1- Get the guards drunk
- 2- Take their daggers
- 3- Kill Duncan with them
- 4- Smear the guards with blood
- 5- Leave the daggers

2.2 During/ Immediately Following the Murder

Lady Macbeth got the guards drunk and drugged their wine. She is calm. Lady Macbeth is alone while Macbeth is killing Duncan. If Duncan hadn't looked



Macbeth Summary Notes

like her father she says she would have killed him herself. Lady Macbeth is clearly the one in charge. Macbeth enters and is frantic. His hands are covered in blood. He is full of regret for the murder. He is convinced the guards (or Malcolm and Donalbain) woke up and were talking while he was murdering. His guilt is weighing on him. Macbeth forgot to leave the daggers on the guards. Lady Macbeth chastises him and takes them back and smears the blood on the guards to incriminate them. She calls the sleeping and the dead “pictures”. Macbeth is left alone. Knocking is heard at the castle door. Macbeth says he wishes the knocking could wake Duncan. He wishes a whole ocean couldn’t wash the blood from his hands. His emotional state isn’t good. Lady Macbeth talks about how easy it was to kill Duncan and says “a little water clears us of this deed”. They wash up and put on their nightgowns. Macbeth has taken the “female” role, and Lady Macbeth the “male”.

Character	Reaction	Line(s)
Macduff -thane	-freaked out -OMG -wakes up the house -suspects Macbeth	-68-69
Lady Macbeth	-fake OMG -pretty good faker -“faints” to take attention away from Macbeth	-95
Banquo	-doesn’t believe it -suspects Macbeth - wants to figure out what really happened	-96 -132
Macbeth	-kills the bodyguards -talks too much	-112 -114-123



Macbeth Summary Notes

Malcolm -crown prince	-they look suspicious -they are worried they're next -think that splitting up is the best way to stay safe -decides to flee to England	-141-152
Donalbain	-they look suspicious -they are worried they're next -think that splitting up is the best way to stay safe -decides to flee to Ireland	

Recap Act 2 Scene 3

Duncan is dead. Malcolm and Donalbain ran away. They look guilty of their father's murder. They separated. One went to England, one went to Ireland. Macbeth freaked out and killed the guards. This made him look suspicious and guilty to Duncan's sons, Macduff and Banquo.

Reading Summary Act 3 Scene 1

A few weeks have gone by since Act 2. Macbeth is now king. Lady Macbeth is queen. Banquo is alone. He speaks in a soliloquy. Banquo is suspicious that Macbeth killed Duncan. He remembers his own prediction that he will be the father of kings. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are planning a banquet in Banquo's honor. Banquo tells Macbeth that he and his son Fleance are going to go riding before the banquet that night. Banquo and Macbeth talk about Malcolm and Donalbain who are now in England and Ireland. Macbeth talks about how Malcolm and Donalbain won't confess to the murder of their father, King Duncan. Macbeth speaks in a soliloquy. He wants to be sure he is going to stay king. He knows Banquo is smart and will figure out that he killed Duncan. Macbeth is afraid



Macbeth Summary Notes

of Banquo because he knows about the witches' predictions and because of his own prediction (Banquo's sons will be kings). Macbeth is king but it isn't good enough- he wants to be *safely and permanently king*. Macbeth knows there is no security in his position with Banquo and Fleance alive. Macbeth says that if Banquo's sons get to be kings then he has killed Duncan for them. Macbeth has decided to kill Banquo and Fleance. He isn't the same old Macbeth. He is more decisive and sounds more like Lady Macbeth.

Macbeth meets with two murderers. The murderers are homeless, hungry and desperate. Macbeth blames their problems on Banquo. Macbeth is pretty calm. He seems to have lost some part of his moral compass. He views Banquo and Fleance's deaths as just a job that needs to be done. This is completely different from his state of mind before he killed Duncan. Macbeth can't kill them himself because he is king now. He is afraid of damaging his reputation and losing friends if he directly orders them to be killed or if he is caught killing them himself. He sounds like Lady Macbeth when he convinces the murderers to kill. He manipulates them and compares them to dogs. He tells the murderers to 1- kill Banquo and Fleance 2- tonight 3- while they are out riding away from the castle.

Recap Act 3 Scene 1

Banquo is suspicious of Macbeth. Macbeth plans Banquo's murder. 1- he hires 2 murderers. 2- he manipulates them and tells them they are poor and homeless because of Banquo. 3- he tells the murderers to kill Banquo and Fleance while they are out riding their horses away from the castle that night. Macbeth wants to make sure that his position as king is safe and secure.



Macbeth Summary Notes

Reading Summary Act 3 Scene 2

Lady Macbeth and Macbeth aren't as close as they used to be. They don't interact as passionately as they used to. Macbeth is talking more, but isn't giving Lady Macbeth any important information. Lady Macbeth is in the dark about Macbeth's plan to kill Banquo and Fleance. During the day Macbeth is afraid someone is going to kill him and at night he has nightmares (lines 16-24).

Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth to be nice to Banquo at the banquet later tonight. He tells her to put on a false face and hide her true feelings (echoes what Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth to do in Act 1 Sc 5 before he kills Duncan). Lady Macbeth doesn't want Macbeth to kill Banquo, she says they'll die soon enough. Macbeth ignores her. He asks for the help of night- he sounds like Lady Macbeth when she asks for help to convince Macbeth to murder King Duncan. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth seem to have switched roles. Macbeth has been corrupted by two things- the power of the crown and guilt.

Differences in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's Relationship

- *They are more distant as a couple*
- *They appear to have switched personalities*
 - *Macbeth talks more, Lady Macbeth talks less*
 - *Macbeth is now doing the planning of the murders*
 - *Lady Macbeth isn't in control*

Reading Summary Act 3 Scene 3

The three murderers attack Banquo and Fleance while they are out riding in the woods. Banquo is killed, but he tells Fleance to run, and he escapes. Banquo tells Fleance to get revenge. Macbeth will be angry.



Macbeth Summary Notes

Reading Summary Act 3 Scene 4: Banquet Scene

The banquet is in full swing. One of the murderers enters to speak with Macbeth. He reports that he killed Banquo but Fleance escaped. Macbeth is worried that Fleance will get revenge for his father's death. When Macbeth returns to his chair he begins acting strangely- he sees the ghost of Banquo sitting in it (no one else can see the ghost). Lady Macbeth tries to do damage control and says he has had "fits" since he has been young. She is trying to have Macbeth keep it together.

Reading Summary Act 3 Scene 4: Banquet Scene (cont'd)

Lady Macbeth tries to do damage control and says he has hit "fits" since he has been young. She is trying to have Macbeth keep it together. Macbeth gives himself away by repeating the word "murder" and describing Banquo's wounds. When they find his body it will be very suspicious. Macbeth is going to go to sleep and then go back to the witches to learn more predictions.

Reading Summary Act 4 Scene 1

The witches cast a spell. They put lots of gross things into their cauldron- bit of people and animals. They say "something wicked this way comes"- and Macbeth enters. He wants more information from the witches and he will get it directly from their masters in the form of apparitions (ghosts-like visions).

Apparition	Warning	Macbeth's Interpretation/Plan
1. Armed Head (Severed head with a helmet on it)	Beware Macduff	He will kill him.



Macbeth Summary Notes

2. Bloody Baby (a just born baby)	No one born of woman can kill Macbeth	Macbeth doesn't think he has to worry about anything, but he will still kill Macduff just to be sure.
3. Crowned child carrying a tree (a child with a crown on his head who is carrying a tree)	Macbeth will not be defeated until Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane hill	Macbeth can't be killed until a whole forest moves. Macbeth thinks he is safe and that the warning is impossible.
4. 8 kings holding mirrors followed by a smiling Banquo	Banquo will still be the father of 8 kings	Problematic for Macbeth. He is not happy about this.

Lennox enters and says Macduff fled to England where Malcolm was spreading word that Macbeth was the murderer of King Duncan. Macbeth is not happy with this and decides to murder Macduff's family- his wife, children and all of his relatives. Macbeth decides to no longer think, and plan before he acts- he will now make all of his decisions impulsively and act on them immediately.

Recap of 3.4 and 4.1

Macbeth threw a banquet for Banquo, but he was already dead. One of Macbeth's hired murderers visits Macbeth during the banquet and tells him that Banquo was killed, but Fleance escaped. During the banquet Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo and talks of murder. Lady Macbeth tries to smooth things over, but eventually they have to tell the thanes to leave. Things don't look good. Macbeth decides he is going to act now without thinking. Macbeth visits the witches and got 4 more predictions:



Macbeth Summary Notes

Apparition	Warning	Macbeth's Interpretation/Plan
1. Armed Head	Beware Macduff	He will kill him
2. Bloody Baby	None born of woman can kill Macbeth	Macbeth doesn't think he has to worry about anything, but he will still kill Macduff just to be sure
3. Crowned child carrying a tree	Macbeth will not be defeated until Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane hill	Macbeth can't be killed until a whole forest moves. Macbeth thinks he is safe and that the warning is impossible.
4. 8 kings holding mirrors followed by a smiling Banquo	Banquo will still be the father of 8 kings	Problematic for Macbeth. He is not happy about this.

Macbeth is informed that Macduff has fled to England. Macbeth orders the slaughter of Macduff's family.

Reading Summary 5.1: The Sleepwalking Scene

Macbeth had killed all of Macduff's family (wife, children, all!). Lady Macbeth is sleepwalking and talking in her sleep. Her gentlewoman has observed her obsessively washing her hands for 15 minutes at a time (Like Macbeth in Act 2.2 she is talking about how much blood is on her hands) and talking of the murders of Macduff's family, Duncan and Banquo. Lady Macbeth must also constantly have light by her. This is a big change from when she asks for the help of darkness. She is paranoid, tired and starting to lose her mind. The guilt is



Macbeth Summary Notes

getting to her. She is a very different Lady Macbeth from earlier. The doctor and gentlewoman are worried she may hurt herself.

Scotland is unofficially at war. Everyone has turned against Macbeth. They are trying to overthrow him because of the murders he has committed.

SCOTLAND	ENGLAND
Macbeth	Macduff
	Fleance
	Malcolm
	Donalbain
	Menteith
	Caithness
	Lennox
	Angus
	English Army (10,000 soldiers)

Reading Summary 5.2

The thanes gather to discuss their abandonment of Macbeth. They say he is a bad king. Pretty much everyone knows about his murderers.

Reading Summary 5.3

Macbeth is still feeling confident because of the witches' predictions. His servant tells him that there are ten thousand soldiers gathering to fight against him. Macbeth is not afraid, but gets ready for battle. He says he has lived long enough. He knows that his way of life will not lead to old age, that it is a way of life that comes with an early death without honor. He is determined to fight until his flesh is hacked from his bones (5.3.33-34). The doctor tells Macbeth that Lady



Macbeth Summary Notes

Macbeth is not well and her illness is mental, not physical. Macbeth's only reaction is to tell the doctor to "cure her".

Reading Summary Act 5 Scene 4: Crowned Child Carrying a Tree

Malcolm and Macduff meet in front of Birnam Wood and make a plan for the English army to conceal their numbers by cutting branches from the trees and carrying them as they march to Macbeth's castle at Dunsinane. This will make the witches third prediction/warning come true. We know Macbeth will die.

Reading Summary Act 5 Scene 5: Lady Macbeth's Death

Macbeth says (line 9) "I have almost forgot the taste of fears"- Macbeth seems to not have feelings anymore- but it bothers him that he isn't bothered by the horrible screams of the women. He admits to being a murderer- and that nothing should surprise him anymore. His major characteristic is that he is a "bad guy" now- but he isn't evil- he still has a conscience. Seyton tells him that Lady Macbeth is dead (she committed suicide). Macbeth says (lines 17-28) "She should have died hereafter..." Macbeth does not react strongly to her death. He is very calm. He compares life to a "walking shadow", a "brief candle", a "poor player" (actor), and a "tale" (story). Candle= short; Shadow= dark, empty; Actor= not real/fake; Tale= fake. Macbeth feels that life is meaningless. Macbeth hears that Birnam Wood is coming to Dunsinane and he knows he will be defeated.

Reading Summary Act 5 Scene 6

Malcolm, Macduff and the English Army are about to launch their attack on Macbeth's castle. The first group will be Young Siward, the second will be Macduff and Malcolm. They don't know Macbeth is fighting alone.

Reading Summary Act 5 Scene 7: Battle Scene



Macbeth Summary Notes

Macbeth fights Young Siward and kills him. Macbeth remarks “Thou wast born of woman”. Macbeth still feels slightly invincible. Macduff enters the castle vowing revenge for his slain family.

Reading Summary Act 5 Scene 8: Macbeth vs. Macduff

Macbeth contemplates suicide, but decides to kill more before he dies. Macbeth does not want to fight Macduff because he has killed too many of his family members already. Macbeth states that he can't be killed by a man born of a woman, but Macduff reveals that he was born by a C-section- a loophole in the witches prediction/warning. Macbeth is beheaded and the last of the witches predictions comes true (beware Macduff). Malcolm is crowned king.

