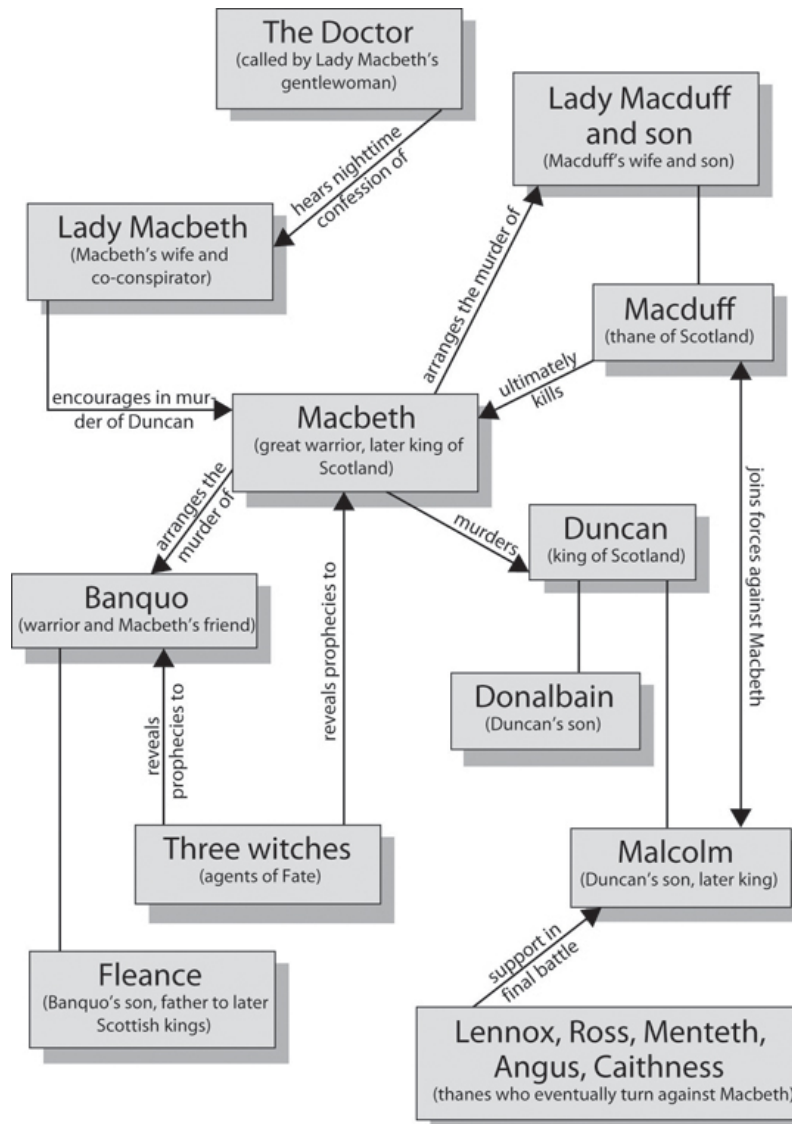


Characters, Themes, Symbols and Motifs

Character Map



Characters, Themes, Symbols and Motifs

Explore the different symbols within William Shakespeare's tragic play, Macbeth. Symbols are central to understanding Macbeth as a play and identifying Shakespeare's social and political commentary.

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

The Fall of Man

The ancient Greek notion of tragedy concerned the fall of a great man, such as a king, from a position of superiority to a position of humility on account of his ambitious pride, or hubris. To the Greeks, such arrogance in human behavior was punishable by terrible vengeance. The tragic hero was to be pitied in his fallen plight but not necessarily forgiven: Greek tragedy frequently has a bleak outcome. Christian drama, on the other hand, always offers a ray of hope; hence, Macbeth ends with the coronation of Malcolm, a new leader who exhibits all the correct virtues for a king.

Macbeth exhibits elements that reflect the greatest Christian tragedy of all: the Fall of Man. In the Genesis story, it is the weakness of Adam, persuaded by his wife (who has in turn been seduced by the devil) which leads him to the proud assumption that he can "play God." But both stories offer room for hope: Christ will come to save mankind precisely because mankind has made the wrong choice through his own free will. In Christian terms, although Macbeth has acted tyrannically, criminally, and sinfully, he is not entirely beyond redemption in heaven.

Fortune, Fate, and Free Will

Fortune is another word for chance. The ancient view of human affairs frequently referred to the "Wheel of Fortune," according to which human life was something of a lottery. One could rise to the top of the wheel and enjoy the benefits of superiority, but only for a while. With an unpredictable swing up or down, one could equally easily crash to the base of the wheel.

Fate, on the other hand, is fixed. In a fatalistic universe, the length and outcome of one's life (destiny) is predetermined by external forces. In Macbeth, the Witches represent this influence. The play makes an important distinction: Fate may dictate what will be, but how

Characters, Themes, Symbols and Motifs

that destiny comes about is a matter of chance (and, in a Christian world such as Macbeth's) of man's own choice or free will.

Although Macbeth is told he will become king, he is not told how to achieve the position of king: that much is up to him. We cannot blame him for becoming king (it is his Destiny), but we can blame him for the way in which he chooses to get there (by his own free will).

Kingship and Natural Order

Macbeth is set in a society in which the notion of honor to one's word and loyalty to one's superiors is absolute. At the top of this hierarchy is the king, God's representative on Earth. Other relationships also depend on loyalty: comradeship in warfare, hospitality of host towards guest, and the loyalty between husband and wife. In this play, all these basic societal relationships are perverted or broken. Lady Macbeth's domination over her husband, Macbeth's treacherous act of regicide, and his destruction of comradeship and family bonds, all go against the natural order of things.

The medieval and renaissance view of the world saw a relationship between order on earth, the so called microcosm, and order on the larger scale of the universe, or macrocosm. Thus, when Lennox and the Old Man talk of the terrifying alteration in the natural order of the universe — tempests, earthquakes, darkness at noon, and so on — these are all reflections of the breakage of the natural order that Macbeth has brought about in his own microcosmic world.

Disruption of Nature

Violent disruptions in nature — tempests, earthquakes, darkness at noon, and so on — parallel the unnatural and disruptive death of the monarch Duncan.

The medieval and renaissance view of the world saw a relationship between order on earth, the so-called microcosm, and order on the larger scale of the universe, or macrocosm. Thus, when Lennox and the Old Man talk of the terrifying alteration in the natural order of the universe (nature), these are all reflections of the breakage of the natural order that Macbeth has brought about in his own microcosmic world (society).

Characters, Themes, Symbols and Motifs

Many critics see the parallel between Duncan's death and disorder in nature as an affirmation of the divine right theory of kingship. As we witness in the play, Macbeth's murder of Duncan and his continued tyranny extends the disorder of the entire country.

Gender Roles

Lady Macbeth is the focus of much of the exploration of gender roles in the play. As Lady Macbeth propels her husband toward committing Duncan's murder, she indicates that she must take on masculine characteristics. Her most famous speech — located in Act I, Scene 5 — addresses this issue.

Clearly, gender is out of its traditional order. This disruption of gender roles is also presented through Lady Macbeth's usurpation of the dominate role in the Macbeth's marriage; on many occasions, she rules her husband and dictates his actions.

Reason Versus Passion

During their debates over which course of action to take, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth use different persuasive strategies. Their differences can easily be seen as part of a thematic study of gender roles. However, in truth, the difference in ways Macbeth and Lady Macbeth rationalize their actions is essential to understanding the subtle nuances of the play as a whole.

Macbeth is very rational, contemplating the consequences and implications of his actions. He recognizes the political, ethical, and religious reason why he should not commit regicide. In addition to jeopardizing his afterlife, Macbeth notes that regicide is a violation of Duncan's "double trust" that stems from Macbeth's bonds as a kinsman and as a subject.

On the other hand, Lady Macbeth has a more passionate way of examining the pros and cons of killing Duncan. She is motivated by her feelings and uses emotional arguments to persuade her husband to commit the evil act.

Characters, Themes, Symbols and Motifs

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Hallucinations

Visions and hallucinations recur throughout the play and serve as reminders of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's joint culpability for the growing body count. When he is about to kill Duncan, Macbeth sees a dagger floating in the air. Covered with blood and pointed toward the king's chamber, the dagger represents the bloody course on which Macbeth is about to embark. Later, he sees Banquo's ghost sitting in a chair at a feast, pricking his conscience by mutely reminding him that he murdered his former friend. The seemingly hardheaded Lady Macbeth also eventually gives way to visions, as she sleepwalks and believes that her hands are stained with blood that cannot be washed away by any amount of water. In each case, it is ambiguous whether the vision is real or purely hallucinatory; but, in both cases, the Macbeths read them uniformly as supernatural signs of their guilt.

Violence

Macbeth is a famously violent play. Interestingly, most of the killings take place offstage, but throughout the play the characters provide the audience with gory descriptions of the carnage, from the opening scene where the captain describes Macbeth and Banquo wading in blood on the battlefield, to the endless references to the bloodstained hands of Macbeth and his wife. The action is bookended by a pair of bloody battles: in the first, Macbeth defeats the invaders; in the second, he is slain and beheaded by Macduff. In between is a series of murders: Duncan, Duncan's chamberlains, Banquo, Lady Macduff, and Macduff's son all come to bloody ends. By the end of the action, blood seems to be everywhere.

Prophecy

Prophecy sets *Macbeth's* plot in motion—namely, the witches' prophecy that Macbeth will become first thane of Cawdor and then king. The weird sisters make a number of other prophecies: they tell us that Banquo's heirs will be kings, that Macbeth should beware Macduff, that Macbeth is safe till Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane, and that no man born of woman can harm Macbeth. Save for the prophecy about Banquo's heirs, all of these predictions are fulfilled within the course of the play. Still, it is left deliberately ambiguous whether some of them are self-fulfilling—for example, whether Macbeth wills himself to be king or is fated to be king. Additionally, as the Birnam Wood and “born of woman” prophecies make clear, the prophecies must be interpreted as riddles, since they do not always mean what they seem to mean.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colours used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

Blood

Blood is everywhere in *Macbeth*, beginning with the opening battle between the Scots and the Norwegian invaders, which is described in harrowing terms by the wounded captain in

Characters, Themes, Symbols and Motifs

Act 1, scene 2. Once Macbeth and Lady Macbeth embark upon their murderous journey, blood comes to symbolize their guilt, and they begin to feel that their crimes have stained them in a way that cannot be washed clean. "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?" Macbeth cries after he has killed Duncan, even as his wife scolds him and says that a little water will do the job (2.2.58–59). Later, though, she comes to share his horrified sense of being stained: "Out, damned spot; out, I say . . . who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" she asks as she wanders through the halls of their castle near the close of the play (5.1.30–34). Blood symbolizes the guilt that sits like a permanent stain on the consciences of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, one that hounds them to their graves.

The Weather

As in other Shakespearean tragedies, Macbeth's grotesque murder spree is accompanied by a number of unnatural occurrences in the natural realm. From the thunder and lightning that accompany the witches' appearances to the terrible storms that rage on the night of Duncan's murder, these violations of the natural order reflect corruption in the moral and political orders.