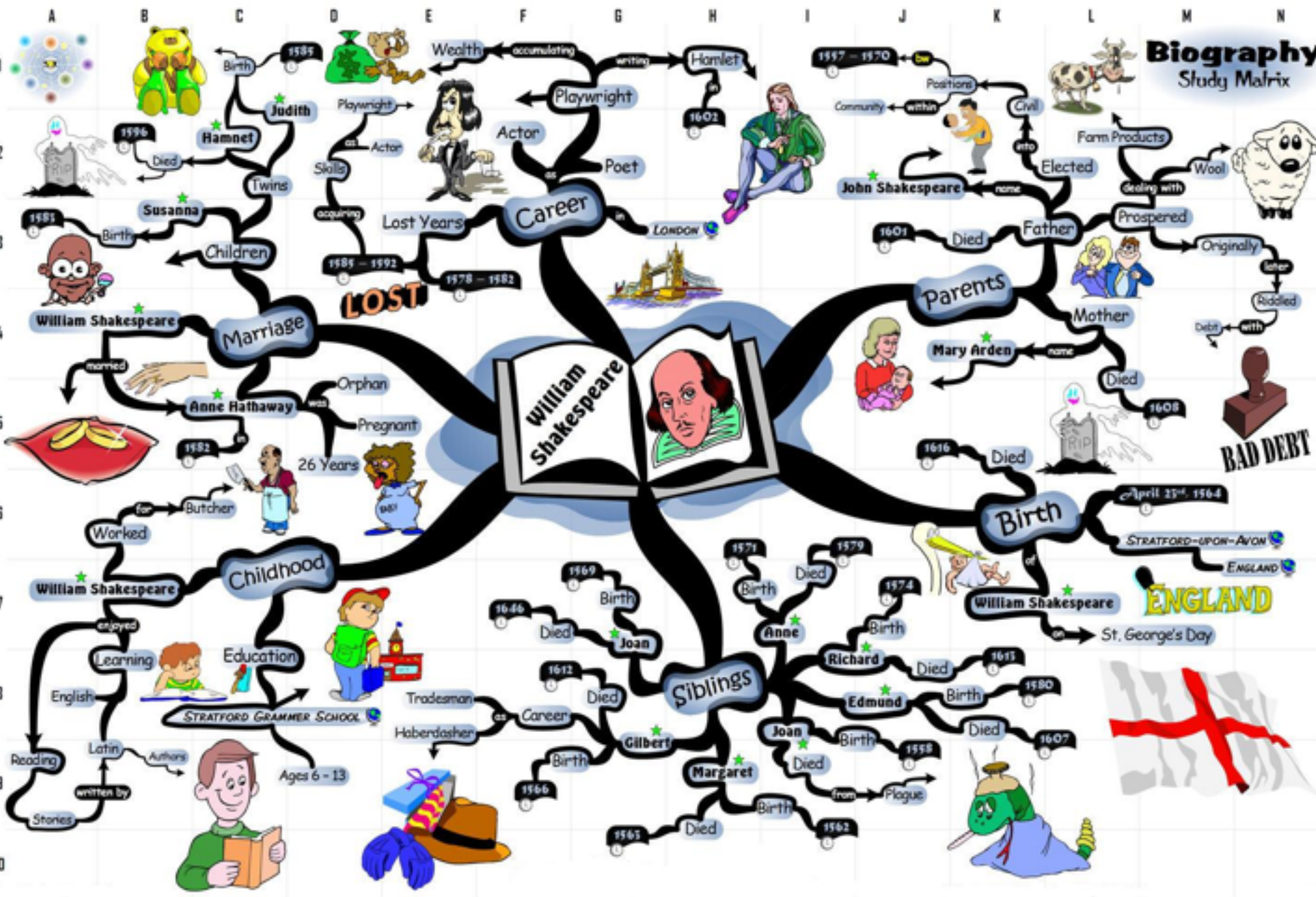




MACBETH: REVISION GUIDE

Biography Study Matrix



MACBETH KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER

Plot		Characters	Gothic links	
Act 1: Macbeth and Banquo meet witches, Cawdor executed, Lady M reads letter, taunts M, Duncan arrives		Macbeth	Madness	Lady M and M driven to madness
		Lady Macbeth		
		The Three Witches		
Act 2: M kills Duncan, Malcolm flees, M crowned		Banquo	Transgression	Against natural order/ divine right of kings/ sexuality
		King Duncan		
Act 3: Banquo suspects M, murder of B, Fleance escapes, M haunted by B's ghost at a banquet		Malcolm	Supernatural	Witches; ghost; hallucinations
		Macduff		
Act 4: Witches show M future kings - sons of Banquo, Macduff's family murdered, Malcolm says he is dishonest to test Macduff's loyalty		Lady Macduff	Setting	Darkness; castle; set in the past
		Fleance		
		Hecate		
Act 5: Lady M sleepwalks, dies, Macduff kills M, Malcolm restored as King		Lennox	Violence and blood	Starts with battle; Cawdor's execution; King's & Banquo's murders; final battle
		Ross		
Soliloquy	One character speaking to audience; M uses to make audience complicit	The Murderers	Desire	Unnatural desires
		Porter		
Dramatic irony	Audience knows more than characters; audience knows D will die	Donalbain	Exploitation	Witches exploit Macbeth and trick him
		Themes		
Hamartia	Tragic flaw; M's could be easily influenced/ambition	Ambition	Fear	Constant uncertainty and risk
		Power		
Hubris	Pride; M could be said to have this or Lady M	Versions of Reality	Inevitability	Doomed from the start; tragic?
		Fate and Freewill		
Catharsis	Purgation of pity and fear; happens at the end	Gender		
		Supernatural		
Anagnorisis	Recognition or the tragedy to come	Violence		
		Time		
Peripetieia	Sudden reversal of fortune			
Rhyme	Used by the witches to create chant-like, supernatural atmosphere			

Plot analysis...

INITIAL SITUATION

IN THE BEGINNING WE MEET (OR HEAR ABOUT) OUR CHARACTERS: KING DUNCAN IS A NICE OLD MAN WHO WAS GOING TO BE TAKEN ADVANTAGE OF BY TRAITORS; MACBETH IS A COURAGEOUS WAR HERO WHO DEFENDS HIS KING, HIS COUNTRY, AND HIS HONOR. SWEET! TIME FOR A HEROIC ACTION FLICK, RIGHT?

CONFLICT

ENTER THREE WITCHES

NOT SO MUCH. ALONG COME THREE PESKY WITCHES/ SISTERS/ FATES WHO ANNOUNCE THAT MACBETH IS GOING TO BECOME KING OF SCOTLAND. HE'S STOKED, BUT QUICKLY REALIZES THE PROBLEM: IF HE'S GOING TO BECOME KING, SOMEONE ELSE IS GOING TO HAVE TO NOT BE KING. LIKE THE CURRENT KING DUNCAN, AND DUNCAN'S SONS, MALCOLM AND DONALBAIN.

COMPLICATION

THE KING IS DEAD; LONG LIVE THE KING

WITH A LITTLE SPURRING FROM LADY MACBETH, MACBETH KILLS THE KING TO SECURE THE KINGSHIP. (THAT MUST HAVE BEEN QUITE A "HONEY-DO" LIST.) IT IMMEDIATELY BECOMES CLEAR THAT THE ONLY WAY TO HIDE THE MURDER IS TO KEEP MURDERING, WHICH MEANS THAT THE BODY COUNT BEGINS TO CLIMB.

CLIMAX

GHOST HUNTERS

A FRIENDLY LITTLE VISIT FROM THE GHOST OF HIS MURDERED FRIEND BANQUO SENDS MACBETH INTO A RAVING FIT, BRINGING A QUICK END TO THE BANQUET MACBETH HAS THROWN TOGETHER TO CELEBRATE HIS NEW KINGSHIP. WE SUSPECT THAT THINGS ARE ABOUT TO GO QUICKLY DOWNHILL.

SUSPENSE

POWER HUNGRY

MACBETH VISITS THE WEIRD SISTERS, WHO TELL HIM SOME CRYPTIC THINGS THAT HE INTERPRETS AS: "IT'S COOL; NO ONE CAN DEFEAT YOU." BUT, WHAT'S THIS? FORCES—LOTS OF FORCES, BUT KING DUNCAN'S SON MALCOLM—ARE GATHERING IN ENGLAND TO FIGHT HIS TYRANNY.

CONCLUSION

I AM NO MAN

THE LAST PART OF THE PROPHECY FULFILLED, MACBETH STANDS AGAINST A MAN NOT-OF-WOMAN-BORN. STILL HE FIGHTS, BUT GOOD PREVAILS OVER TYRANNY AND MADNESS. HE'S KILLED, MALCOLM IS NAMED THE RIGHTFUL KING, AND EVERYONE GOES OFF TO PARTY AT THE CORONATION CEREMONY.

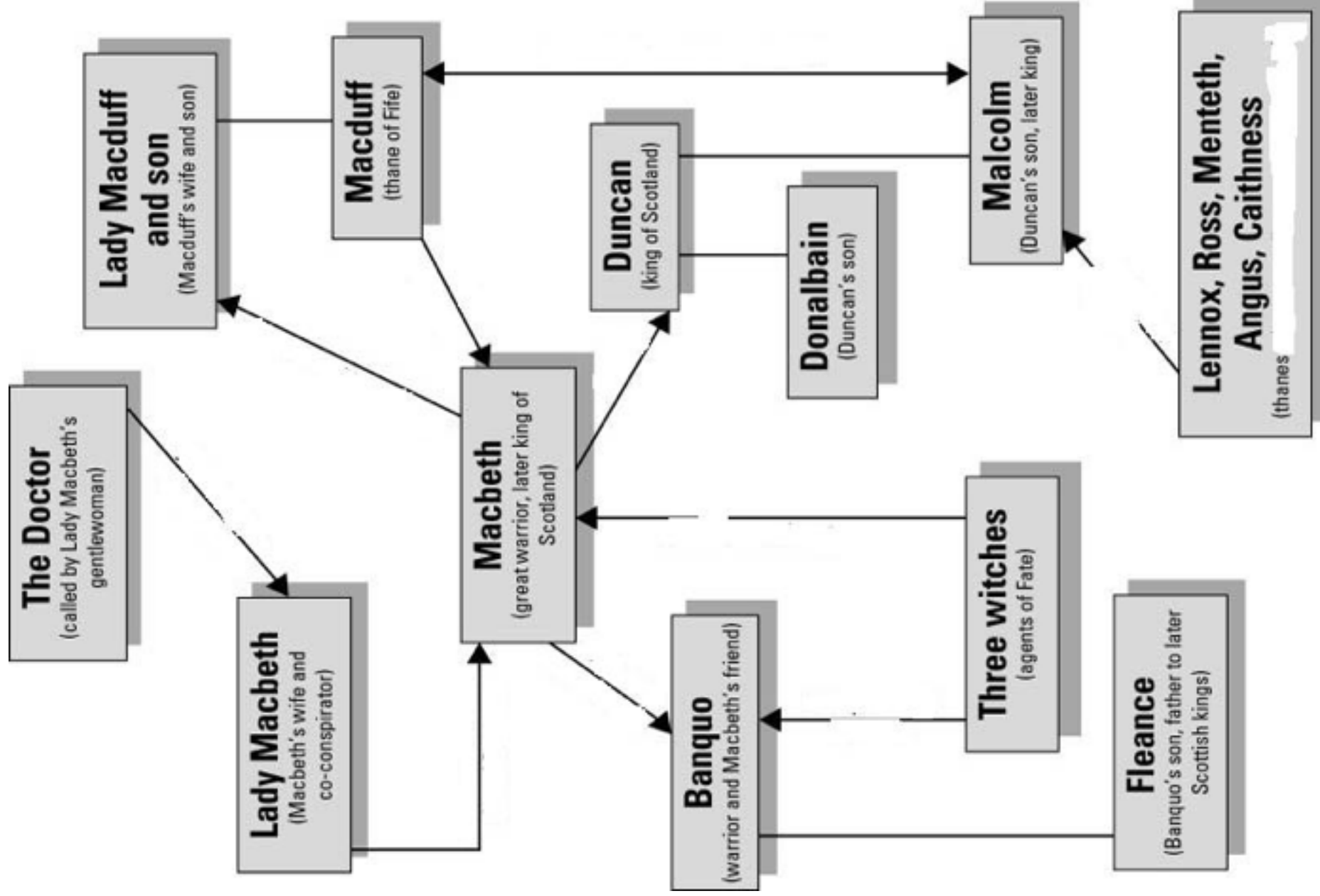
DENOUEMENT

FOOL ME TWICE, SHAME ON ME

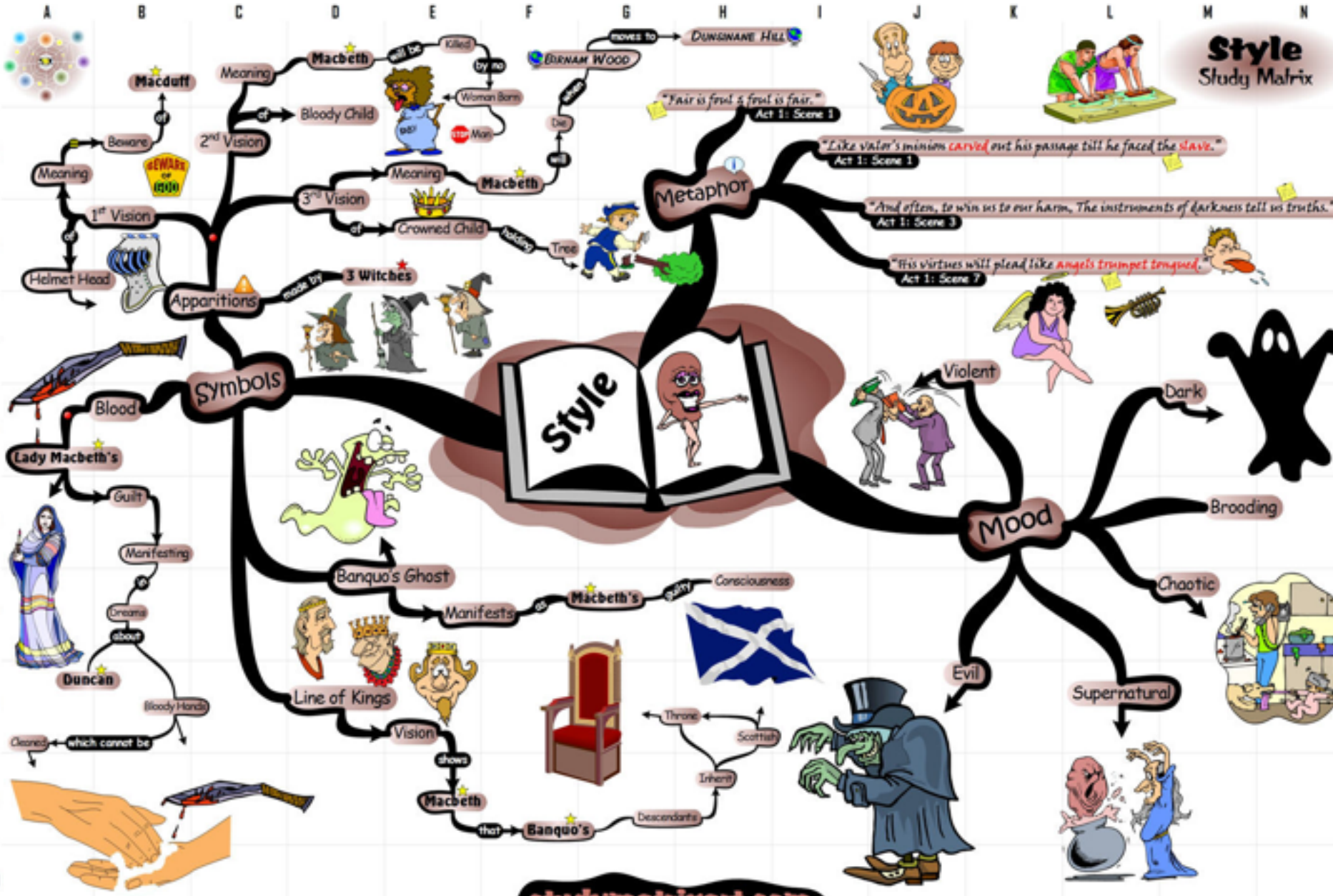
TO THE SURPRISE OF... NO ONE, IT TURNS OUT YOU CAN'T TRUST WITCHES' TALES TO HELP YOU OUT IN ANY WAY. IT LOOKS LIKE MACBETH IS GOING TO BE DEFEATED, AND HE GOES OUT COMMITTED TO DYING SOLDIERLY DEATH.

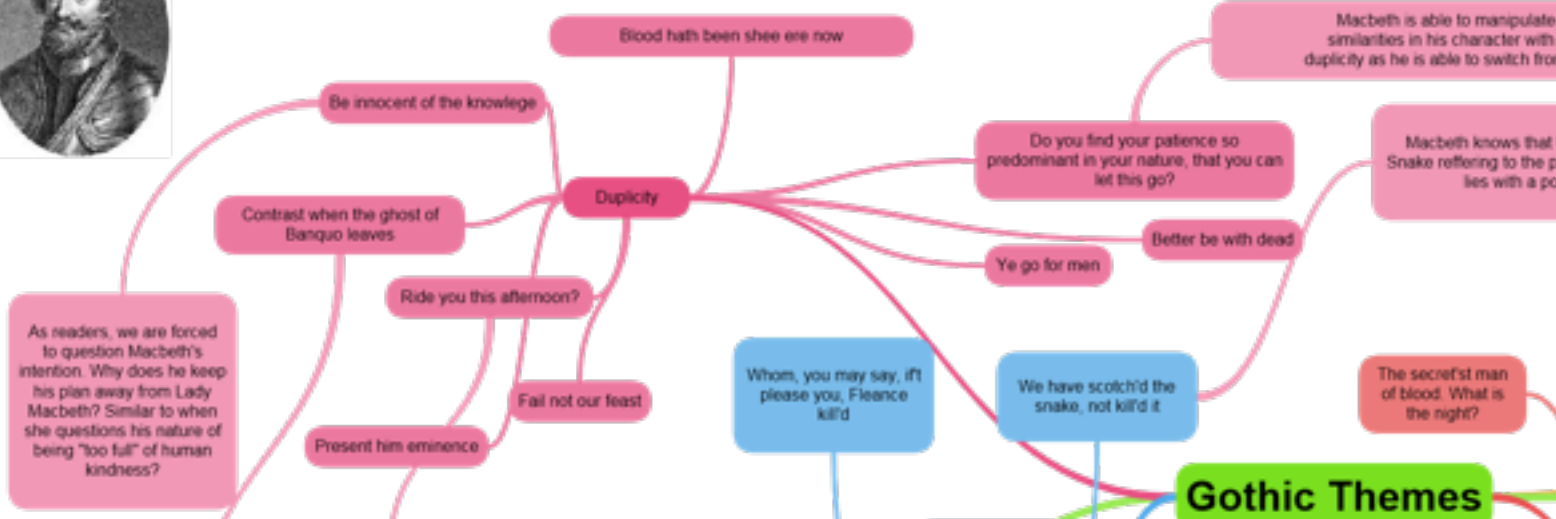
CHARACTER TABLE

Characters	QUOTE	DETAILS
Macbeth		
Lady Macbeth		
The Three Witches		
Banquo		
King Duncan		
Malcolm		
Macduff		
Lady Macduff		
Fleance		
Hecate		
Lennox		
Ross		
The Murderers		
Porter		
Donalbain		



Style Study Matrix



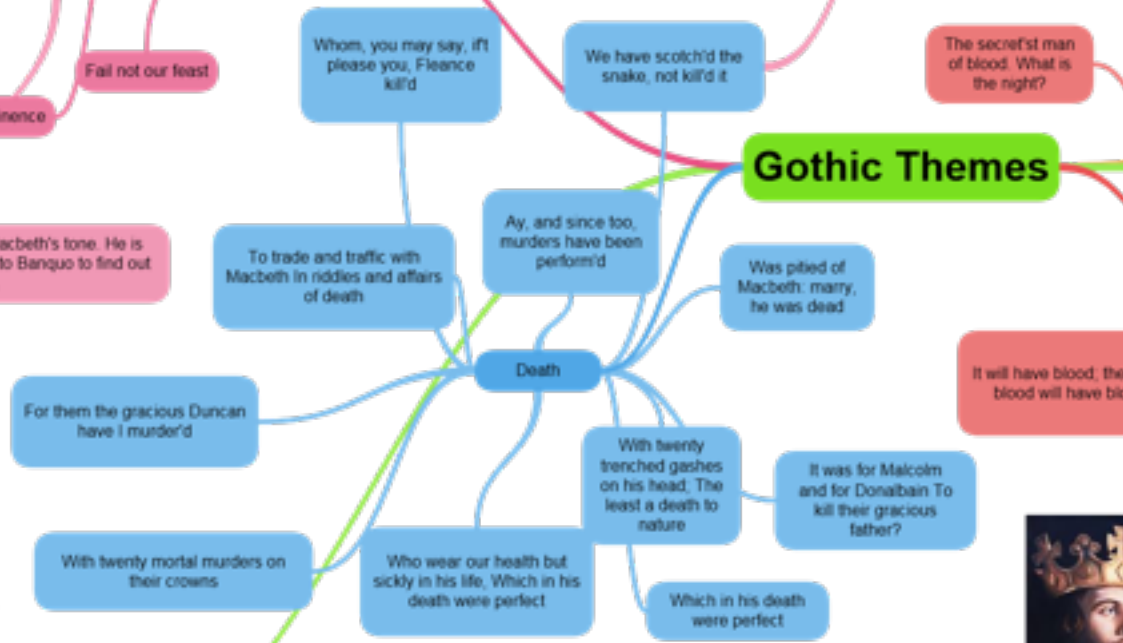


As readers, we are forced to question Macbeth's intention. Why does he keep his plan away from Lady Macbeth? Similar to when she questions his nature of being "too full" of human kindness?

Certainly, there is duplicity in Macbeth's tone. He is consciously being overly-friendly to Banquo to find out information.

Macbeth is almost able to switch "on" and "off" his emotions. When Banquo leaves, he is able to appear normal to guests.

Gothic Themes



ere to black Hecates summons

The table's full

The Supernatural

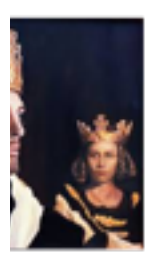
Come, seeling night

Why how now, Hecate, you look so angrily?

[Enter the Ghost of Banquo and sits in Macbeth's place]

To the weird sisters. More shall they speak





CAPTAIN

And Fortune, on his damnèd quarrel smiling,
 Show'd like a rebel's whore. But all's too weak;
 For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name)
 Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel,
 Which smoked with bloody execution, (1.2.16-20)
 Basically, the captain says here that Macbeth should have died in battle—but he was stronger than his fate. If this is true, then Macbeth has no one to blame but himself. But notice that the captain calls Macbeth "damned quarry": Macbeth may escape fortune this time, but that "rebel's whore" will get him in the end. (Hey, Shakespeare's words, not ours.)

BANQUO

Look, how our partner's rapt. (1.3.156)
 "Rapt" comes from the Latin word "raptus," which means to be "seized" or "kidnapped." (Brain snack: It's the same word that gives us "rape," which clues you into the way that women were viewed as property—rape was a crime against a man's property rather than a crime against a woman.) But back to the play: if Macbeth is "rapt," then he's been "seized" by something outside of his control. Does that mean we let him off the hook?

THIRD WITCH

All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter! [...]
 Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.
 So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo! (1.3.53;70-71)
 Tra-la-la, there goes Macbeth innocently walking along when all of sudden the witches show up to tempt him by talking about the awesome power that's going to be his. Right? Or are they just giving voice to his secret desire?

FIRST WITCH

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!

SECOND WITCH

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!

THIRD WITCH

All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter! (1.3.51-53)

Million-dollar question: are the witches (1) playing on Macbeth's ambition and planting the idea of murder in his head; (2) really privy to some secret info about the way things are going to go down; or (3) actually controlling fate in some way?

FATE & FREEWILL

KEY QUOTES...

POWER

DUNCAN: My plenteous joys,

Wanton in fulness, seek to hide themselves
 In drops of sorrow.— Sons, kinsmen, thanes,
 And you whose places are the nearest, know
 We will establish our estate upon
 Our eldest, Malcolm, whom we name hereafter
 The Prince of Cumberland; which honor must
 Not unaccompanied invest him only,
 But signs of nobleness, like stars, shall shine
 On all deservers.—From hence to Inverness
 And bind us further to you. (1.4.39-49)
 When King Duncan names his son, Malcolm, the Prince of Cumberland, he's essentially naming him the heir apparent to the throne. Fun fact: he's seriously out of order here, since Scotland was an elective monarchy at the time. This is all Macbeth needs to decide that Malcolm and King Duncan are nothing but an obstacle in his path to ultimate power.

MACBETH

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 And nothing is but what is not. (1.3.147-155)

History Snack: Regicide was a pretty common occurrence in 11th century Scotland, the time period of Macbeth, but it definitely was not common in early 17th century England. The Divine Right of Kings said that monarchs were God's appointed representatives on earth, so rebellion wasn't just treason—it would actually send you straight to hell. James even wrote about it in [The Trew Law of Free Monarchies](#) (1598), where he claimed that "The state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth; for kings are not only God's lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon God's throne, but even by God himself are called gods." In other words,

DUNCAN

There's no art

**To find the mind's construction in the face.
He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust. (1.4.13-16)**

Here, King Duncan says that the former Thane of Cawdor (who turned out to be a traitor) seemed to be a "gentleman" he could "trust"; ergo, it's impossible to know a man's mind by reading his face. Um, Duncan? Maybe you should listen to yourself and stop putting all your trust in the next treacherous Thane of Cawdor.

MACBETH

So foul and fair a day I have not seen. (1.3.39)

Hmm. This sounds familiar. Didn't the weird sisters just say almost the exact same thing? Has Macbeth seen this play before, or does he already have some kind of psychic connection with the weird sisters?

MACBETH [aside]

**The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step
On which I must fall down, or else
o'erleap,
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide
your fires;
Let not light see my black and deep
desires.
The eye wink at the hand; yet let
that be
Which the eye fears, when it is
done, to see. (1.4.55-60)**

Macbeth describes his ambition as being "black and deep desires," which makes it sound... well, wrong. Is ambition okay in any context, or are we all supposed to let fate and chance toss us around?

VERSIONS OF REALITY

KEY QUOTES...

AMBITION

ALL

**Fair is foul, and foul is fair;
Hover through the fog and
filthy air. (1.1.12-13)**

Clearly, Shakespeare's been traveling to **Beijing**. (Rim shot.) Unfunny jokes about pollution aside, the witches set us up here to mistrust everything. In the fog, it's hard to tell what's really there. Are they even there?

BANQUO [...]

My noble partner

**You greet with present grace and great prediction
Of noble having and of royal hope,
That he seems rapt withal. To me you speak not.
If you can look into the seeds of time,
And say which grain will grow and which will not,
Speak, then, to me, who neither beg nor fear
Your favors nor your hate. (1.3.57-64)**

Uh-oh. Someone's feeling left out. Banquo wants a prophecy, too—although he seems to be much more chill about it, claiming that he doesn't care one way or another. But if that's true, you'd think he wouldn't bother trying to look into the future.

MACBETH

**My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man
That function is smother'd in surmise,
and nothing is but what is not. (1.3.52-55)**

Slow down there, Macbeth, because these ladies haven't said a word about murder. The fact that his first thought is about killing the king is mighty suspicious—almost as though they've just awoken a murderous ambition that's been there all along.

LADY MACBETH

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be
What thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it.
Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear
And chastise with the valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round,
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crowned withal. (1.5.15-20;28-33)

According to Lady Macbeth, her husband is ambitious, but he's also too "kind" to do what it takes to murder Duncan so that he, Macbeth, can be king. So what's a wife to do? Lady Macbeth plans to "chastise" Macbeth with the "valour of [her] tongue," which is another way of saying she's going to nag her husband into taking action so he can be "crown'd withal." This speech establishes Lady Macbeth as the dominant partner in the relationship, which inverts typical 17th century gender and social roles. Since husbands were supposed to "rule" their wives in the same way that kings ruled countries, Lady Macbeth's plan is just another version of treason: taking power that doesn't belong to you.

BANQUO :You should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so. (1.3.47-49)

"Should" be: why? Because they look like women, or because they're obviously supernatural? And does the presence of a beard automatically disqualify someone from being a woman? (Don't tell the moustache-bleaching industry.)

FIRST WITCH: When shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

SECOND WITCH: When the hurly-burly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

FIRST WITCH: I come, Graymalkin.

SECOND WITCH

Paddock calls.

THIRD WITCH

Anon.

ALL

Fair is foul, and foul is fair;

Hover through the fog and filthy air. (1.1.1-13)

The audience might not get a look at the stage directions, but all the clues are here: the women speak in rhythmic, chant-like lines (check out "Writing Style" for a close look at their language); they call out to their familiars—and, since "Graymalkin" was a common name for a cat, the audience would have gotten the reference, sort of like saying, "I come, Crookshanks/ Hedwig calls"; and, finally, they end with that creepy inversion: fair is foul, and foul is fair." **Supernatural?** Super creepy, at least.

FIRST WITCH

I'll drain him dry as hay.
Sleep shall neither night nor day
Hang upon his penthouse lid.
He shall live a man forbid.
Weary sev'nights, nine times nine,
Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine.
Though his bark cannot be lost,
Yet it shall be tempest-tossed.
(1.3.19-26)

Here, the First Witch says that she's going to punish a sailor's wife by "drain[ing] [the sailor] dry as hay," which means that she's going to make the sailor impotent: no children, and no sex. Macbeth is definitely worried about male impotence—even Lady Macbeth makes a jab at her husband about it. Is that just a low blow, or does Macbeth actually associate sexual potency with masculinity?

FIRST WITCH

I'll drain him dry as hay.
Sleep shall neither night nor day
Hang upon his penthouse lid.
He shall live a man forbid.
Weary sev'nights, nine times nine,
Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine.
Though his bark cannot be lost,
Yet it shall be tempest-tossed.
Look what I have. (1.3.15-27)

All the sailor's wife did was refuse to share her chestnuts, and now the sisters are going to make him impotent and infertile. You do not want to tick off a witch. (Oh, but those chestnuts? Sometimes a chestnut isn't just a chestnut, if you know what we mean.)

GENDER SUPERNATURAL

BANQUO

That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' Earth
And yet are on 't?—Live you? Or are you aught
That man may question?
You should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so. (1.3.42-44;47-49)

If Macbeth were a horror movie—which it kind of is—then Banquo would be the skeptic who gets killed because he refuses to believe. Where Macbeth accepts the supernatural unquestioningly, doing some pretty dumb things like following a floating dagger and arguing publically with a ghost, Banquo isn't to completely discard his reason and rationality. Unfortunately, that turns out to be the wrong choice.

DUNCAN

**What bloody man is that? He can report,
As seemeth by his plight, of the revolt
The newest state. (1.2.1-3)**

(1) We all but start with a bloody man, which doesn't bode well for the eventual body count (2) This guy is our king. Shouldn't he be a little bloody, too? Is he just letting everyone else fight his battles for him?

MALCOLM

**Say to the King the knowledge of the broil
As thou didst leave it.**

CAPTAIN

**Doubtful it stood,
As two spent swimmers that do cling together
And choke their art. (1.2.7-11)**

The Captain waxes poetic with his description here, as though violence is something that can be beautiful and noble—even glorious. Does Macbeth glorify violence?

CAPTAIN

**For brave Macbeth (well he
deserves that name),
Disdaining fortune, with his
brandish'd steel,
Which smoked with bloody
execution,
Like valor's minion carved out his
passage
Till he faced the slave;
Which ne'er shook hands, nor
bade farewell to him,
Till he unseamed him from the
nave to th' chops,
And fixed his head upon our
battlements. (1.2.18-26)**

Basically the first thing we know about Macbeth is that he's disemboweled—"unseam'd him from the nave to the chops"—and then beheaded someone. We're not sure if we're supposed to be impressed or a little afraid, but Duncan thinks this is so awesome that Macbeth gets rewarded with Cawdor. Hm. We're obviously in a violent, warrior culture here, so maybe we shouldn't be so surprised when Duncan ends up dead.

**VIOLENCE
KEY QUOTES...**

TIME

LADY MACBETH

**Thy letters have transported me
beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant. (1.6.64-66)**

When Lady Macbeth reads her husband's letter (bearing news of the witch's prophesies), her thoughts immediately turn toward the "future" that she imagines for herself and her husband. Her dreams of being the wife of a king are so vivid and so real to her, it's as though time has completely collapsed, and she feels the "future in the instant."

MACBETH [Aside]

**Come what come
may,
Time and the hour
runs through the
roughest day.
(1.3.163-164)**

After hearing the witch's prophesy that he'll become king, Macbeth pushes thoughts of "murder" from his mind and says he won't lift a finger against the present king —instead, he'll leave his future to "chance." Too bad that resolution doesn't last.

BANQUO My noble partner

**You greet with present grace and great prediction
Of noble having and of royal hope,
That he seems rapt withal. To me you speak not.
If you can look into the seeds of time
And say which grain will grow and which will not
Speak, then, to me, who neither beg nor fear
Your favors nor your hate. (1.3.57-64)**

We kind of love this metaphor of time being like a field of seeds, full of many possible futures. Which ones will grow? And can we affect it, through fertilizer, hoeing, watering, or neglect?

Macbeth: THEMES



AMBITION



POWER



VERSIONS OF REALITY



GENDER



THE SUPERNATURAL



VIOLENCE



TIME

THEMES

FATE AND FREEWILL	POWER	AMBITION	VERSIONS OF REALITY
<p>The dog ate my homework. The devil made me do it. She forced me to eat that apple. People have been coming up with excuses for their actions since Ugg first had to apologize for hitting Zog with a rock. (The saber-toothed tiger made me do it?) And the favorite excuse of great tragedy is almost always "fate." But Macbeth questions that excuse. Is it Macbeth's fate to be a traitor and a king-killer? Or is he alone responsible for his actions, and did he freely choose his choice? The play pits the prophecies of the three weird sisters against its own dramatization of Macbeth's internal conflict—and it's not clear which wins. In fact, fate and free will might just be working together.</p>	<p>Absolute power corrupts absolutely... unless, of course, your absolute power is a god-given right. In Shakespeare's time, the Divine Right of Kings was the idea that the power of kings comes directly from God. Guess who was a big fan of the Divine Right of Kings? Our man Will's very own patron, James I. In Macbeth, power is natural—until it's not. When Macbeth kills Duncan, he goes against the very law of nature and God by killing his king, and then gets killed in return. According to the play, it's okay to kill King Macbeth because King Macbeth is actually a tyrant. But who gets the power to decide what tyranny looks like?</p>	<p>You'd think it was enough to be the nation's greatest warrior and Thane of Cawdor. What more could a man want? Apparently, a lot. Once Macbeth has had a taste of power, he's willing to kill anyone (men, women, and children) who he thinks might undermine his seat on Scotland's throne. But Macbeth doesn't get to enjoy being a gangsta for long. He puts his own desires before the good of his country, and, in the end, is destroyed by that ambition. So, maybe you should lay off that nefarious plot you're cooking up to become class president: according to Macbeth, the power and glory just isn't worth it.</p>	<p>Bearded witches, severed fingers, and floating daggers: Macbeth is more fun than a haunted house at the state fair. And, like that haunted house, nothing is quite what it seems. Fair is foul; foul is fair; and the rivers of blood turn out to be corn syrup and food coloring. But once you're in that rickety cart jerking around the tracks, can you really be sure that the skeleton in the corner is fake?</p>

THEMES

GENDER	SUPERNATURAL	VIOLENCE	TIME
<p>Ah, 11th-century Scotland: a time when men were men, and women were ... either bearded witches, unsexed nags, or dead. (Yeah, did you notice that not a single woman is left alive at the end of the play?) Shakespeare may be known for strong female heroines, but they're not hanging around this play. Not that Macbeth is full of strong male heroes, either. We get a lot of examples of how not to do it, and in the end we're left with Macduff and Malcolm as our role models. So, which one are you going to look up to: the man who left his family to the not-so-tender mercies of Macbeth's murderous crew; or the new king, whose first impulse was to run away?</p>	<p>Are the three weird sisters witches, or are they just ... three weird sisters? Is there really a floating dagger, or is Macbeth just making up excuses? Does he really see a ghost, or is it just the impression of his guilty conscience? Do you believe in magic? In Macbeth, the supernatural isn't just for stories around the fireplace; it's a real, everyday fact of life. Almost, you might say, natural. Unless, of course, it isn't. To figure out what's going on with all the witches and ghosts, you have to decide whether you believe in fate. Is Macbeth seeing daggers and ghosts because someone outside his control is controlling him? Or is he simply seeing the fevered imaginings of a guilty and freely choosing mind?</p> <p>QUESTIONS CONTENT START</p>	<p>Do violent TV shows and video games actually make kids more violent? Maybe. But if they do, then you're going to have to lock up Shakespeare with a MA-17+ rating, too, because Macbeth's body count is out of control. And it's not just aliens or zombies being brutally slain: it's women and kids, too. As with all of Shakespeare's tragedies, Macbeth piles on the violence. Just as we ask whether it's necessary or gratuitous in the latest James Bond movie, we can ask the same thing here: is there a good reason for all the violence, or did people in the seventeenth century like to watch blood being spilled just as much as we do?</p>	<p>Macbeth's most famous speech begins "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow," so, yes: we're going to say that time matters. (And, to be honest, this theme takes the Tough-o-Meter up a notch or two, but we think you can handle it.) Basically, the idea is that time literally comes to a halt when Macbeth murders King Duncan and takes the throne. All of the events that take place between the murder and the final battle seem to happen out of time, almost in some sort of alternate reality, in some witch-land outside of history. Macduff's final remark that the "time is free" now that Macbeth is defeated and Malcolm is set to take his rightful position as hereditary monarch clues us in to the relationship between the seeming disruption in linear time and the disruption of lineal succession: without its rightful ruler, a country has no future.</p>

SYMBOLISM

Pretty standard stuff here. Darkness indicates something bad is about to happen; light is associated with life and God. Here's a look at some specifics:

From the first act, the cover of night is invoked whenever anything terrible is going to happen. Lady Macbeth, for example, asks "thick night" to come with the "smoke of hell," so her knife won't see the wound it makes in the peacefully sleeping King (1.5.57-58). The literal darkness corresponds to the evil or "dark" act she plans to commit.

And then, when she calls for the murderous spirits to prevent "heaven" from "peep[ing] through the blanket of the dark to cry 'Hold, Hold!'" she implies that light (here associated with God, heaven, and goodness) offers protection from evil and is the only thing that could stop her from murdering Duncan (1.5.60-61). So, it's no surprise to us that, when Lady Macbeth starts going crazy, she insists on always having a candle or, "light" about her (5.1.23-24). We get the impression that she thinks the light is going to protect her against the evil forces she summoned... but no such luck.

Light/ Life

Macbeth responds to the news of Lady Macbeth's suicide by proclaiming "out, out brief candle" (5.5.26), turning the candle's flame has become a metaphor for her short life and sudden death. Similarly, Banquo's torchlight (the one that illuminates him just enough so his murderers can see what they're doing) is also snuffed out the moment he's killed (3.3.27). And both of these incidents recall an event from the evening King Duncan is murdered —Lennox reports that the fire in his chimney was mysteriously "blown" out (2.3.63).

Straightforward, right? The one thing we're stuck on is that this whole play is about inversion: fair being foul, and foul being fair; men being women, women being men; and the whole regicide business. Are there any moments that make this dark/light dichotomy more complex? Or is this one area where light is just light, and dark is just dark?

After King Duncan is murdered by Macbeth, we learn from the Old Man and Ross that some strange and "unnatural" things have been going on. Even though it's the middle of the day, the "dark night strangles the traveling lamp," which literally means that darkness fills the sky and chokes out the sun, i.e. an eclipse (2.4.9). Could this be another allusion to the way the king's life has been extinguished (kings are often associated with the sun's power) and his power usurped by "darkness" (Macbeth)?

Probably. And in this case, nature itself becomes a symbol for the political struggle. That makes sense, if you think that kingship in the play is shown to be part of the natural order, something handed down from God. (See our "Power" theme for more about the Divine Right of Kings.)

And that's not all. We also learn that an owl was seen killing a falcon and Duncan's horses went wild and began eating each other (2.4.13-24). Clearly, nature is out of whack, right? Owls are supposed to prey on mice —not go around eating larger birds of prey like falcons. And Duncan's horses? Once tame, they "broke their stalls [...] contending 'gainst obedience" just before they ate each other (2.4.21).

It sounds like all of nature is in a state of rebellion, bucking their natural roles and "contending" against the natural order, just like Macbeth has upset the natural order of things by killing the king.

Dark and Stormy

And don't forget that the play begins with a terrible storm (likely conjured by the witches) that's associated with dark forces and also the rebellion against King Duncan.

FIRST WITCH

When shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

SECOND WITCH

When the hurlyburly's done,
When the battle's lost and won. (1.1.1-4)

The word "hurlyburly" means "tumult" and can apply to either or both the literal storm and "the battle" that's being waged between the king's forces and the rebels (led by the traitorous Macdonwald and Cawdor). In Macbeth, the human world and the natural world are one and the same—and Macbeth's regicide throws both of them topsy-turvy.

SYMBOLISM

When Macbeth visits the weird sisters and demands to know whether or not Banquo's heirs will become kings, the witches conjure a vision of eight kings, the last of which holds a mirror that reflects many more such kings. Cool vision, right?

Not to Macbeth. See, these are Banquo's heirs, which means that Macbeth's sons aren't going to become king which means Macbeth had better watch his back.

But it would have been pretty cool to Shakespeare's audience, because, as the stage directions tell us, the last king is carrying "two-fold balls and treble scepters" (4.1.136). These two balls (or orbs) are a symbolic representation of King James I of England (VI of Scotland), who traced his lineage back to Banquo. At James's coronation ceremony in England (1603), James held two orbs (one representing England and one representing Scotland). It looks like Shakespeare has just paid a nice little compliment to his patron.

The drunken Porter responds to the knocking at the castle's gates just after Macbeth has murdered King Duncan. As he does so, he imagines there's a Catholic "equivocator" at the door "who committed treason enough for God's sake" (2.3.8;10).

On the one hand, an "equivocator" is a person who speaks ambiguously or doesn't tell the whole truth, which shows up over and over in Macbeth. The witches tell partial truths when they make predictions; Macbeth frequently bends the truth as he deliberates about whether or not it's OK to murder the king; he equivocates when he justifies (to his henchmen) that murdering Banquo is acceptable; and even Banquo has some ambiguous thoughts about the prophecy that he'll father kings.

On the other hand, the word "equivocator" is most likely an allusion to the treatise written by the Jesuit Henry Garnet, who encouraged Catholics to speak ambiguously or, "equivocate" when they were being questioned by Protestant inquisitors (so they wouldn't be persecuted for their religious beliefs).

What does that have to do with anything? Henry Garnet was tried and executed for his role in the [Gunpowder Plot of 1605](#), when a group of Catholics planned to blow up the King and Parliament (they stored kegs of gunpowder in a nearby building). The plot failed, but it was a majorly upsetting experience for everyone involved—and it's likely that a lot of the audience members would have associated the scene of Macbeth returning from the room where he's murdered the sleeping king with this terrorist plot. Ooh. We just got chills.

SYMBOLISM

Get out the hydrogen peroxide, because this play needs it: there's blood all over. From the bleeding Captain in the beginning to Macbeth's bleeding head at the end, literal blood drips from every page. But in our view, it's the imagined blood that really counts.

When Macbeth considers murdering Duncan, he sees a floating "dagger of the mind" that points him in the direction of the sleeping king's room (2.1.50). As Macbeth wonders if his mind is playing tricks on him, the dagger becomes covered in imaginary blood, which anticipates the way that very real daggers will be soiled when Macbeth murders King Duncan.

But where does this dagger come from? Did the witches conjure it up? Is it a product of Macbeth's imagination? Is Macbeth being tempted to follow or warned not to pursue the hallucination? Given what happens later, we're tempted to say that it's Macbeth's own vision, an externalization of his guilt. Out, Out, Damned Spot

Eventually, imagined blood comes to symbolize guilt for both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. After he murders Duncan, Macbeth supposes that even "Great Neptune's ocean" could not wash away his stain of guilt (2.2.78) after Lady Macbeth tells him to "go get some water / And wash this filthy witness" from his hands (2.2.60-61).

Obviously, water isn't going to get these two clean. Lady Macbeth spends most of the play's last acts seeing the imaginary "spot" of blood she can't seem to wash from her guilty hands (5.1.33). But it's Macbeth who really spells it out for us. Once he kills his friend Banquo, who returns as a ghost, Macbeth tells that "blood will have blood" (3.4.151). His image of wading in a river of blood sums up the lesson: you might just as well keep on going once you start, because that stuff is never going to wash out.

This play, unfortunately, is full of dead babies and slain children. And it's hard to make jokes about that, even if they are fictional and several hundred years old. The witches throw into their cauldron a "finger of birth-strangled babe" and then conjure an apparition of a bloody child that says Macbeth will not be harmed by any man "of woman born" (4.1.30;91); Fleance witnesses his father's murder before nearly being killed himself; Macbeth kills Young Siward; and Macduff's young son, his "pretty chicken," is called an "egg" before he's murdered. So, what's the deal?

The play is fixated on what happens when family lines are extinguished, which is exactly what Macbeth has in mind when he orders the murders of his enemies' children. (His willingness to kill kids, by the way, is a clear sign that he's passed the point of no return.) We can trace all of this back to Macbeth's anger that Banquo's "children shall be kings" (1.3.89), but not Macbeth's: he laments that, when the witches predicted he would be king, they placed a "fruitless crown" upon his head and a "barren scepter" in his hands (3.1.66-67).

There's also a sense of major political and lineal disorder here. When Macbeth kills Duncan and takes the crown, Malcolm (King Duncan's heir) is denied "the due of birth" (3.6.29). By the play's end, order is restored with the promise of Malcolm being crowned as rightful king. And, we also know that Banquo's line will rule for generations to come. It's fitting that, in the end, Macbeth is killed by a man who was "untimely ripped" from his mother's womb.

The way these characters keep talking about clothes, you'd think there was a 30% off sale at Old Navy. But clothes aren't just keeping the nobles warm in their drafty castles; they're also functioning symbolically to represent these people's stations in life—earned, or stolen.

When Macbeth first hears that he's been named the Thane of Cawdor, he asks Angus why he is being dressed in "borrowed robes" (1.3.115). Macbeth doesn't literally mean that he's going to wear the old thane's hand-me-down clothing. Here, "robes" is a metaphor for the title (Thane of Cawdor) that Macbeth doesn't think belongs to him. And later, Angus says that Macbeth's kingly "title" is ill-fitting and hangs on him rather loosely, "like a giant's robe / Upon a dwarfish thief" (5.2.24-25).

Angus isn't accusing Macbeth of stealing and wearing the old king's favorite jacket, he's accusing Macbeth of stealing the king's power (by killing him) and then parading around with the king's title, which doesn't seem to suit him at all. Famous literary critic Cleanth Brooks has something to say about that image:

The crucial point of the comparison, it seems to me, lies not in the smallness of the man and the largeness of the robes, but rather in the fact that—whether the man be large or small—these are not his garments; in Macbeth's case they are actually stolen garments. Macbeth is uncomfortable in them because he is continually conscious of the fact that they do not belong to him. There is a further point, and it is one of the utmost importance; the oldest symbol for the hypocrite is that of a man who cloaks his true nature under a disguise. (source, 48)

Keep an eye out in the play for other times when clothing shows up—or even cloth in general. Like those banners Macbeth hangs right before battle; does he actually believe they're going to help?

SETTING

Where It All Goes Down

Scotland and England in the 11th Century

Get your popcorn: the play opens on a foggy heath amidst a terrible thunder storm, so you know you're in for a laugh-riot of a play.

Not. Macbeth is a dark, dreary play with a lot of dark, dreary action taking place under the cover of darkness, whether at Macbeth's first castle, Inverness, or later, at the palace in Dunsinane. Despite these set changes, Macbeth doesn't go into a lot of detail about it's setting—that's why, like a lot of Shakespeare plays, it can be adapted to pretty much any time period the director fancies. Gangsters in Australia? [Been there](#). Soviet era? [Done that](#).

Though the play is kind of set in the 11th century, based on [Holinshed's Chronicles](#), Shakespeare isn't into historical accuracy. (Historical accuracy wouldn't be invented for another two hundred or so years.) So, the play is full of allusions to contemporary, 17th century events, like the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 in Act II, Scene iii (see "[Symbols: The Equivocator](#)" for more on that, and to King James I (see "[Symbols: Eight Kings](#)" for our take on that.) Plus, the actors would have been dressed in 17th century clothing.

[Aye, Lassie](#)

There is one quirk we want to bring up: Macbeth is the only Shakespearean play that's set in Scotland. This likely has something to do with the fact that after Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603, King James VI of Scotland was crowned King James I of England, just a few years before the play was written. Since all plays were performed at the discretion of the monarch, Shakespeare had a major interest in stroking James's ego.

Other than having more "Macs" than an Apple store, though, is there anything peculiarly Scottish about this play?

GENRE

Tragedy

Was Macbeth the greatest tragedy ever written? Maybe. But before we go throwing around words like "greatest," lets take a peek at our handy-dandy tragedy checklist:

Dramatic work: Check. Macbeth's a play, that's for sure.

Serious or somber theme: The play's all about what causes people to commit evil acts (like murder). So, check.

Hero's got a major flaw of character or conflict with some overpowering force: Check. Macbeth's got some serious ambition (so does his wife), which makes him willing to kill in order to secure his position as King of Scotland. Plus, once Macbeth eliminates Duncan, he can't seem to stop killing people. Is there some other "overpowering force" at work too? Keep reading.

Hero is destined for destruction and downfall: Here's where Shakespeare mixes things up. On the one hand, the "weird sisters" (three witches) prophesize that Macbeth will become King of Scotland. "Weird" comes from the old English ("wyrð") word for "fate" (see these ladies' "Character Analysis for more about that), which aligns the witches with the three fates, who are supposed to control man's destiny.

So, does that mean the witches control Macbeth's fate? If the answer to this question is yes, then Macbeth is destined to murder Duncan, become king, and get then later get his own head lopped off by his disgruntled countryman. But this isn't necessarily the case. In fact, the play goes out of its way to dramatize Macbeth's deliberation about whether or not he should kill the King. What's more, the three sisters never say a word about murder. Are the weird sisters just a catalyst for the murderous ambition that's maybe been inside Macbeth all along? There's lots more room for interpretation here so go ahead and take a stab at it.

Ends in death but with the promise of continuity: Not all tragedies end in death but all of Shakespeare's tragedies do. The question isn't whether things will end badly, but how badly. In Macbeth, it's pretty bad—Macduff's entire family is murdered, along with Banquo and his son, and, of course, Macbeth himself.

But despite the deaths of individuals in the play (King Duncan, the guards, Macduff's wife and kids, Lady Macbeth, the Siward's son, etc.), Shakespeare is also interested in the restoration of political order. With Malcolm on their thrones, things (we hope) are going to get back to normal—culminating in Shakespeare's very own king James I, who traced his lineage back to Banquo.

So there you have it: Macbeth is definitely a tragedy. Is it the greatest ever written? At the least, it's a strong contender.

Bring on the tough stuff - there's not just one right answer.

1. The last scene in the play, where Malcolm blesses all who have fought nobly on his side and promises to punish all who helped the traitors, is eerily reminiscent of the first scene with his father, Duncan. Is this play commenting that it's just the nature of history to repeat itself?
2. Macbeth starts the play as a hero and ends up a tyrant. Does this mean there are no truly evil people and power corrupts, or just that some people have bad judgment when choosing heroes?
3. Lady Macbeth is often hailed as the source of Macbeth's evil, but she never talks about her own gain. Even when she should be all happy as queen, she takes her own life. Is Lady Macbeth just caught in fate here? Was she just trying to do the good thing by being a supportive wife? Is good in the eye of the beholder?
4. The three witches, the weird sisters, are also often blamed for planting the seed of treachery in Macbeth's mind yet the root of the word "wyrd" goes back to the Anglo Saxon word for "fate." Does thinking something is fated make it happen? How much personal agency do we have against fate?
5. The good of other characters seems magnified when called out against Macbeth's evil. If not for Macbeth, Duncan would've died an aged king, Malcolm would never have tested his mettle in battle, and Macduff would've just been a good, quiet Thane of Fife, not a warrior-hero. Does it truly take the worst of times to see the best in men's natures?
6. Is there anything good about ambition? Are there any kinds of acceptable ambitions, or are we all just supposed to be content with our lots, whether we're kings or servants? (Or witches.)
7. Straight talk: are there really witches, floating daggers, and invisible spots of blood or do the spooky, supernatural occurrences merely reflect the characters' interior thoughts? And what difference does it make?
8. Macbeth has been adapted in India and Japan; it's been set in the Chicago underworld, the Melbourne Mafia, and in small-town Pennsylvania. What makes Macbeth's themes so universal? Where would you set it?

Questions About Fate and Free Will

- 1 What is Macbeth's initial response to the weird sisters' prophesy? Does his attitude change at some point? If so, when does the change occur?
- 2 Macbeth is repeatedly described as giving the witches his "rapt" attention. Why is that? What does this suggest about Macbeth's choices?
- 3 Do all of the witches' prophesies come true?
- 4 What role does Lady Macbeth play in her husband's actions? Is she always involved in Macbeth's decision making?

Questions About Ambition

- 1 What compels Macbeth to murder Duncan? What drives him to continue committing heinous acts after the initial murder?
- 2 What does Lady Macbeth say about her husband's ambition? What does this reveal about her desires?
- 3 If Macbeth believed he was fated to have the crown, can he be credited (or blamed) with ambition in trying to gain it?
- 4 What fuels Malcolm's interest in defending Scotland? Do his actions up to the final battle indicate that he's prepared to be King? Is he ambitious? What is the difference between him and Macbeth, if they're after the same throne?

Questions About Power

- 1 What kind of a ruler is King Duncan? How would you compare his leadership to Macbeth's?
- 2 What is the play's attitude toward the murder of King Duncan? Toward the death of Macbeth?
- 3 In Act iv, Scene iii, Malcolm pretends that he thinks he'll become a tyrant once he's crowned king. Why does he do this? What's Macduff's response? What's the overall purpose of this scene?
- 4 Does the play ever portray an ideal monarch? If yes, what does that monarch look like? If no, why do you think the play never shows us a good king?

Questions about Versions of Reality.

- 1 At the beginning of the play, the witches say "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." What in the world does this mean, and how does that topsy-turvy feeling resonate in the play?
- 2 How do Macbeth and Banquo respond to the witches' prophesy in act one, scene three? Does it seem real to them? Why or why not?
- 3 What kinds of hallucinations and visions occur in the play? What purpose do they serve?
- 4 Why is a doctor called in to tend to Lady Macbeth? What's wrong with her?

Questions About Gender

- 1 How does Lady Macbeth convince her husband to kill Duncan? Could (according to the logic of this play) a man have used a similar strategy on a woman, or a man on a man? Or does this kind of convincing only work one way?
- 2 What is meant when Lady Macbeth says Macbeth is too "full o'th'milk of human kindness"? Why "milk"? Is this description gendered?
- 3 How does the play define "manhood"? What is it that makes one a "man" in Macbeth?
- 4 How are women characters portrayed in Macbeth? What kinds of roles do they play? Is "womanhood" or "femininity" defined in the way that masculinity is?

Questions About The Supernatural

- 1 How do Banquo and Macbeth react when they first encounter the weird sisters in Act I, Scene iii? Are they surprised, afraid, confused?
- 2 The witches accurately predict Macbeth's future, but do they control his fate? Why or why not?
- 3 How would you characterize the witches' speech? What does it suggest about their characters? How does it set them apart from other characters in the play?
- 4 Are there connections or similarities between the witches and any other characters in the play? If so, what are they, exactly?

Questions About Violence

- 1 Most characters in the play have won their honors on the battlefield. To what degree could you describe politics in Macbeth as a kind of battlefield? Is this political violence acceptable.
- 2 Nature always seems to be rebelling against the unnatural acts going down in Dunsinane, yet violence is a central part of the natural world. Are humans any more than animals here?
- 3 The play ends with as much violence as the original battle against another traitor to the crown. Is there a suggestion here of cyclical and never-ending violence? Is there any way to argue against Macbeth's claim that blood demands blood? And **where have all the flowers gone?**
- 4 When Malcolm wants to grieve, Macduff tells him instead that violence in the name of Scotland is a better cure. Yet when Macduff finds out his family is murdered, he grieves first before taking revenge. Is violence a justified reaction to a wrong, or is it just an emotion out of control that can be rightfully calmed with thought?

Questions About Time

- 1 What is the weird sisters' relationship to time? Are they the only figures capable of seeing into the future?
- 2 What kind of future does Lady Macbeth imagine for herself and her husband? Do either of the Macbeths spend much time imagining the future? (And what do you make of the fact that they apparently don't have children, even though Lady Macbeth talks about breastfeeding?)
- 3 How does Shakespeare's interest in representing the past (11th century Scottish history) in Macbeth relate the play's overall portrayal of time?

In Macbeth, ambition can be good if it's used for the best interests of the country. Macbeth portrays excessive ambition as unnatural and dangerous, with the ability to ruin individuals and entire countries.

Macbeth leaves us hanging. It never answers the question of whether free will or fate determines a person's future. Macbeth may be fated to be king, but he decides all on his own that he will murder Duncan in order to obtain the crown. His actions suggest that fate may be predetermined, but free will determines how a people reach their destinies.

In Macbeth, **regicide** (killing a king) is unnatural and evil but **tyrannicide** (killing a tyrant) is A-OK. Although King Duncan is a good man and a virtuous king, he's too "meek" to rule effectively. Macbeth, on the other hand, rules Scotland like a tyrant. The play, then, suggests that a truly good monarch should be strike a balance somewhere between Macbeth and Duncan.

Truth and reality are often murky in Macbeth and the distinction between what is "foul" and what is "fair" is frequently blurred. Lady Macbeth's hallucination of blood stained hands is no hallucination: no matter what she does, she can never wash away her guilt for the murder of Duncan.

For Lady Macbeth and her husband, masculinity is synonymous with cruelty and violence. In the play, women are portrayed as dangerous forces who can emasculate and ruin men.

Macbeth consistently undercuts the reality of the supernatural by focusing on the Macbeths' internal guilt and struggle. In Macbeth, the supernatural represents the fear of the unknown.

The reason that Macbeth's violence is inexcusable is because it doesn't play by the established rules. In Macbeth, organized violence is sport, and individual violence is uncivilized.

Throughout Macbeth violence and cruelty are associated with masculinity.

Although Macbeth did everything in his power to secure his future on earth, by the end of the play, time is out of his control. In Macbeth time comes to a complete halt and the "hours" are thrown out of joint when King Duncan is murdered. Normal time is only restored when Macbeth dies.