

Edexcel English Literature GCSE

Macbeth: Themes Guilt, Innocence and Paranoia

This work by [PMT Education](https://www.pmt.education) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)



Guilt, Innocence, & Paranoia

Though it is the Macbeths' **unchecked, amoral ambition** that causes their **fall from grace**, it is their **guilt and paranoia** that **breaks them**. Without guilt, they wouldn't be **driven insane** by their deeds. Without paranoia, their murder spree might have begun and ended with Duncan's death.



<http://leavingcertenglish.net/2011/11/macbeth-questions/>

Context

Killing a king was a **provocative** subject when 'Macbeth' was first being written and performed.

Elizabeth I had died without an heir, so James VI of Scotland was made the new king of England. This raised a lot of questions about whether he was the **rightful** monarch, and who should be allowed to be king.

This **political tension amounted in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605**, where a group tried to assassinate James and members of Parliament. As the king was the patron of Shakespeare's theatre group, it was important that he pleased him. By illustrating how violently and deeply guilt destroyed the Macbeths, Shakespeare is clearly **condemning** regicide.

Religion

Jacobean Britain was a **very religious, Christian country**. People believed God was **all-seeing**, so would see every sin and crime someone committed. No one was **exempt** from His judgement. Shakespeare supports this idea by showing how the Macbeths are put through a sort of hell, despite their crime not being known by anyone else.

The Renaissance was also a period when people believed in the innate (natural) goodness of humanity. The Macbeths are destroyed by their own guilt, suggesting their **innate goodness rebelled against their deliberate immorality**.

Innocence, in contrast, is a **virtue** that Shakespeare, in keeping with Christianity, celebrates. The Macbeths pursue a **facade of innocence** while plotting their murders, and as they descend further into their web of violence, they long to **regain** their lost innocence. Malcolm, a posterboy of youthful innocence and virtue, is the rightful king of Scotland, showing how goodness is the correct way to be given power.



Macbeth

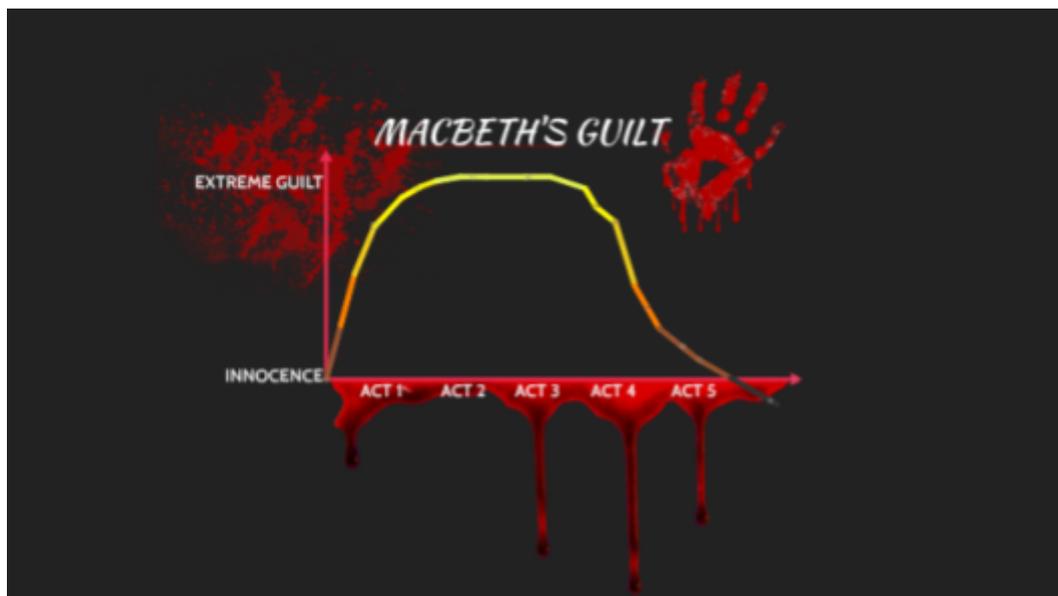
Though both are troubled deeply by their guilt, the Macbeths' experiences of it and reactions to it are very **different**, and reveal their differences in **character**.

Macbeth's guilt is focused on the murder, as he expresses his greatest remorse directly before and after he kills Duncan. After that, his guilt comes in the form of **paranoia**, and this sends him on a **frenzied murder spree**. Shakespeare suggests **guilt and conscience are more powerful than ambition**.

Guilt and religion

Shakespeare associates **guilt with religion**. While wondering if he should really kill Duncan, Macbeth acknowledges, **"We'd jump the life to come," (1.7)**. This is a reference to the **afterlife**, which Christians believed would be granted to those who **honoured God**. Macbeth knows committing murder will **sacrifice his life in Heaven**, making him fully **mortal** and **abandoned by God**. The threat of this is enough to make Macbeth reconsider his plan, showing the power religion and belief had over people at the time. Shakespeare suggests Macbeth should have listened to his **conscience and faith** rather than to his wife. Shakespeare shows the **moral and religious consequences** of being guilty.

Macbeth continues, **"But wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'? / I had most need of blessing and 'Amen' / Stuck in my throat," (2.2)**. He is deeply distressed and upset by this experience. It seems Macbeth is scared because he has been **denied God's forgiveness**, so knows he is **damned**. The phrase **"I had most need of blessing"** reveals his **regret**, for he is desperate to **reclaim his innocence**. The **metaphor "stuck in my throat"** evokes the image of a **barrier blocking Macbeth from God**.



<https://prezi.com/ckbmn8mldby9/macbeth-and-guilt/>

Guilt is presented as an intense fear of knowing yourself and facing what you have done. After killing Duncan, he claims, **"To know my deed, 'twere best not know my self," (2.2)**.



The perception of himself as an **honourable hero** has died along with Duncan. He would rather be **unconscious** or **forget who he is** than look at what he's done.

Regret

Macbeth's regret is echoed later in the play, when Ross says of Scotland, "***Alas, poor country, / Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot / Be called our mother, but our grave,***" (4.3). Shakespeare shows how Macbeth's **guilt** has clouded the country in uncertainty and weakness. Ross suggests Scotland is "***almost afraid to know itself***" because **it cannot face what it has become**. The same is true of Macbeth himself, meaning the king and his country are **identical**.

Paranoia

Paranoia is portrayed as a **poison** that is **relentless** and **inescapable**. Macbeth **loses** all his **heroic qualities** because of his fears, and he becomes murderous even as he descends into madness. He says, "***For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind; / For them, the gracious Duncan have I murdered, / Put rancours in the vessel of my peace / Only for them,***" (3.1). Shakespeare shows that Macbeth's ambition is punished, not rewarded. The **metaphor** "***put rancours in the vessel of my peace***" suggests his guilt and paranoia has **polluted** his soul. Similar **imagery of corruption** is used as the play continues: "***O, full of scorpions is my mind,***" (3.2), presenting his paranoia as **infinite, small stings**.

Lady Macbeth

Unlike her husband, Lady Macbeth is initially **free from any feelings of guilt**. Her journey in the play takes her **from power and strength** to **weakness and insanity**. Whereas



<http://leavingcertenglish.net/2013/01/the-macbeths-marriage/>

Macbeth's guilt makes him more violent and brutal, Lady Macbeth's guilt makes her go into herself. She closes herself off to everyone else, cannot be in darkness, and sleep walks as she is trapped in her own guilty thoughts. The way her guilt **takes over is gradual but destructive**, showing how even the most **callous** (insensitive and cruel) and cold people aren't immune to God's judgement and their own human conscience.

Rejecting femininity

Guilt and regret are presented as **obstacles to following ambition**. These two feelings are linked to femininity and thus Lady Macbeth tries to rid herself of her conscience when she calls upon "***spirits***" to "***unsex***" her. She demands that they: "***Stop up th'access and passage to remorse / That no compunctious visitings of nature / Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between / Th'effect and it,***" (1.5). This indicates that she is **capable** of feeling guilt, but wants to



repress these feelings because she views them as **weaknesses**. The only way to overcome guilt is to not feel it, as Shakespeare implies **guilt is too powerful to ignore**.

Cost of guilt

The **cost** of Lady Macbeth's guilt is shown to be endless paranoia. She says to herself, ***"Nought's had, all's spent / Where our desire is got without content. / 'Tis safer to be that which we destroy / Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy,"*** (3.2), which suggests she **envies** the dead for their **peace of mind**. ***"All's spent"*** illustrates how there is a **cost** for being guilty of a crime, and may also allude to her mental exhaustion - she is ***"spent"***. Lady Macbeth is becoming aware of the **infinite cycle of violence** they have got themselves into to **satisfy their paranoia**. Shakespeare shows that sins and crimes are never rewarded, so that the perpetrators are only left with their **remorse**.

Shakespeare demonstrates how guilt and regret can't be **escaped**. Lady Macbeth tells her worried husband, ***"What's done, is done,"*** (3.2), suggesting they **can't change their fate and will just have to live with the consequences**. Shakespeare suggests that greed and ambition can't predict the guilt that comes with making fantasies into reality. The line becomes a **refrain** for her, as later she mutters to herself in her sleep, ***"What's done cannot be undone,"*** (5.1). The **repetition** makes it appear like she is trying to **convince** herself to let go and get the courage to face reality. The change from ***"is done"*** to ***"cannot be undone"*** gives the impression that her guilt and desperation have **increased**.

Blood & Hallucinations

Blood is a **symbol of guilt and death** in Macbeth. The Macbeths can't escape it no matter how much they try to wash it away.

Hallucinations and **ghosts** are also **symbols of guilt and death**, as they point to the **existence of an Afterlife** and the invisible world of the **supernatural**.



<http://stanleysclass.weebly.com/macbeth.html>

Blood as a motif

Blood is a **motif** used throughout the play to show how the

Macbeths **react** to their guilt. They both react differently to the blood which reveals to the audience how differently their minds work.

Lady Macbeth believes that the simple act of washing their hands will rid them of both the physical blood but also the mental guilt of their deed. She orders her husband, ***"Go get some water / And wash this filthy witness from your hand,"*** (2.2), echoing this later, ***"A little water clears us of this deed,"*** (2.2). Here, ***"water"*** is a **symbol of purity and life**. She isn't focused on what the murder says about them or the mental impact it will have, only



the implications of if they get caught with blood on their hands. She worries that it will **implicate** them in the murder as a **“witness”**, so tells Macbeth to **“wash”** it away. At the same time, she only refers to blood with the **euphemisms “filthy witness”** and **“deed”**, suggesting she can’t **confront** the reality of her actions.

In contrast, Macbeth is **shocked** by the blood on his hands, asking, **“Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No: this my hand will rather /**



<http://jameskarasreviews.blogspot.com/2016/05/macbeth-review-of-2016-st-ratford.html>

The multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red,” (2.2). He knows their guilt goes beyond the **literal “blood” on their “hand[s]”**, and that nothing can remove the **metaphorical “blood”** on their souls. The reference to **“Neptune”**, a **non-Christian god**, could reflect how he has turned his back on God.

Macbeth’s hallucinations

Macbeth is faced with the **reality** of his guilt in the form of **blood-soaked hallucinations**. A dagger dripping with blood leads the way to Duncan’s sleeping form, a **premonition** of the violence and guilt to come, while Banquo’s ghost points his bloodied finger at Macbeth in an **accusation** of responsibility. Macbeth’s famous **soliloquy** opens, **“Is this a dagger which I see before me, / The handle toward my hand?” (2.1).** The question shows that Macbeth **cannot tell the difference between what is real and what is imagined**, suggesting his guilt has already taken hold.

Macbeth asks, **“Art thou but / A dagger of the mind, a false creation, / Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?” (2.1)**, suggesting he is aware that he can’t **trust** everything he sees. At the same time, though, he isn’t sure if the dagger is from his **“mind”** or not, implying he doesn’t know what his mind is **capable** of. It seems his **inability to cope with guilt** makes him hallucinate. The **adjective “heat-oppressed”** refers to the **pressure** guilt places on you. It connotes a fever, portraying **guilt as a disease**.

Shakespeare presents guilt as an **intense psychological torture** that makes reality break down. Mental illnesses, such as the psychosis Macbeth is experiencing, weren’t understood in Shakespeare’s time. It was common to think the mentally ill were **possessed**.

At first, Lady Macbeth is **dismissive** of Macbeth’s hallucinations, telling him **“‘Tis the eye of childhood / That fears a painted devil,” (2.2)** and his **“flaws and starts”** are merely **“impostors to true fear” (3.4)**. In her final scene however, she is **tormented** by her own visions. She cries, **“Out, damned spot!” (5.1)**, showing she is trying to wash her hands of an invisible spot of blood. Its invisibility reflects how **guilt doesn’t have to be visible or known by others for it to be real**: she knows her own guilt and cannot unlearn it.



Sleep

Shakespeare uses **sleep** as a **symbol of innocence and peace**, it brings **comfort** and is an escape from the troubles of the real world. Sleep is also used to express and reveal **the subconscious and the conscience**. Thus, sleep is **denied** to the Macbeths after they murder Duncan. Instead, their nights are **plagued** by nightmares and **“restless ecstasy” (3.2)**, suggesting they **relive** their crimes every time they close their eyes.



<https://www.thoughtco.com/summary-of-macbeth-2985022>

When the Macbeths murder Duncan, Shakespeare shows they have **sacrificed** any chance of **serenity and well-being**. It is concluded, **“Macbeth shall sleep no more,” (2.2)**. As well as being the **villain**, Macbeth realises he has **damned himself**. He **“shall sleep no more”**, so **he has brought torment and torture on himself**. Shakespeare shows how those who are guilty of sins are **self-destructive**. Macbeth sleeping **“no more”** is a **symbol of his active, haunted conscience**. Sleep is **“innocent”**, a **“balm of hurt minds”**, so **it cannot be enjoyed by a murderer** bathed in blood, as Macbeth is.

Insomnia

Macbeth’s **insomnia** takes its toll on him, so that he longs for some **semblance** of peace, even death. He says, **“Better be with the dead / Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace, / Than on the torture of the mind to lie / In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave. / After life’s fitful fever, he sleeps well,” (3.2)**, suggesting his attempts to feel content have only brought him more pain. Here Macbeth envies the **“dead”** and clearly mistakes death for a form of **“sleep”**, which implies murder and death has taken over his mindset.

Lady Macbeth’s sleep is **disturbed** by sleep walking, suggesting her mind is always racing. The Doctor notes, **“A great perturbation in nature, to receive at once the benefit of sleep and do the effects of watching,” (5.1)**, suggesting Lady Macbeth is **doomed** to always **“watch”** the murder be **replayed**.



Light vs. Dark

Shakespeare uses **imagery of light and darkness** to explore **guilt and innocence**. Light is a **symbol of innocence**, enlightenment, and often **holiness**, whereas **darkness** is associated with the **evil spirits that call for foul murder**. Often, light and darkness indicate which characters are guilty and which can be trusted.

Darkness used to conceal

Both of the Macbeths call upon **darkness** to **mask** their crimes. The darkness could be reflective of them turning their back on God and goodness and instead siding with temptation and the devil.

When the idea of murdering Duncan first comes to Macbeth, he says in an **aside**, ***“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)***. Duncan already established **“stars”** as **“signs of nobleness”**, so Macbeth is **using the darkness to protect his innocent reputation**.

- The phrase **“black and deep desires”** evokes an **images of decay**, and suggests Macbeth is **aware of his immorality while he nurtures it**. By asking the **“stars”** to **“hide [their] fires”**, it seems Macbeth is more concerned with **avoiding judgement** than embracing darkness.
- **“Let not light see”** and **“Yet let that be, / Which the eye fears”** suggests **the darkness is for his own benefit**. He can't **bear** to look at what he is going to do, even though he wants it to happen.



<https://jwa.org/blog/risingvoices/women-of-influence-what-macbeth-taught-us-about-women-in-power>

Lady Macbeth has a similar request when she says, ***“Come, thick night, / And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, / That my keen knife sees not the wound it makes, / Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,” (1.5)***. She asks directly for **“thick night”** and **“the dunnest smoke of hell”**, meaning she is calling upon **forces of darkness** to help her be wicked, whereas Macbeth is more concerned with avoiding **“light”** to **preserve** his ‘pure’ soul. However, Lady Macbeth does reveal she is concerned about **discovery**, wanting to stop **“heaven peep[ing] through the blanket of the dark”**.

Development of the Theme

For Macbeth, his guilt and paranoia are **constants** that **accompany** him throughout the play. As the play progresses, his guilt and paranoia **worsens**. This is reflected in how Macbeth’s language changes. He uses **more Hellish, grotesque, and supernatural**



imagery. His **obsession** with death and mortality increases, and he makes **repeated references** to his troubled mental state and lack of sleep. At the same time, he becomes **crueler and more brutal**.

For Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, her guilt and paranoia only **manifest** fully in her **final scenes**. At the start, she **orchestrates** the murder and **silences** all of Macbeth's fears and regrets. There are **subtle indications** that she isn't as confident and cold as she wants to seem, but her speech is **controlled and cutting**. Eventually, she is completely unaware of Macbeth's actions. This **division** that forms both physically and mentally between the couple portrays guilt as **isolating**.

