

OCR English Literature GCSE

Macbeth: Character Profile

The Witches

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The Witches

SYMBOLISES PURE EVIL & DARKNESS

INTRODUCTION

The Witches are commonly referred to as the “**weird sisters**” or the “**Wayward sisters**”, depending on the version of the text that you read (due to discrepancies between Shakespearean English and the modern form). Shakespeare portrays these Witches as **supernatural beings**, who give Macbeth many **cryptic prophecies**; they predict that he will become “**Thane of Cawdor**”, then that he will “**get kings**” and finally that he shall not be “**vanquished**” until “**Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him.**”



Shakespeare introduces the Witches in the first scene of the play, thus giving special emphasis to their importance. Shakespeare’s use of **parallelism** in the **paradoxical** phrase “**Fair is foul, and foul is fair**” foreshadows the rest of the play.

Shakespeare refers to the Witches as the **Weird Sisters** (depending on the version that you read), which bears connotations of “**wired**” meaning fate in Old English and therefore associating their speech with **prophecy**. The witches could represent the **three fates** from **classical mythology**, as the three fates represent the past, present and future. This reflects the three predictions they give to Macbeth, as they claim to “**spin the threads of life**”. The three Witches have differing roles as one spins, one measures, one cuts. This relates to their roles in the future, present and past, respectively. Shakespeare suggests they are in control of events, as they decide on the **fates and destinies of men** - or perhaps they lead them to their fate.

SYMBOLISM

- Supernatural:** The inclusion of ‘magical’ creatures is contextually significant as the **contemporary audience** was interested in, believed in and was fearful of witches. The monarch at the time of writing in the early 17th Century was James I, who wrote the book ‘**Daemonologie**’ which explained how to identify a witch and how to torture them. These witches would be seen as a very real and genuine threat to the **contemporary audience**, who actually believed that witches lived amongst them and are more than a **fictional fantasy**.



CHARACTER IN CONTEXT

Appealing to James I

Shakespeare uses the character of the Witches in order to appeal to the current monarch James I, who had a passion for the **history of witchcraft**. It is important to understand how Shakespeare portrays the Witches in an appealing fashion.

James I's passion for witches is evident as he was involved in many witch trials (e.g. North Berwick Witch Trials), where he took part in interrogating a witch. He also believed they had tried to kill him on the way to the trials and therefore the portrayal of the Witches as **inherently evil and agents of Satan** appeals to James I. He wrote a book about witches – '**Daemonologie**'. Through connecting witches to regicide Shakespeare is clearly demonstrating that witchcraft is **infernal** and thus Shakespeare is evidencing his allegiance to the king and gaining his favour through this play.



Shakespeare also has the motive of wanting to make the play interesting to James so that he will **financially support the theatre** and **ensure patronage** (ascending from the Lord Chamberlain's men to The King's Men, under James I).

Shakespeare had been very reliant on Elizabeth's patronage previously in protection from puritans trying to ban the theatre. Perhaps this could be why there are so many **religious references**. In order to prove that theatre is not sinful and can actually serve to accompany the messages of the bible and even reinforce them. This is shown through Macbeth's fall from grace as he succumbs to the **temptation** of the Witches.

Regicide

Shakespeare **condemns regicide** through his portrayal of Macbeth and the mental torment it causes him. You can consider why Shakespeare wanted to exhibit the evil nature of regicide in the contemporary context. Through presenting regicide as inspired or even controlled by the Witches, Shakespeare implies it is related to the **devil** and hence regicide will have severe **religious consequences**. This act is directly **contradicting the will of God** as the divine right of kings is subverted through regicide.

Furthermore, Macbeth is aligned with forces of **supernatural** evil within the play. He is evidence that association with the **supernatural** will always result in suffering and severe consequences. This is also evident through Shakespeare's portrayal of Lady Macbeth, who is driven insane.



The Witches' direct influence upon the Macbeths is evidenced through the link between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's lack of sleep and also the Witches' proclamation that "**sleep shall neither night nor day, hang upon his penthouse lid**". This could be the Witches **preventing sleep**, as this lack of sleep will cause Macbeth to waste away and deteriorate as a result of this curse.

Bible

The **Bible** forms a great deal of references made in Macbeth, as the Witches **subvert the holiness** of Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism were the mainstream contemporary religions). It is important to consider why Shakespeare portrays the Witches as **symbolising** the perceived evil within the Bible.

The audience perceives the Witches as **agents of the devil**, as stated in King James I's '**Daemonologie**', which theorised that the witches carried out the work of the devil and were



controlled by him. Therefore they are the devil's influence on earth, carrying out the work that is beyond his capability. Hence, regicide is the work of the devil.

They act as part of the fall of man, in causing him to succumb to temptation – like the serpent in the **Garden of Eden**. The Witches form an **anti-trinity** - as they always appear in a three they form a **trinity of evil**. This opposes and contradicts the **trinity of the Father, the Sun and the Holy Ghost**, who according to the Bible, comprise "**one God in**

three Divine persons". Thus it could be contended that the three Witches **comprise the Devil in three infernal persons**. Macbeth turns to them in times of need (when worried after Banquo's death) for advice and comfort instead of to God. He has transitioned from good to evil – from "**fair to foul**".

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

Supernatural

The structure of the Witches' speech emphasises their supernatural characteristics. The **rhythmic** and **chant-like** nature of the Witches' rhetoric implies that their words have real extraordinary power. Shakespeare, through **linguistic techniques**, uses this as **symbolic** of the **supernatural** and to connect other characters to the **supernatural**. This is evident as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth also speak in **rhyming couplets** at times when they are expressing evil or when they are controlled by the **supernatural**. For example, Macbeth says: "**stars hide**



your fires // let not light see my black and deep desires" and ***"fairest show // false face must hide what false heart doth know"***.

Trochaic Tetrameter

Shakespeare uses **trochaic tetrameter** when the Witches' speak. The audience will notice this shift in meter between the characters and place importance on what is being said. This causes the witches to stand out as different and other-worldly, as this is a difficult and unnatural way to speak, causing them to be perceived as **supernatural** and **dangerous**.

→ This **meter** is also used for the fairies in 'A Midsummer's Night Dream'.

Rhyming Couplets

Shakespeare's use of **rhyming couplets** gives the Witches' speech a spell-like sound as is **symbolic** of spell casting and bringing things into existence through their utterances. This sets up the debate as to whether the Witches are really controlling events or if they are in actuality leading Macbeth into his own demise.

KEY MOMENTS

| SC | OCCURRENCE | SIGNIFICANCE |
|-----|---|---|
| 1.1 | The Witches are introduced. | By opening the entire play with a scene revolving around the Witches, in "thunder and lighting" (pathetic fallacy), Shakespeare is being explicit in setting one of the major themes of the play as the supernatural. This also works to intrigue the reader - and suggests that the tension in the play will be caused by the presence of the Witches. |
| 1.3 | The Witches meet with Macbeth (and Banquo). | This scene and the Witches' inclusion in it reaffirms the audience that a key theme of the play is the Supernatural. They state their predictions for Macbeth: "hail to thee, thane of Glamis [...] hail to thee, thane of Cawdor [...] hail Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter." By the end of the scene, Ross has joined the characters and pronounces Macbeth thane of Cawdor, which solidifies Macbeth's belief in their prophecies. They also predict for Banquo: "Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none" suggesting his descendants will be Kings, even if Banquo himself will not become one. |
| 3.5 | The Witches meet with Hecate. | It's argued that this scene has not been written by Shakespeare, and is not crucial to understanding the |



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| | | play. However, here Hecate (Goddess of Witchcraft) meets with the Witches to explain that she wishes to play a direct role in Macbeth's downfall. This leads to the question, is Macbeth entirely responsible for his downfall? |
| 4.1 | The second meeting with Macbeth and the introduction of apparitions. | The Witches make further predictions, through the forms of apparitions which appear before Macbeth: “beware Macduff” , “none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” and “Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him” . This scene demonstrates the immense power that the Witches and their prophecies hold over Macbeth. |

RELATIONSHIPS

Macbeth | The Witches are dependent on Macbeth to fulfill their **prophecies**. It was believed that witches were unable to directly kill man so instead they had to control others to create the disorder and chaos they wished to impart on mankind.

- The Witches refer to a story about a sailor. The **rhyming couplet** **“Though his bark cannot be lost, / Yet it shall be tempest-tossed,”** shows the audience the limited power they have over man. They cannot directly destroy his ship, but instead they can cause a storm to occur.

The Witches can't kill Duncan themselves but instead they have the power to influence the men around him. It could therefore be argued that Macbeth becomes their puppet and vehicle for evil. Their **prophecies** cause Macbeth to realise his own **entrenched** ambitions and then inspire him to act upon it. It is their suggestion and temptation that triggers his fall.

- Perhaps Macbeth is a **greater force of evil** than the Witches as he is the one who physically carries out the act of regicide. Indeed, they recognise **“something wicked this way comes”**.



However, you could argue that the Witches are simply a **catalyst** for Macbeth's actions, it is his desire to fulfill his ambition for power which provides the momentum within the play. Perhaps, Macbeth had the potential to sin, but needed the suggestion in order to persuade him into acting. Therefore it can be said that Macbeth had the intent all along, but needed the Witches to enlighten him of it. The Witches sparked confidence within him so that he could do it and succeed.

The notion of **regicide** already existed within Macbeth's mind and he sustains it himself, rather than the Witches planting this entirely new concept in Macbeth's head. Therefore, Shakespeare's play is more of an exploration of the **psychological state** of Macbeth, rather than an exploration of the **supernatural**. This prompts the interpretation that the Witches only predicted events rather than causing them and deciding fate. Duncan had already decided that Macbeth would be Thane of Cawdor, before they told Macbeth

Duncan | Though they never meet, King Duncan **linguistically echoes** the witches in speech (unwittingly) as he exclaims "**when the battle's lost and won**", which is Shakespeare using **parallelism** (repeated grammatical structure) to echo the Witches, who state "**what he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won**". This shows how the witches exert control over all aspects of the world – even the king.

Furthermore, this **alleviates responsibility** from Macbeth as suspicions of King Duncan's divineness is not necessarily only due to innate evil that the Witches have encouraged within him. Duncan is presented as the **pinnacle of virtue** as he is "**so clear in his great office**", yet he is still susceptible to the witches control as shown by this use of **parallelism**.

Banquo | Banquo is also affected by the Witches, as he admits to dreaming of the witches: "**I dreamed last night of the three weird sisters**". However, this occurs on the same day that Banquo met the Witches, prompting the question - had he been thinking of them before they met? Were Macbeth and Banquo already connected to the **supernatural**?

This dream shows that they have influenced Banquo too, however he serves as evidence that the witches can be resisted and they do not have complete control as they give him a **prophecy** too, which he ignores. This response from Banquo is necessary for his character as he serves as the **foil** to Macbeth and to embrace the Witches would go against the purpose of his character.

Lady Macbeth | Lady Macbeth can be interpreted as a fourth witch, of perhaps an even greater evil. It is important to understand why Shakespeare portrays Lady Macbeth as similar to the Witches. She lapses into **rhyming couplets** when trying to persuade Macbeth to commit **regicide** and evil deeds. This **linguistic mimic** of the Witches' form of speech connects her to their inherent evil. Lady Macbeth uses **paradoxical rhyming couplets** which bear connotations of both evil and the Witches, including: "**only look up clear; to alter favour ever is to fear**", "**alls spent**" "**without content**", and "**that which we destroy**" "**doubtful joy**"



Lady Macbeth defies **gender roles** as she is **dominant** in her relationship with Macbeth, which was often all the justification needed to convict a woman of witchcraft. She becomes the **proxy** of the witches to maintain their **evil influence** over Macbeth.

→ This is shown as she greets him in the same way as the witches did which implies a form of connection:

- ◆ Lady Macbeth - "**Great Glamis, worthy Cawdor, greater than both by the all hail hereafter**".
- ◆ The Witches "**hail Macbeth thane of Glamis/Cawdor/thou shalt be king hereafter**"

Lady Macbeth's ongoing influence on Macbeth could be why, unlike Banquo, he is unable to resist the Witches' influence. Macbeth has many moments when he is decided to resist evil and not murder Duncan. But this reluctance causes him to be **emasculated** by Lady Macbeth - she is outraged, calls him a coward and questions his manhood: "**When you durst do it,**" she says, "**then you were a man**". This tempts Macbeth back into murder as he does not want to be seen as **feminine**.

KEY QUOTES

"your face my thane is like a book".

- The Witches capitalise on the obvious intentions and ambitions of Macbeth, as demonstrated through this **simile**. The Witches can be argued to simply be a **catalyst** to Macbeth's inevitable fulfillment of his ambition for power: his demise.

The Witches are described as: "imperfect speakers"

- However, Macbeth listens to them and their prophecies anyway because he wants what they say to be true.
 - They speak in **riddles** that are meant to be misunderstood and Macbeth chooses to ignore this as his **greed for power overcomes him**.
 - Therefore, it could be argued that they are not controlling fate, rather they are allowing Macbeth to gain validation of the desires he already has.
- Their words are **vague and ambiguous** because they are not a source of control but a source of temptation.



- Macbeth interprets their speech to suit his pre-existing desires and therefore it could be argued that Macbeth twists their **prophecies** in order to further **his own agenda of power**.

"lost and won" & "lesser than Macbeth and greater".

- Shakespeare establishes the Witches as a source of **chaos and disorder**.
 - This is evident as their interference causes the **reversal of order**.
 - Things that shouldn't be able to coexist begin to occur as the **complex riddles** of the Witches come to fruition.
- **Paradoxical** phrases are often used by Shakespeare, when the Witches are speaking to demonstrate the ostensibly (seemingly true but not necessarily true) nature of their positive prophecies made to Macbeth.

"valour of my tongue".

- Their use of language to tempt and control bears connotations of **satanic imagery** and the snake in the **Garden of Eden**.
 - They are female and so this is the only way women can have power
 - The serpent used untrustworthy language to tempt Eve, in the Garden of Eden, through twisting what God had said and claiming he didn't want them to become like him; the fruit wasn't really forbidden.

"fair and foul"

- The oxymoronic language used by Shakespeare **reflects Macbeth's confusion in the audience**, who would be similarly ambivalent towards the actual meaning of the **prophecies**, as they too cannot understand the **oxymorons**.
 - This works to cultivate intrigue and build **tension**.
- Things that are accepted as foul seem fair to Macbeth, like **regicide** (killing the King).
- Macbeth who was fair becomes foul, himself.

"look not like the inhabitants of the earth, / And yet are on it"

- This **juxtaposing** comment further works to reassure the confusing and illogical nature of the Witches, and the theme of the Supernatural in general. This suggests





their introduction to the characters, especially Banquo and Macbeth, will be chaotic.

- Links to Banquo's later comment: "***you should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so.***" - The Witches clearly work beyond the natural laws of physics and biology.

