

OCR English Literature GCSE

Macbeth: Themes Ambition

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Ambition

The plot of *Macbeth* is propelled forwards by the Macbeths' **manipulative ambition**; both centre their actions around their ultimate desire for Macbeth to become king. Both characters exploit those around them in order to improve their position in the **social hierarchy** and are spurred on by the prophecies of the three Witches. Ambition is seen as **corrupting** and causes Macbeth to lose his **nobility** and ultimately become intensely violent. Nevertheless, both he and his wife suffer deep remorse and guilt over their actions - causing Lady Macbeth to ultimately kill herself. *Macbeth* in some senses is a **dramatic representation** of the **devastating psychological consequences** of pursuing one's ambitions without any regard for morality.



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Historical context

Macbeth was (most likely) written in 1606, at the start of the **Jacobean** period. At that time, **societal status** was intensely important. A rigid **class system** and **intricate social hierarchy** meant that people, particularly those belonging to the upper echelons of society, valued titles highly.

- This explains partly why, when told he will potentially become the Thane of Cawdor and then a king, Macbeth takes this incredibly seriously.
- A lot of the tension in the play is caused by a battle over names and titles, as many of the characters are ambitious and keen to increase their social standing.

Modern Western society with its **individualistic values** treats ambition as a good quality. In contrast, in Jacobean and Elizabethan England ambition would have generally been treated as a dangerous quality to possess. Many people in Elizabethan and Jacobean times believed in the Divine Order, or **Great Chain of Being**, as it was alternatively called. According to the Great Chain of Being, everything in the universe has a specific place and rank in order of their perceived importance and spiritual nature. Rocks are at the bottom of this chain, and God is at the top. The King is the highest ranked earthly being. This order, as the name suggests, was believed to be divinely ordained. Anyone trying to rise above their rank was therefore believed to be going against God. Thus, in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, **ambition was equated with sin**.

Macbeth

The entire play explores the **titular** character's quest to fulfil his ambitions, which he describes as: **"black and deep desires"** (A1.S4). Through *Macbeth*, Shakespeare explores whether ambition is useful, and how it relates to fate:



- Is ambition useful in any situation?
- Or are events just bound to occur regardless?
- **Two key sources of Macbeth's ambition are the Witches prophecy, and his wife, Lady Macbeth.**

Effect of the Witches

When Macbeth initially meets with the Witches in Act One. During their meeting the Witches reveal their prophecies to him. Although they don't mention murder, Macbeth's thoughts jump ahead to the possibility of killing the King: **"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"** (A1.S3).

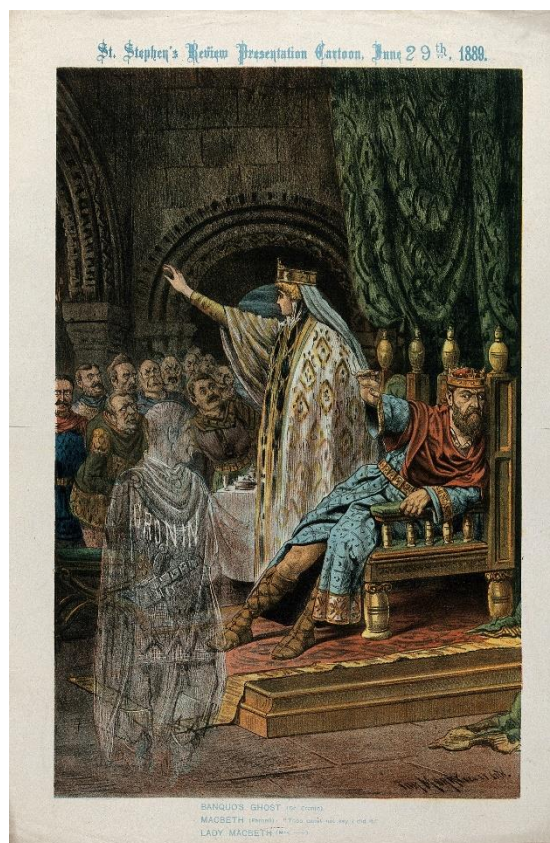
Tragic Flaw

One characteristic of Shakespearean tragedy is that **all protagonists have a tragic or fatal flaw** (translated from the Greek word *hamartia*). Characters' tragic flaws set in action a chain of events in which felicity is changed into disaster. Macbeth's **insatiable ambition** is his tragic flaw. Macbeth is willing to give up everything to become king. The murders that he and his wife commit cause both to grow mad with guilt. One reflection of Macbeth's madness is when he begins experiencing visions of the bloody knife: **"a dagger of the mind, a false creation"** (A2.S1), which shows how the consequences of his ambition has caused him mental distress and near insanity.

Murder

Arguably, it is Macbeth's ambition which ultimately leads him to murder Duncan: he sees it as the only option to continue on his ambitious path. In the final scene of Act One, Macbeth admits that it's only his ambition for power that leads him to wanting to kill his King: **"I have no spur // To prick the sides of my intent, but only // Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself // And falls on the other"** (A1.S7).

- He compares his current situation to horse riding; **ambition is the metaphorical spur** he, the rider, uses to motivate his horse (i.e. make his plans a reality).
- However, as he notes, a horse rider may overestimate their ability when trying to clear an obstacle and consequently fall down. Macbeth's admission **foreshadows** his tragic end.



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Upon discovering Duncan dead in Act Two, it's implied that Duncan's children are the murderers, and Ross exclaims: **“Gainst nature still! // Thriftless ambition, that will ravine up // Thine own lives’ means!” (A2.S4).**

- Therefore, Duncan's children are going a **“[a]gainst nature”** in killing their father, simply in the pursuit of their supposed ambition. The audience is obviously aware that it was in fact Macbeth who killed Duncan; so it questions whether it is also against nature for Macbeth to kill someone he respected and was indebted to, just in the hope of fulfilling his ambition. Ross' exclamation also implies that ambition is an **unnatural phenomenon**.
- He justifies all his actions in Act Three, arguing that they're **“For mine own good” (A3.S4).**

Lady Macbeth



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Alongside the three Witches' prophecy, Lady Macbeth is seen as the other motivator of Macbeth's ambition to **usurp the crown**. She **relentlessly criticises his actions and lack of masculinity**, and it is her attitude which arguably leads him to kill Duncan. However, this ambition contributes to her own insanity and she eventually commits suicide.

Similarly to her husband, when Lady Macbeth first hears of the Witches' prophecies, her mind immediately jumps to murder. She has both the ambition and the confidence to act on her desires, but doubts her husband's capacities to do so. This is expressed in her **soliloquy**: **“Yet I do 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.” (A1.S5)**

- This is one of Lady Macbeth's most famous quotes, and she says it in Act One, Scene Five, when we are first introduced to her. Shakespeare may have chosen to have her say these words when she is first introduced to the

audience in order to **foreground** the fact that Lady Macbeth's **defining trait** is her ambition. In contrast, we are introduced to Macbeth when he is in battle, which might



have suggested to Jacobean audiences that he is brave and noble (at least superficially or initially so).

- Lady Macbeth can be seen as the **ultimate catalyst** for the plot, spurring her husband to commit murder.
- In the above quote, Shakespeare implies that Lady Macbeth believes that you can only act on your ambitions and achieve greatness when you sacrifice or ignore their **moral compass**. She doubts Macbeth's ability to do this; according to her judgement he is "**too full o' th' milk of human kindness // To catch the nearest way**" or, in other words, do what (supposedly) needs to be done.
- Evil is **equated with "illness"** in this quote. Lady Macbeth's words suggest that she believes pursuing one's ambitions generally necessitates doing evil deeds; evil and ambition and intimately linked.

Masculinity

Lady Macbeth, as a woman, would've been socially pressured to appear less ambitious and encouraged to hide her desires.

- However, while Lady Macbeth only encourages her husband to carry out Duncan's murder and does not herself commit it, she can be viewed as more ruthless and single-minded in her ambition than Macbeth. After Macbeth receives the Witches' original prophecy, he is not satisfied or resolved to act on it and seeks his wife's counsel.

Lady Macbeth then "**pour[s her] spirit into [his] ear**" (A1.S5.L24)

and directs his actions, all the while **persistently questioning his manhood**. Thus, while she **uses gender norms to shame Macbeth** into committing murder, the **power dynamic** between them is uncommon for the day - a wife would have been expected to be submissive and accepting of her husband's orders. In a reversal of this, Lady Macbeth wields power over Macbeth and directs his actions. For this reason and as well as due to her ruthless ambition, Lady Macbeth would have been viewed as a **masculine character**. A Jacobean audience might have been inclined to view her particularly negatively on the assumption that she is untrustworthy because she does not conform to **accepted gender norms**.



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Desire for power

Shakespeare demonstrates in his play that overwhelming ambition leads to loss and suffering. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth end up dead, and prior to their deaths they are less powerful and less happy than they were at the beginning of the play. However, while desire for power ultimately corrupts both characters, it also **drives the plot**.



Guilt

Ambition is the play's **central theme** and guilt is its result. Macbeth and his wife are tormented by guilt, so much so that their sanity is undermined. The apparition of Banquo's ghost to Macbeth in Act 3 Scene 4 may be **interpreted by a modern audience** as a psychological phenomenon, the projection of Macbeth's mind - a mind which has been unhinged by guilt (however, Jacobean audience were more familiar with and less sceptical about supernatural phenomena and therefore might have been more likely to view the ghost as real).

Blood

Blood is another **motif** in *Macbeth* which vividly symbolises sin, and thus is intimately connected to guilt. In Act 2 Scene 2, Macbeth encounters his wife after murdering Duncan and asks her a **rhetorical question**: ***“Will all great // Neptune’s ocean wash this blood // Clean from my hand? // No, this my hand will rather // The multitudinous seas incarnadine”***. In other words, the sin Macbeth committing by murdering Duncan is **indelible**; it will not wash away. In fact, he declares, in **dramatic, Latinate language**, it is more likely to spread, turning the oceans red. Macbeth predicts that his guilt will grow - a prediction which indeed plays out. Macbeth also hallucinates blood at various points in the play, imagining in Act 2 Scene 1 ***“a dagger in the mind”***. Addressing this dagger directly, he says, ***“I see thee still, // And, on thy blade and dudgeon, gouts of blood, // Which was not so before”***. These vivid images would likely evoke **visceral reactions** from the audience and are visual representations of his guilt.

However, **at the beginning of the play, blood does not symbolise sin** and therefore imply guilt. **Instead, it represents Macbeth’s loyalty and bravery** as a soldier. Macbeth is introduced by an army captain, who declares that ***“brave Macbeth - well he deserved that name // Disdaining fortune, with his brandished steel // Which smoked with bloody execution // Like valor’s minion, carved out his passage // Till he faced the slave”*** (A1.S2). In convoluted and gruesome language, the captain thus describes how ruthlessly Macbeth executes - this is meant to be a commendation and a sign of his valour. Later in the play, Macbeth changes from ***“noble”*** (A2.S3) to a ***“butcher”*** (A5.S8) and an ***“abhorred tyrant”*** (A5.S8) and his hallucinations of blood represent his guilt. Thus, blood is a complex symbol and **its changing meanings mirror Macbeth’s changing character**.

