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Macbeth

by

William Shakespeare

Approx: 1603 - 1606



MonkeyNotes Edited by Diane Sauder

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

Mainly set in Scotland in the 11th century, mostly in Macbeth's castle and the king's palace at Forres. Also in military camps and open fields near the battleground, and at King Edward's palace in England.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Macbeth - the evil King of Scotland who stole the throne from Duncan by murdering him and who sinks into a state of chaos because of his greed and guilt; his evil acts lead to his ruin, and rebel forces lead an attack against him, and Macduff, in a personal battle, beheads him.

Lady Macbeth - the wife of Macbeth, who is even more driven by greed and power than her husband and who is the manipulative force behind the murder Duncan. Like her husband, fear and remorse cause her ruin; she goes mad and kills herself.

Malcolm - King Duncan's oldest son, rightful heir to the throne of Scotland, who flees to England after his father's murder and later returns to lead a successful attack against Macbeth.

Banquo - a general in Duncan's army and a close friend of Macbeth prior to Macbeth's seizing the throne. Macbeth begins to fear the good Banquo and has him murdered.

Macduff - a general in Duncan's army who becomes suspicious of Macbeth's part in the king's murder. Macduff flees to England to encourage Malcolm to fight against Macbeth and seize his rightful crown. When Macbeth murders Macduff's entire family, Macduff swears personal revenge against the.....

Additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - Macbeth as the personification of greed and resulting evil. He kills the king to seize the throne for himself and continues to murder to.....

Antagonist - His conscience and guilt, which are his undoing (and the forces of good at work)

Climax - At the banquet scene (at mid point in the play), Macbeth can no longer hide his torment and guilt and incriminates himself saying "Thou canst say I did it." From this point forward in.....

Outcome - The play ends in tragedy, for the main character loses his battle with himself. Since the main character is the personification of greed and evil, the.....

SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

Macbeth is a tragic play about a man who lusted after power, stole the throne of Scotland from the rightful Prince Malcolm, and threw the country into chaos through his evil reign. In the end, his own greed and guilt defeat him. Ironically, at the beginning of the play, Macbeth has everything going for him. He is an honored and valiant Scottish warrior who has just won his greatest battle and the title of Thane of Cawdor. Unfortunately, shortly after the battle, he meets three evil witches who sow the seed of greediness in his soul when they predict he will become the King of Scotland.

Macbeth, encouraged and manipulated by his even greedier wife, murders King Duncan in order to seize the throne for himself. But the stolen crown gives him no pleasure, for he is riddled with guilt over the murder and fearful of being discovered. In order to protect himself and his throne, he kills his good friend Banquo, whom he has begun to fear most of all. The two murders on his conscience are more than he can sanely bear, and at a banquet, attended by all the lords and ladies of the land, he thinks he sees the ghost of Banquo sitting in his chair. He claims to the assembled crowd that "Thou canst say I did it," and clearly incriminates.....

THEMES

Major Theme

Evil begets evil, but evil will not prevail. Macbeth's own lust for power, fueled by his wife's greed, brings about murder and mayhem; but in the end, the evil leads to Macbeth's undoing and.....

Minor Theme

Be on guard against appearances; they sometimes seem as real as reality itself. Throughout the play, Macbeth has trouble distinguishing between truth and appearances, and.....

MOOD

Dark, brooding, and evil as developed by the four supernatural witch scenes, Macbeth's sick mind, and the chaotic state of affairs in Scotland.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

William Shakespeare is usually considered the greatest dramatist and finest poet the world has ever known. No other writer's plays and poetry have been produced so many times or in so many countries or translated into so many languages. One of the major reasons for Shakespeare's popularity is the variety of rich characters that he successfully creates, from drunkards and paid murderers to princes and kings and from inane fools and court jesters to wise and noble generals. Each character springs vividly to life upon the stage and, as they speak their beautiful verse or prose, the characters remind the viewers of their own personalities, traits, and flaws. Shakespeare also made his characters very realistic. The dramatist had an amazing knowledge of a wide variety of subjects, and his well-developed characters reflect this knowledge, whether it be about military science, the graces of royalty, seamanship, history, the Bible, music, or sports.

In Shakespeare's time, few biographies were written, and none of the literary men of the Elizabethan Age was considered important enough to merit a book about his life. The first portfolio of his works, collected as a memorial to Shakespeare by members of his own acting company, was not published until 1623, seven years after his death. His first biography was written one hundred years later. As a result, many of the facts of Shakespeare's life are unknown. It is known that he was born in Stratford-on-Avon in England, sometime in early 1564, for his Baptism is recorded on April 26 of that year. His mother Mary had eight children, with William being the third. His father, John Shakespeare, was a fairly prosperous glovemaking and trading merchant who owned several houses in Stratford and became the town's mayor when Shakespeare was a boy. The young Shakespeare probably studied in the local grammar school and hunted and played sports in the open fields behind his home.

The next definite information about William Shakespeare is that the young man, at age 18, married Anne Hathaway, who was 26, on November 28, 1582. In 1583, it is recorded that Anne gave.....

MACBETH - THE DRAMA

Shakespeare based his play *Macbeth* on three actual historical events. King Duff of Scotland was murdered by Donwald in 967. Almost a century later, Macbeth seized the Scottish throne, in 1040, after killing Duncan I. Macbeth actually reigned until 1057 when Malcolm III, eldest son of Duncan I, killed Macbeth and succeeded him, after several months, as King of Scotland. Shakespeare created his play about Macbeth on a distorted version of the historical events which he studied in Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of Scottish History*. The only pure, historical truth in the entire play is Duncan's death at the hand of Macbeth.

Shakespeare obviously gathered much information from Holinshed. The *Chronicles* state that King Duff found some of his nobles guilty of witchcraft and had them murdered. Donwald, who had friends killed by the king, began to resent King Duff and, with his wife's help, arranged to have the king murdered at

SCENE SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

ACT I, SCENE 1

Summary

This very short scene immediately sets the dark, evil, somber mood of the entire play. Three witches have gathered in an open field near a battle site in Scotland during a dark thunderstorm. The three of them agree to meet again "upon the heath" to greet Macbeth, the main character of the play. At the end of the short scene, they all cry in their cackling voices, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair", which foreshadows the foulness of the play's plot and the difficulty of distinguishing between appearance and reality.

Notes

The three witches introduce and personify the ugliness and evil which pervades the entire play. During their evil planning, they also introduce the main character, Macbeth. Their language foreshadows the utter doom that is to come out of "the filthy air" that surrounds Macbeth. The opening setting, in a dark field haunted by thunder and lightning, is the perfect place for three grotesque creatures to discuss the evil that they predict. One of the witches asks, "When shall we three meet again?" This question addresses the urgency of time, which is apparent throughout the play. The quick pace of the drama is set in this brief scene with an indication that the meeting with Macbeth will occur quickly before "the set of the sun," but after the "battle is lost and won."

ACT I, SCENE 2

Summary

This short scene is set in King Duncan's camp and further introduces the main character Macbeth. An unnamed sergeant, bleeding from battle wounds, comes into camp and reports on the progress of the fighting, mentioned earlier by the witches in Scene 1. The brave Macbeth has won the battle and killed the rebel Macdonwald and "fix'd his head upon our battlements." But as soon as this victory is won, Sweno, the Norwegian King, sees an advantage as the enemy celebrates and launches a fresh assault upon Macbeth and his army. Macbeth and Banquo withstand the attack and "redoubled strokes upon the foe" to win another victory.

After completing this report to Duncan, the soldier departs to tend his wounds, and the Thane of Ross, a loyal Scottish nobleman, enters to greet the king. He comes from Fife and brings further news of the fighting. He reports that the Thane of Cawdor has become a traitor and joined forces with the King of Norway in the battle against Macbeth, but "the victory fell on us," and the Norwegian King was made to pay 10,000 dollars. King Duncan is furious at the news about the Thane of Cawdor and orders his execution. The title of Thane of Cawdor will be given to Macbeth as a reward for his heroism in battle.

Notes

This scene is in sharp contrast to the previous scene of darkness, doom, and cryptic planning. This setting, in the King's camp, is bright with the color of military costumes and regal clothing. It is also heroic in nature and direct in conversation and planning, in further contrast to the opening scene. The location of the camp is close to the battlefield, as indicated by the opening sound of alarm and the presence of a soldier still bleeding from recent fighting. The real significance of the scene is to further introduce Macbeth and reveal the King's attitude that he is a hero to be honored. But the scene is also filled with ironies and foreshadowing that should be noted. Macbeth and Banquo are described as "two spent swimmers", a strange description for battle heroes, but a perfect foreshadowing of their later deaths. Macdonwald is beheaded in the scene and foreshadows the later murder of Macbeth when his head is carried on a pole for all to see. There is irony related to the title of Thane of Cawdor. The original traitor to the King, the Thane of Cawdor, is executed, and Macbeth is given his title; later, as the second Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth becomes the traitor to the King and murders him; in due time, Macbeth is also executed like the original Thane of Cawdor. Ross, the Scottish nobleman in the scene, bears good news about the battle and is sent to give Macbeth the good news about his new title; later in the play he bears bad news to Malcolm and Macduff about the murder of Macduff's family. Finally, King Duncan celebrates Macbeth as a hero in this scene; later in the play, Macbeth will murder Duncan and celebrate his own ascension to the throne.

ACT I, SCENE 3

Summary

This scene is the culmination of the witches' prediction in Scene 1, where they promised to meet Macbeth "ere the set of sun" and "when the battle's lost and won". It also furthers the theme that runs throughout the play -- that everything is not always as it seems - that appearances lie. The three horrid creatures from Scene 1 have met again on a heath, an unproductive barren waste of land, close to the recent battlefield. Once again the "weird sisters" are stirring up their magic while holding hands and dancing round and round 9 times. One of the witches says she has been out killing swine and another says she has been putting a curse on a sailor's wife who refused to give her some chestnuts to eat. During this somber scene, the witch vows to destroy the sailor, as punishment to the wife, by depriving him of sleep and draining him "dry as hay", much as Macbeth will later be drained. As the witches cackle out their magic spells, a drum roll is heard, and Macbeth and Banquo enter. It is ironic that the first words that the reader hears Macbeth speak in the play are an echo of the words of the three evil witches in the first scene. The main character enters and says to Banquo, "So foul and fair a day I have not seen."

On the surface, Macbeth is pointing out the contrast of the foul weather, plagued by darkness and thunderstorms, and the glory of his fair victory over the enemy. At a deeper level, his words predict the true foulness of his soul that will be revealed throughout the play. It is Banquo who first describes the witches as "withered and wild in their attire" and who don't look "like inhabitants of the earth, and yet are on it." He notices their horrible skinny lips, their chappy fingers, and their beards, which make them appear to be men, and yet they are not. It is also Banquo who first speaks to them by asking, "Live you or are you aught?" In turn, Macbeth asks the witches to speak. They respond by hailing Macbeth three times and by greeting him as something he is not -- the Thane of Cawdor (which he soon will become) and the future king (which he will become in the course of the play). Macbeth is shocked at the witches' words, and Banquo begs to hear about his own future. The witches then offer predictions that reinforce the appearance vs. reality theme of the play. They tell Banquo that he will be "lesser than Macbeth and greater" and "not so happy, yet much happier". They also foretell that he shall beget kings. Macbeth then begs to hear more from the witches -- to know why and how they have made their predictions, but the three horrible creatures quickly vanish without answering, and the men are left to discuss their strange encounter. Macbeth again emphasizes the key theme of appearance vs. reality by stating "what seemed corporal melted into air".

They are soon interrupted by the arrival of Ross and Angus, the Scottish noblemen sent by King Duncan. The two messengers tell of the king's appreciation for Macbeth's bravery and victory and reveal that he has been bestowed the title of Thane of Cawdor - just as the witches had predicted. Banquo is shocked by the accuracy of the witches' words and asks, "Can the devil (in the form of 3 witches) speak true?" Macbeth's reaction is to question how two men can bear the same title, at which point Angus explains that Cawdor is to be executed (much like King Duncan and Macbeth). Then Macbeth turns to Banquo and says he cannot believe that the witches spoke such truth. He is already beginning to think of the third greeting as the future king and is wondering how he can make such a prediction come true. Banquo warns him that evil (in the form of the witches) only speaks half truths in order to stir up trouble and to make appearance seem like reality. Macbeth ignores Banquo's warning and thinks more about becoming king, which bodes both good (having the power) and ill (having to kill the king to gain the power). He ends his musing (that comes in his first spoken soliloquy) by saying, "Nothing is but what is not", which succinctly summarizes the appearance versus reality theme. At the end of the scene, Macbeth chides himself into believing that he will not take evil action against the king but let fate take its own course.

Notes

This scene is very important to the play in many ways. The reader is introduced to Macbeth in person for the first time-- in the very appropriate setting of a barren wasteland peopled by supernatural characters involved in casting evil spells. The witches, in their wickedness, predict that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland and, thus, sow the seed of greed in Macbeth that leads to his own ruin. At first Macbeth

dismisses the witches' words as impossible gibberish, until Ross and Angus arrive and tell him that he has been named Thane of Cawdor by King Duncan as a reward for his valor in battle. This leads Macbeth to believe he will also become king, as the witches predict, and his mind immediately has thoughts of murder, a portent of what is to come in the play. There are other foreshadowings in the scene. The sailor's wife causes her husband's downfall, much as Lady Macbeth will cause her husband's downfall. The sailor will.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The Protagonist, Macbeth - Macbeth is a classic tragic figure brought to ruin by his own greed, guilt, and fear. Shakespeare intensifies Macbeth's tragic nature by showing him to be a valiant hero in the beginning of the play. He is a courageous warrior and one of King Duncan's best generals. In the second scene of the play, Macbeth has just won his most important battle and saved Scotland from the Norwegian King. To honor his bravery, King Duncan gives Macbeth the title of Thane of Cawdor. This is one of the first steps to Macbeth's undoing, for he longs to be more than just a thane. His innate greed is first inflamed by three wicked witches who prophesy to Macbeth that he will become Thane of Cawdor and then King of Scotland. When the first prophecy comes to pass, Macbeth immediately begins to long for greater power. He realizes that in order to seize the throne from the king, he will have to murder him. Being a basically kind man, he is horrified at his own thoughts and decides murder is beyond his capability. He decides to let fate take its course, and if he is meant to be king, it will happen. But the seed of greed has been planted, and Macbeth is a rash man.

In the fifth scene of the play, another side of the early Macbeth is developed. He is shown to be a loving husband who values his wife and calls her "his dearest partner in greatness," sharing what he is with her. They are obviously close, for he immediately writes a letter to Lady Macbeth and tells her about the prophecies of the three witches, for he wants to please her and give information about "what greatness is....."

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

In writing Macbeth, Shakespeare created an almost perfect plot line with a short introduction, rapid rising action, a climax that occurs half way through the play, followed by rapid and intense falling action and a brief conclusion. The first two scenes of the play serve as an introduction. The opening witch scene sets the dark, somber mood of the entire play and foreshadows the "foulness" that is to come. The second scene introduces the character of Macbeth through conversation. He is depicted as a brave, intelligent, and noble warrior, who has just been honored by good King Duncan with a new title. In scene 3, the action of the play actually begins and moves forward at breath-taking speed throughout the balance of the play

Macbeth comes into Scene 3 and meets with the evil witches, who plant the seed of greed in his not so noble mind. When they prophesy that Macbeth will become the King of Scotland, he immediately thinks of murdering the king. The audience is then kept on edge during the next few scenes and wonder if Macbeth is.....

STUDY QUESTIONS - ESSAY TOPICS - BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. At the beginning of the play, explain what Macbeth is like as a character.
2. Explain where the witches appear in the play and why they are important.
3. Why does Malcolm flee to Scotland?
4. Who is more eager to kill Duncan--Lady Macbeth or her husband? Explain why.....

END OF SAMPLE MONKEYNOTES EXCERPTS

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