

Studies on *Macbeth*

The **exposition** (material revealing important events of past) begins when the play starts and continues

We learn about the Weird Sisters' activities and plans to meet Macbeth, the civil war—always a very bad sign in Shakespeare, Macdonwald's and Sweno's rising against Duncan, Macbeth's and Banquo's heroism, the Weird Sisters' predictions for both Macbeth and Banquo, the thanes' reticence about the predictions—"If Chance will have me king, why Chance may crown me, without my stir," Duncan's gratitude to both, especially Macbeth, and his investiture of Cawdor's lands and title in Macbeth, Duncan's naming his son Malcolm prince of Cumberland (against Scottish tradition of selecting kings)

till the **inciting event** (an action or decision which shifts from looking backward to focus on the immediate plot).

Although Macbeth originally dismissed the Weird Sisters' predictions, Duncan's investing him as Cawdor leads him to hope for the "king hereafter": hence he chooses to act to prevent Duncan's making Malcolm king

Complication follows (the creation of knots of plot, the winding up of elements which must achieve some resolution)—from inciting event to

Lady Macbeth urges Macbeth, despite his better judgments, to continue with the murder plot when Duncan and entourage come to Inverness. Lady Macbeth drugs the guards, and Macbeth kills Duncan and guards. Lady Macbeth plants the bloody daggers Macbeth forgets to leave. Horrified by the blood, the Macbeths are interrupted suddenly by knocking. The Porter scene reflects precisely the ideas and actions occurring with the Macbeths. Macduff and Banquo and others suspect Malcolm and Donalbain, who flee, to England and Wales, respectively, and the Macbeths, who brazen it out. Macbeth rushes to Scone to claim kingship at the Stone of Scone. But he remains unquiet because Banquo knows (a) what the Weird Sisters predicted for Macbeth, thus giving him a motive to slay Duncan, and (b) what the Weird Sisters predicted for Banquo and his progeny, thus giving Macbeth a reason to slay Banquo and Fleance.

crisis (turning point of the plot—when the protagonist's options change from good to bad or vice versa).

Now stepped in blood so far he cannot return to innocence, Macbeth orders the murders of Banquo and Fleance, both innocents. Unfortunately there

remain witnesses to Banquo's murder; worst of all, Fleance survives to create additional fear and insecurity in Macbeth.

*Then comes **denouement** (the unraveling of plot elements—all the options we saw presented in complication now turn out not to be viable in tragedy, or to be viable in comedy)*

Banquo won't stay dead, but haunts Macbeth's banquet, causing much suspicion in other thanes. Macduff flees to England and Malcolm. Rosse and Angus, Menteith and Argyll, others refuse to aid Macbeth. Rosse warns Lady Macduff. Macbeth commits the worst outrage in ording the deaths of Lady Macduff and her children. Shakespeare ensures we see these deaths on stage. In England Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty and honor. Lady Macbeth loses her mind, sleepwalks, continually tries to wash off blood. Macbeth becomes more despondent, visits the Weird Sisters looking for help—but instead sees the long line of Banquo's progeny as Scotland's kings. Malcolm, Siward, and Macduff invade Scotland to fight Macbeth. Heartened, however, by "till Birnam's wood shall come to Dunsinane" and "man not of woman born," Macbeth bravely arms to fight.

*till the **climax** (point of intensest audience attention when the protagonist's future is clear).*

Macbeth fights and slays Young Siward, then faces Macduff and learns the Weird Sisters' prophecies are fulfilled.

*After climax we see **catastrophe** (in tragedy) or **resolution** (in comedy) as that future comes to pass as a direct result of the inciting event.*

Macduff sets Macbeth's head on a pike; Malcolm becomes king. We know Banquo's Fleance will follow—down the line to James VI of Scotland and James I of England.

Some questions to consider as you read—

1. What does the first speech reveal about the Weird Sisters, their business?
2. When the play opens, why is Duncan engaged in a war? With whom?

3. What does the bloody sergeant reveal?
4. What does *wyrd* mean? How does the term apply to the Weird Sisters? What kinds of activities do the Weird Sisters describe as their typical pastimes?
5. Describe the verse in the Sisters' incantations? How does their verse differ from normal speech (iambic pentameter)? Why should it so differ?
6. Who actually sees the Weird Sisters? Why is that important?
7. How does Macbeth parallel Cawdor?
8. Describe the individual responses of Macbeth and Banquo to the Sisters' pronouncements. What important decision does Macbeth express when he says, "If Chance will have me king, why Chance may crown me without my stir"? Why is he so easily and frequently described as "rapt"?
9. Why is the title *Prince of Cumberland* important to Scots? Before Duncan and Malcolm, how did Scots select a king? What important decision does Macbeth express in his response to Malcolm's becoming Prince of Cumberland?
11. Why does Duncan want to visit Macbeth's castle at Inverness?
12. Describe Lady Macbeth's reaction to Macbeth's letter describing the Sisters' predictions as well as Duncan's actions and intentions?

13. From her initial appearances, how can we characterize Lady Macbeth? Why does she desire the spirits to “unsex me now”? What is her hold over Macbeth? Describe the conversations between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth about murdering Duncan.
14. What omens accompany Duncan’s arrival at Inverness?
15. Why exactly does Lady Macbeth not kill Duncan? Who else must die because of Duncan’s murder? And who commits those murders? Contrast the ways Macbeth and Lady Macbeth respond to blood, to murdering, to potential discovery.
16. What kind of fellow is the Porter? What are his topics of conversation with himself? What is his attitude toward disturbance? Explore fully the Porter’s speech and its relationships to what happens above with the Macbeths.
17. Who has disturbed the Porter, demanding entrance at Macbeth’s castle? Why is that significant?
18. Who discovers the murders? Where does suspicion fall, and why? Describe the responses of those with cause to fear suspicion.
19. Shakespeare writes many asides and soliloquies for Macbeth, and they are important to our sympathy with Macbeth. What do we learn from his asides and soliloquies in acts 1 and 2? What kinds of images leap to his mind? How does he respond to blood? To the fear of being discovered a murderer? To fear of damnation?

20. Identify and discuss instances of

equivocation

confusion of nature/natural/unnatural

disjunction between eye and hand

attempts to act in darkness, without light of day/stars/discovery

images associated with ill-fitted or inappropriate clothing