

# Year 9 Workbooklet – William Shakespeare & *Macbeth* (Act 1)

## 1. William Shakespeare – The Man Behind *Macbeth*

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon. He became one of the most famous writers in the world, known for his plays, poetry, and sonnets.

Shakespeare's work explored themes like ambition, power, loyalty, betrayal, and the supernatural, all of which remain relevant today.

*Macbeth* is a tragedy, written around 1606. Shakespeare was interested in how ambition and the desire for power can corrupt people and lead them to commit immoral acts. By using Scotland's history, supernatural elements like witches, and complex characters, Shakespeare examines human nature and the consequences of our choices.

### Questions:

1. Why do you think Shakespeare was interested in ambition and power?
2. How might writing during King James I's reign have influenced Shakespeare's themes in *Macbeth*?
3. What is a tragedy, and why is it important for understanding *Macbeth*?

## 2. Historical Context – Scotland, Kings, and Witches

*Macbeth* was written in the early 1600s, during the reign of King James I of England and Scotland. People at that time were very concerned about kingship, loyalty, and treason. King James had a strong interest in witchcraft and even wrote a book called *Daemonologie*, which influenced Shakespeare.

The play draws on real Scottish history. The historical King Macbeth ruled Scotland in the 11th century, but Shakespeare adapted events to make the story more dramatic. The play shows how ambition can corrupt even brave and loyal people, how temptation can influence decisions, and how moral weakness can lead to disastrous consequences.

Shakespeare includes supernatural elements, like the three witches, to explore the tension between fate and free will. He also examines the responsibilities of leadership, the dangers of betrayal, and the moral consequences of choosing evil for personal gain. The story is a warning about how power can change people and destroy lives.

### Questions:

1. Why are witches important in the story? What role do they play in influencing Macbeth?
2. What does *Macbeth* warn us about ambition and the desire for power?
3. How does Shakespeare use historical events to make the story dramatic?

## 3. Character Profiles – Act 1

**Macbeth** is a brave Scottish general who has just helped King Duncan win an important battle. He is intelligent and loyal but also ambitious and easily influenced. The witches' prophecy sparks his desire to become king, and he begins to struggle with his conscience and moral doubts. His inner conflict between ambition and loyalty is central to the play.

**Lady Macbeth** is Macbeth's wife. She is ambitious, determined, and ruthless. When she learns of the witches' prophecy, she immediately begins to plan how to achieve power, manipulating Macbeth into considering murder. Lady Macbeth questions his courage and is willing to suppress morality to achieve their goals.

**King Duncan** is the King of Scotland. He is fair, trusting, and kind. His good nature makes him vulnerable to betrayal, and his murder highlights the consequences of disloyalty and ambition.

**Banquo** is Macbeth's close friend and fellow general. He is brave, loyal, and cautious. Unlike Macbeth, he does not act on the witches' prophecy and represents moral integrity and wisdom.

**The Three Witches** are supernatural figures who give cryptic prophecies to Macbeth and Banquo. They create tension, foreshadow events, and tempt Macbeth with ambition. Their presence raises questions about fate, morality, and free will.

## 4. Act 1 – Scene Summaries & Extracts

### Scene 1: The Witches Meet

The play opens with three witches meeting during a violent storm. They speak in riddles and paradoxes, creating a sense of mystery and danger. They plan to meet Macbeth, foreshadowing his encounter with them and the events to come.

### Extract:

“Fair is foul, and foul is fair: Hover through the fog and filthy air.”

**Meaning:** Good and evil are mixed; appearances are deceptive. This sets a dark and uncertain tone for the play.

## **Scene 2: The Battlefield**

A captain reports to King Duncan that Macbeth and Banquo have fought bravely against Norway. Macbeth is described as fearless and skilled, and the king rewards him for his loyalty. This scene establishes Macbeth’s reputation as a hero and sets the stage for his later moral conflict.

### **Extract:**

“For brave Macbeth—well he deserves 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...”

**Meaning:** Macbeth is shown as courageous and honorable, earning respect for his achievements in battle.

## **Scene 3: The Witches’ Prophecy**

The witches meet Macbeth and Banquo. They hail Macbeth as “Thane of Glamis,” “Thane of Cawdor,” and future king. Banquo is told his descendants will be kings. Macbeth is intrigued but troubled by the prophecy. Banquo warns him to be cautious.

### **Extract:**

“All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, Thane of Glamis! All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor! All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!”

Banquo responds: “Good sir, why do you start; and seem to fear Things that do sound so fair?”

**Meaning:** The prophecy sparks ambition in Macbeth, setting up the central conflict between his desire for power and his conscience.

## **Scene 4: Duncan Names Malcolm**

King Duncan praises Macbeth for his bravery and loyalty and names his son Malcolm as heir to the throne. Macbeth begins to see Malcolm as an obstacle to achieving kingship.

**Extract:**

“The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step On which I must fall down, or else o’erleap,  
For in my way it lies.”

**Meaning:** Macbeth’s ambition grows, and he begins contemplating murder.

### **Scene 5: Lady Macbeth Plans Duncan’s Murder**

Lady Macbeth reads a letter from Macbeth about the witches’ prophecy. She fears he is too kind to act and resolves to persuade him to seize power through murder.

**Extract:**

“Yet do I fear thy nature; It is too full o’ the milk of human kindness To catch the nearest way.”

**Meaning:** Lady Macbeth shows ambition and ruthlessness, revealing her plans to manipulate Macbeth.

### **Scene 6: Duncan Arrives at Macbeth’s Castle**

Duncan arrives at Macbeth’s castle and is welcomed by Lady Macbeth. He comments on the beauty and hospitality of the castle, unaware of the danger awaiting him.

**Extract:**

“This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself Unto our gentle senses.”

**Meaning:** Dramatic irony – the audience knows of the murder plot, but Duncan does not.

### **Scene 7: Macbeth’s Dilemma**

Macbeth debates killing Duncan. He fears the moral consequences and the potential punishment for regicide. Lady Macbeth manipulates him by questioning his courage and resolve. Macbeth is torn between ambition and morality.

**Extract:**

“If it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well It were done quickly... We still have judgment here; that we but teach Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return To plague the inventor.”

Lady Macbeth responds: “Art thou afeard To be the same in thine own act and valour As thou art in desire?”

**Meaning:** Macbeth struggles with conscience, while Lady Macbeth encourages ruthless action.

## 5. Questions on Act 1

**Comprehension Questions:**

1. How do the witches set the mood in Scene 1?
2. Why is Macbeth praised by the captain and Duncan in Scenes 2–4?
3. What prophecy do the witches give Macbeth and Banquo in Scene 3?
4. How does Lady Macbeth react to the prophecy in Scene 5?
5. What doubts does Macbeth express in Scene 7?

**Analysis Questions:**

1. Why does Shakespeare open the play with the witches? How does this create tension?
2. How does Shakespeare show the conflict between ambition and conscience in Macbeth?
3. How do Lady Macbeth’s actions influence Macbeth’s decisions?
4. Identify examples of dramatic irony and explain their effect.
5. How does Shakespeare explore the theme of fate vs. free will in Act 1?

## 6. Creative Task

**Diary Entry:**

Imagine you are Macbeth after hearing the witches’ prophecy. Write a diary entry describing your thoughts and feelings. Are you tempted to act on it, or do you try to resist?

## 7. Stretch and Challenge

1. Who is more ambitious in Act 1 – Macbeth or Lady Macbeth? Why?
2. Do you think the witches are controlling Macbeth, or is he responsible for his choices?
3. How does Shakespeare explore the theme of good vs. evil in Act 1?
4. How does Shakespeare use language to create tension and foreshadow future events?

## 8. Glossary

**Tragedy** – A story where the main character has a flaw that leads to their downfall.

**Prophecy** – A prediction about the future.

**Ambition** – A strong desire for power, status, or achievement.

**Conscience** – A sense of right and wrong that guides behaviour.

**Dramatic Irony** – When the audience knows something the characters do not.

**Treacherous** – Likely to betray trust.

**Supernatural** – Beyond the natural world, such as witches or magic.