Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Macbeth

Contents

1. Plot
2. Themes
3. Context
4. Key quotations
5. How to get top marks
6. Key terms
7. Quick questions
8. What to do next

Plot

- After a battle, Macbeth and Banquo meet three witches. They predict that Macbeth will be Thane of Cawdor and then king, and that Banquo's descendants will be kings. Macbeth is soon made Thane of Cawdor.
- Lady Macbeth persuades him to murder King Duncan while he stays at their castle. Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, flee, and Macbeth becomes king.
- Fearing the prophecy, Macbeth has Banquo murdered, but Banquo's son Fleance escapes. Banquo's ghost appears at a banquet.
- The witches warn Macbeth to beware Macduff, but say no man 'of woman born' can harm him and he is safe until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane. Macbeth has Macduff's wife and children murdered.
- Lady Macbeth, overwhelmed by guilt, sleepwalks and later dies. Malcolm's army carries branches from Birnam Wood. Macduff, who was 'untimely ripped' from his mother's womb, kills Macbeth, and Malcolm becomes king.

Themes

- Ambition and power; guilt; the supernatural; appearance and reality ('Fair is foul, and foul is fair'); kingship and tyranny; masculinity; order and disorder.

Context

- It was written around 1606 for King James I, who was also King James VI of Scotland, claimed descent from Banquo and was fascinated by witchcraft.
- The Gunpowder Plot (1605) made killing a king (**regicide**) a shocking, topical subject. People believed in the **Divine Right of Kings**: kings were chosen by God, so killing one disrupted the natural order (the **Great Chain of Being**).
- Jacobean audiences expected women to be obedient and gentle, which makes Lady Macbeth shocking.

Key quotations

- 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' (the witches). 'Stars, hide your fires; / Let not light see my black and deep desires' (Macbeth).
- 'Look like th' innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't' and 'unsex me here' (Lady Macbeth). 'Vaulting ambition' (Macbeth).
- 'Is this a dagger which I see before me' and 'O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!' (Macbeth). 'Out, damned spot!' (Lady Macbeth).
- 'This dead butcher and his fiend-like queen' (Malcolm).

How to get top marks

- Track the change: from a brave soldier praised in Act 1 to 'this dead butcher' at the end. And notice that Lady Macbeth's journey runs the other way.
- Use the soliloquies: they let the audience see his mind, which is why he's a **tragic hero** and not simply a villain.
- Bring in context only when it explains something, such as why **regicide** would shock an audience just after the Gunpowder Plot.

Key terms

Soliloquy	A speech in which a character speaks their thoughts aloud, alone on stage.
Regicide	The killing of a king.
Divine Right of Kings	The belief that kings are chosen by God.
Great Chain of Being	The belief in a God-given order, with the king at the top of human society.
Tragic hero	A great person who falls because of a fatal flaw.
Hamartia	A tragic hero's fatal flaw, such as Macbeth's ambition.
Dramatic irony	When the audience knows something a character doesn't.
Tyrant	A cruel ruler who uses power unjustly.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. What do the witches predict for Macbeth in Act 1?
2. What do the witches predict for Banquo?
3. Who persuades Macbeth to kill Duncan?
4. Where is Duncan murdered?
5. Who escapes when Banquo is murdered?
6. What does Lady Macbeth do while sleepwalking?

Your notes

7. Why can Macduff kill Macbeth, despite the prophecy?
8. What does 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' suggest?

Answers

1. He will be Thane of Cawdor and then king
2. His descendants will be kings
3. Lady Macbeth
4. In Macbeth's castle
5. Fleance
6. Tries to wash imaginary blood from her hands
7. He wasn't born naturally, but was 'untimely ripped' from his mother
8. Things are not what they seem

What to do next

Practise 13 questions on this topic

Try 4 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

Free revision for GCSE and KS3 at lycolearn.co.uk. Some notes are for one exam board only, and say so in brackets.

Your notes