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# Macbeth

**William Shakespeare** · *c. 1606 · original English text*

A brave captain hears that he shall be king, and, with his wife, murders the king who is his guest. The play is a study of ambition unmoored from conscience: each crime makes the next seem necessary, sleep and order depart, and the crown is held only until a man "not of woman born" brings it down.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

## What does a crown cost, when it is taken by murder?

*"I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er."*
**Macbeth** · Act III, Scene IV

The play answers in blood and sleeplessness. Ambition leaps and falls; guilt cannot be washed off; the apparent promises of the witches prove traps. Legitimate rule and courage return only after the usurper is slain.

KEY CHARACTERS

**Macbeth**
*courage turned to usurpation*

**Lady Macbeth**
*will and later guilt*

**Duncan**
*the guest-king; lawful rule*

**Banquo**
*tempted, but not a murderer*

**Macduff**
*loyalty, grief, and justice*

**Malcolm**
*the rightful heir*

**The witches**
*equivocation and bait*

**Fleance**
*the escaped son; the promised line*

AMBITION'S LEAP

> *"I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself / And falls on th' other—"*
> **Macbeth** · Act I, Scene VII

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

### 01 The Witches' Word

ACT I, SCENES I–IV

*A prophecy finds a man already willing to hear it.*

- The witches greet **Macbeth** as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and king hereafter
- **Banquo** is told he will beget kings, though he be none
- The first title comes true at once; Duncan names Malcolm his heir
- Macbeth's thought turns already to murder: "Stars, hide your fires"
- Duncan will sleep, as a guest, in Macbeth's castle

> *"Fair is foul, and foul is fair: / Hover through the fog and filthy air."*
> **The witches** · Act I, Scene I

### 02 The Murder of the Guest-King

ACT I, SCENE V – ACT II

*Hospitality is broken, and sleep is murdered with the king.*

- **Lady Macbeth** steels herself and her husband when his will falters
- Macbeth sees a dagger in the air and goes in to Duncan
- He cannot say "Amen"; a voice cries that Macbeth has murdered sleep
- Lady Macbeth smears the grooms; Macduff discovers the murder
- Malcolm and Donalbain flee; Macbeth is named king

> *"Methought I heard a voice cry, "Sleep no more! / Macbeth does murder sleep,""*
> **Macbeth** · Act II, Scene II

### 03 Banquo and the Feast

ACT III

*The crown is not enough, once it has been stolen.*

- Macbeth fears Banquo and the promised line of kings
- Murderers kill Banquo; his son Fleance escapes
- Banquo's ghost takes Macbeth's seat at the banquet
- Lady Macbeth dismisses the lords; the king is visibly shaken
- Macbeth will seek the witches again

> *"Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather / The multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red."*
> **Macbeth, just after the murder** · Act II, Scene II

### 04 The Cauldron and the Slaughter

ACT IV

*False security, and a crime that has no military purpose.*

- The apparitions tell him to beware Macduff; that none of woman born shall harm him; that he shall not be vanquished till Birnam Wood come to Dunsinane
- He is shown a line of kings from Banquo
- Macduff has gone to England; Macbeth has Macduff's wife and children murdered
- In England, Malcolm tests Macduff; they will make war to free Scotland

> *"By the pricking of my thumbs, / Something wicked this way comes."*
> **A witch, as Macbeth approaches** · Act IV, Scene I

### 05 Sleepwalk and Siege

ACT V

*The promises collapse; the tyrant is unmasked as a man.*

- Lady Macbeth walks in her sleep, rubbing her hands: "Out, damned spot!"
- She dies; Macbeth hears it as a tale told by an idiot
- The English force comes under Birnam boughs; the wood "moves"
- Macduff, "from his mother's womb untimely ripp'd," meets Macbeth and slays him
- Malcolm is hailed as king; the time is free

> *"Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, / To the last syllable of recorded time;"*
> **Macbeth, on the queen's death** · Act V, Scene V

Ambition · Conscience & Guilt · Tyranny · Equivocation · Order Disturbed · Courage

## What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The witches never force Macbeth's hand. Watch what he and his wife add to the prophecy.
2. Duncan is murdered as a sleeping guest. How does the play treat that breach of hospitality and loyalty?
3. Follow sleep: who loses it, who walks, and what the voice means by "Macbeth does murder sleep."
4. The apparitions' promises are technically true and practically false. That is equivocation.
5. Compare Banquo's restraint with Macbeth's. Both hear a future; only one kills for it.
6. Lady Macbeth is the stronger at first and the first to break. What does the sleepwalking scene confess?

**Quotations** are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #1533, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/macbeth/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.