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Key events

Act 1



The play opens with a storm and sets up a mysterious and frightening atmosphere for the audience. Three witches plan to and later manage to intercept Macbeth and his friend Banquo on their way back from battle. They tell them three prophecies: that Macbeth will be Thane of Cawdor and then king and Banquo's descendants will be kings, although he won't be. They dismiss the idea until Macbeth is made Thane of Cawdor for his bravery in battle. He then wonders if this has come true, then will the prophecy that he will be king come true as well? King Duncan names his son Malcolm as the heir to the throne and Macbeth writes to his wife about everything that has happened. When he arrives back at his castle, she convinces him to kill King Duncan who arrives to stay with them. Macbeth has his doubts, but she coerces him into committing the murder.

Act II



Banquo tells Macbeth that he dreamed about the witches and their prophecies, but Macbeth denies having thought about them and encourages Banquo to go to bed. He then sets about murdering the king. He returns to Lady Macbeth having murdered King Duncan and waits for the body to be discovered. The drunken porter pretends to guard the gates of Hell (allowing a brief break for the audience in the tension that is building) and Malcolm and Lennox find the body. In a state of panic, Macbeth murders Duncan's chamberlains. In fear for their lives, Malcolm and Donalbain flee the country. Macbeth becomes king.

Act III



Macbeth arranges to have Banquo and his son Fleance murdered by hired assassins, as Banquo seems suspicious after Duncan's murder and because of the witches' prophecy about his sons becoming kings, Macbeth sees him as a threat. Macbeth hires assassins to murder Banquo and his son Fleance but Fleance escapes. Macbeth holds a feast once he is crowned and Banquo's ghost appears, but only to him. He speaks to the ghost, and the Lords at the feast are worried about his sanity. Macbeth decides to visit the witches for more information. Meanwhile the witches meet with their queen, Hecate, and prepare for Macbeth's arrival. Lennox, a thane, and another lord discuss how Macduff is going to England to speak to Malcolm about raising an army to overthrow Macbeth.

Is this a dagger which I see before me,
 The handle toward my hand?^① Come, let me clutch thee.
 I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
 Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
 To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but
 A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
 Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?^②
 I see thee yet, in form as palpable
 As this which now I draw.
 Thou marshal'st me the way that I was going,
 And such an instrument I was to use.
 Mine eyes are made the fools o' the other senses,
 Or else worth all the rest. I see thee still,
 And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,
 Which was not so before. There's no such thing:
 It is the bloody business which informs
 Thus to mine eyes.^③ Now o'er the one half-world
 Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
 The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates
 Pale Hecate's offerings;^④ and wither'd Murder,
 Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
 Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
 With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
 Moves like a ghost.^⑤ Thou sure and firm-set earth,
 Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
 Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts,
 And take the present horror from the time,
 Which now suits with it. Whiles I threat, he lives;
 Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.

A bell rings.

I go, and it is done; the bell invites me.
 Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell
 That summons thee to heaven, or to hell.^⑥

Exit.

① **Character:** Macbeth is uncertain whether or not he sees a dagger. The hallucination symbolises his ambition, guilt and moral conflict.

Structure: The soliloquy shows the audience Macbeth's internal dilemma. On stage, the dagger might be shown as a physical prop, as a light, or nothing at all.

② **Character:** Macbeth wonders if stress has resulted in this hallucination. Some critics argue that he is experiencing PTSD.

③ **Theme (sin and guilt):** Macbeth feels guilty even at the thought of killing Duncan.

Language: He uses euphemisms for murder throughout the speech, suggesting he is too horrified by what he's about to do to even name the action.

④ **Theme (evil and supernatural):** Hecate was the Greek goddess of night and witchcraft. Macbeth's reference to her links to the theme of the supernatural and acknowledges that he is under the spell the witches have cast over him.

⑤ **Context:** The Roman king, Tarquin, was tyrannous. Macbeth's reference to him shows his willingness to enact evil to achieve power.

⑥ **Form:** The rhyming couplet adds a finality to this scene and to Duncan's life.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

dudgeon – wooden handle

gouts – large drops

marshl'st – guide/show the way

palpable – able to be touched

sentinel – guard

Key quotations



These top ten quotations chart the key events of the play *Macbeth* from the witches' ominous chant in Act I: Scene I to Macbeth's downfall at the end of the play. You'll find these important quotations annotated in the playscript and labelled with a key symbol.

“

Fair is foul, and foul is fair.

Act I: Scene I, page 12 ⑤ The witches



1

”

“

A little water clears us of this deed.

Act II: Scene II, page 43 ③ Lady Macbeth



6

”

“

All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!

Act I: Scene III, page 19 ③ Third Witch



2

”

“

O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!

Act III: Scene II, page 63 ③ Macbeth



7

”

“

Stars, hide your fires; / Let not light see my black and deep desires.

Act I: Scene IV, page 27 ② Macbeth



3

”

“

Out, damned spot! Out, I say!

Act V: Scene I, page 104 ③ Lady Macbeth



8

”

“

...look like the innocent flower, But be the serpent under it.

Act I: Scene V, page 30 ④ Lady Macbeth



4

”

“

Out, out, brief candle!

Act V: Scene V, page 116 ① Macbeth



9

”

“

Is this a dagger which I see before me...

Act II: Scene I, page 39 ① Macbeth



5

”

“

Of this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen...

Act V: Scene IX, page 124 ② Malcolm



10

”



Theme quotations

The themes are the main ideas or concerns that the play invites the audience to consider. These are some of the main themes that Shakespeare presents in *Macbeth*. Notice how the lists of quotations show the development of each theme throughout the play.

Power and kingship

“If chance will have me King, why, chance may crown me / Without my stir.”

Act I: Scene III, page 23 ⑤ Macbeth

“Stars, hide your fires; / Let not light see my black and deep desires.”

Act I: Scene IV, page 27 ② Macbeth

“Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown / And put a barren sceptre in my gripe”

Act III: Scene I, page 57 ⑤ Macbeth

“A show of EIGHT KINGS, the last with a glass in his hand; BANQUO'S GHOST following.”

Act IV: Scene I, page 84 ② (stage direction)

“The king-becoming graces, / As justice, verity, temperance, stableness, / Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness, / Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude”

Act IV: Scene III, page 95 ④ Malcolm

“Now does he feel his title / Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe / Upon a dwarfish thief.”

Act V: Scene II, page 108 ① Angus



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Character ✕ **Language**: This metaphor shows that Macbeth is tormented and disturbed by his own thoughts. Scorpions are deadly creatures that can kill with a sting, showing Macbeth's mind is filled with torturing thoughts.

Quotations underlined for quick reference and easy understanding.

LADY MACBETH

You must leave this.

MACBETH

O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!

Thou know'st that Banquo and his Fleance lives.

LADY MACBETH

But in them nature's copy's not eterne.

MACBETH

There's comfort yet; they are **assailable**.

Tricky words highlighted and defined on the page.

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