

Themes in *Macbeth*

This resource is designed as a reference guide for teachers. We have listed the major themes and motifs within *Macbeth* and provided examples of scenes where you can study them.

Themes

- Ambition
- Kingship
- Fate and free will
- Appearance and reality

Motifs

(Recurring elements and patterns of imagery in *Macbeth* which support the play's themes)

- Nature / The natural world
- Light and darkness
- Children
- Blood
- Sleep
- Visions

Themes

Ambition and the devastation which follows when ambition oversteps moral boundaries.
Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 5: Lady Macbeth receives Macbeth's letter, analyses his character, and invokes the forces of evil.
- Act 1 Scene 7: Macbeth reflects on what is needed to achieve his ambition and Lady Macbeth taunts him to 'screw your courage to the sticking place.'
- Act 3 Scene 1: Macbeth determines to kill Banquo in order to prevent his children succeeding to Scotland's throne.

Kingship and the difference between appropriate use of power and tyranny.
Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 7: Macbeth reflects on Duncan's qualities as king.
- Act 3 Scene 6: Lennox and another lord discuss life under Macbeth's rule.
- Act 4 Scene 3: Malcolm and Macduff compare tyranny to honourable kingship.

Fate and free will and the extent to which we control our own destinies.
Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 3: Macbeth and Banquo encounter the witches on the heath. Macbeth reflects on their prophecies.
- Act 2 Scene 1: Macbeth talks with Banquo about their encounter with the witches, sees a visionary dagger and makes his decision to kill Duncan.
- Act 6 Scene 1: Macbeth visits the witches who offer him further prophecies.

Appearance and reality, and how people and events are often not as they seem.
Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scenes 1 and 2: The witches invoke confusion ('Fair is foul, and foul is fair').
- Act 1 Scene 4: Duncan reflects on the traitorous Thane of Cawdor and ironically rewards Macbeth with this title, saying, 'I have begun to plant thee, and will labour/To make thee full of growing.'
- Act 1 Scene 6: Duncan remarks on the Macbeths' castle having 'a pleasant seat' as the Macbeths plot his murder.

Motifs

Nature /The natural world and its disruption when the bounds of morality are broken.

For example:

- 'Against the use of nature'
Act 1 Scene 3
- 'Tis unnatural,/ Even like the deed that's done.'
Act 3 Scene 4
- 'And his gash'd stabs looked like a breach in nature'
Act 3, Scene 1
- 'Boundless intemperance/ In nature is a tyranny.'
Act 4, Scene 3

Light and darkness, representing innocence and evil.

For example:

- 'Stars, hid your fires; Let not light see my black and deep desires'
Act 1 Scene 4
- 'that darkness does the face of earth entomb,/When living light should kiss it?'
Act 4 Scene 2
- 'Come, seeling night,/ Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day'
Act 3 Scene 2

Children, representing the future and highlighting evil when they are abused.

For example:

- 'Your children shall be kings.'
Act 1 Scene 3
- 'And pity, like a naked new-born babe,'
Act 1 Scene 7
- 'I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me'
Act 1 Scene 7
- 'He has no children. All my pretty ones?'
Act 4 Scene 3

Blood, representing evil plans and consequences of overreaching ambition.

For example:

- 'Make thick my blood'
Act 1 Scene 5
- 'And on thy blood and dungeon gouts of blood/Which was not so before. There's no such thing:/It is the bloody business which informs thus to mine eyes.'
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?'
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'Here's the smell of blood still.'
Act 5 Scene 1

Sleep, a natural process and its disruption as caused by the fracture of the moral order.
For example:

- 'Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse / The curtain'd sleep'
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'There's one did laugh in's sleep, and one cried 'Murder!''
Act 2 Scene 2
- 'Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more! / Macbeth does murder sleep''
Act 2 Scene 2
- 'we may again / Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights'
Act 3 Scene 6
- 'A great perturbation in nature, to receive at once the benefit of sleep and do the effects of watching!'
Act 5 Scene 1

Visions, representing the extensions of a guilty conscience.
For example:

- 'Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible / To feeling as to sight?'
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'Hence, horrible shadow! Unreal mockery, hence!'
Act 3 Scene 4
- 'Wash your hands; put on your nightgown; look not so pale! I tell you yet again,
Banquo's buried.'
Act 5 Scene 1
- 'My wife and children's ghosts will haunt me still'
Act 5 Scene 7

Macbeth's ambition



In order to fully understand Macbeth's ambition, in early rehearsals, the cast spent some time researching the real Macbeth who was an 11th century Scottish king.

Macbeth was born around 1005. His father was a 'mormaer' which means 'earl'.

In August 1040, he killed the ruling king, Duncan I, in battle near Elgin, Morayshire. Macbeth became king. His marriage to Kenneth III's granddaughter Gruoch strengthened his claim to the throne. In 1045, Macbeth defeated and killed Duncan I's father Crinan at Dunkel.

In the research, the cast found that the real Macbeth had a grandfather that was supposedly meant to be king but never got to the throne. This piece of historical evidence helped the actor playing Macbeth find another motivation for his character's ambition. The real Macbeth desired power because he felt it was his birthright.

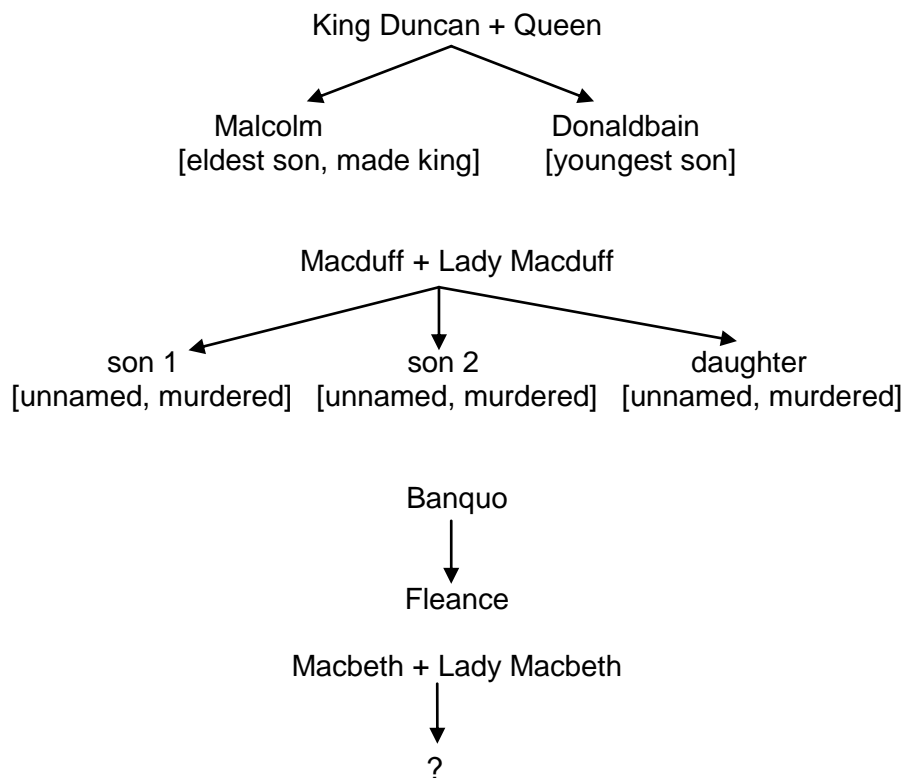
One focus in the rehearsal room was around the legacy of children and the complex relationships between fathers and sons. In the activities which follow, we use practical approaches for exploring the following key father and son relationships in the play:

- **Malcolm** who is made heir to the throne by his father King **Duncan**
- **Macduff** and his struggle between his role as a father and a soldier
- **Banquo** and his relationship with **Fleance**
- **Macbeth** and **Lady Macbeth**'s childlessness

Below are find family trees to illustrate the father and son relationships.

The play does not tell us if Duncan and Banquo have wives or the names or number of Macduff's children.

In Michael Boyd's production of *Macbeth*, three children are cast as Macduff's children who are illustrated on these family trees here:



I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me
(Act 1, Scene 7)