

William Shakespeare's
Macbeth
Act 2 Study Guide (pp. 47-75)



Free Will
Ambition
Guilt
Power

Honor
Destiny
Fear
Deception

Be able to define
(and read for the ideas of):
Fate _____ Loyalty _____
Name: _____

(This guide may be collected—fair warning) ☺

One of the character traits that Shakespeare gives Macbeth is a very vivid imagination. For example, he “sees” a dagger before him that does not exist except in his mind. As you read, be aware of other examples of this character’s imagination and the part it plays in his emotions and decisions.

Act II, scene 1:

1. The theme of sleeplessness is again introduced when Banquo tells Macbeth that he has dreamed of the witches, “the three Weird Sisters” (I.i.25)—what does Macbeth say?
2. When Macbeth wants Banquo to listen to him, to do as he says; Macbeth tells Banquo, “If you shall cleave to my consent, when ‘tis, It shall make honor for you,” (II.i.32-33); what is Banquo’s response and why is it important?
3. Explain what Macbeth sees in the air, how it is positioned, how it changes in appearance, and where it leads him.

NOTE: There are several important aspects of Macbeth’s soliloquy in this scene:

- Elizabethans believed in order in the world, the idea that all is how it should be (that “the king is on the throne and all is right with the world”), yet in Macbeth’s soliloquy in Act II the opposite is expressed when Macbeth

says "Nature seems dead" (II.i.59) because the act he will commit is against the natural order of things. (There is more on this idea in Act II, scene iv.)

- The soliloquy also mentions Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft, connecting the witches, again, to King Duncan's murder.
- Along with the dagger mentioned in the soliloquy (yup, that is the answer to the above question (#3), the motif of blood is mentioned here (and it is quite gory, the dagger is covered with "gouts of blood").

Scene 2:

Literary Term: ELISION. Act II is singularly concerned with the murder of Duncan. But Shakespeare here relies on a technique that he uses throughout *Macbeth* to help sustain the play's incredibly rapid tempo of development: ELISION (to omit or leave out). We see the scenes leading up to the murder and the scenes immediately following it, but *the deed itself does not appear onstage*. Duncan's bedchamber becomes a sort of hidden sanctum into which the characters disappear and from which they emerge powerfully changed. This technique of not allowing us to see the actual murder, which persists throughout *Macbeth*, may have been borrowed from the classical Greek tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles (remember when Oedipus blinds himself?). In these plays, violent acts abound but are kept offstage, made to seem more terrible by the power of suggestion.

1. Why didn't Lady Macbeth kill King Duncan herself?
2. Explain the following two quotes, both stated by Lady Macbeth:
 - "Infirm of purpose!
Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead
Are but as pictures" (II.ii.72-74).
 - "My hands are of your color, but I shame
To wear a heart so white...
A little water clears us of this deed.
How easy it is then!" (II.ii.88-89).
3. Why does Macbeth use two daggers to kill the king?
4. When Macbeth hears the voices of the king's servants, he becomes concerned that he couldn't say "Amen" to their prayers. Why? What does Lady Macbeth say?

5. Macbeth looks at his hands (either his own, or hands that he imagines in front of him, it is not quite clear) that will pluck out his eyes, and then he sees the blood on his hands. What does he wonder? (HINT: “Incarnadine” means pink/red).
6. Macbeth regrets what he has done—discuss the evidence that he now regrets his actions:
7. What evidence is there that Lady Macbeth has no regrets?

NOTE: Scene ii:

- The setting itself reacts. After Macbeth has committed the unnatural act (killing the king), nature itself reacts; nature seems upset. As Lady Macbeth says, “I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry” (II.ii.22). The idea that nature reacts to the human world is called the **PATHETIC FALLACY** (as it is rather pathetic that we think our lives are so significant that they can impact nature/the world).
- The MOTIF of SLEEP: Macbeth says he is worried he will never be able to sleep after this unnatural act, that he has murdered sleep itself, and sleep is “Chief nourisher in life’s feast,” that sleep nourishes us like food (II.ii.56).
- Also of significance at the end of this scene is **FORESHADOWING** when Lady Macbeth says that it will make them “mad” if they think about what they have done when they killed the king.

Scene 3:

Comic Relief is a humorous scene, incident, or speech that occurs in the midst of a serious or tragic literary work. Authors use it to break tension while preparing for greater tension to follow. Scene 3, with the drunken porter, is one of the most famous examples of this technique in all of literature, and it takes place while Macbeth is washing Duncan’s blood off his hands, just before the discovery of the murder. This scene does more than provide relief; it also deals with issues – sin, hell, deceit, ambition – that are central to the play. Examine the porter’s woozy speech carefully.

1. What is the sound of the knocking?
2. What does the porter pretend to be, what kinds of “people” does he pretend to let in, and why is this significant?
3. According to the porter, what effects does alcohol have?

4. Lennox and Macduff (two Scottish noblemen) arrive at Macbeth's castle to seek King Duncan (note that they are commenting upon the unnatural night, for nature has rebelled against the killing of the king—chimneys have been blown down, the earth shook, etc.). Who finds the king's dead body—and what does he say about it? What is ironic about what he says to Lady Macbeth (lines 92-95)?

5. When Macbeth is told of the king's death, he says,

"Had I but died an hour before this chance,/ I had lived a blessed time; for from this instant/There's nothing serious in mortality;/ All is but toys; renown and grace is dead..." (II. iii.103-106).

This is a complicated section in that Macbeth's words can be taken two ways. Discuss how it might be an act of dissembling (see vocabulary note, below) and how it could be an earnest statement (and an example of foreshadowing).

DISSEMBLE: to conceal the truth or real nature of, to feign (as in *to dissemble innocence*).

A. It might be dissembling because:

B. It might be an earnest statement because:

6. What happens to the men who are accused of Duncan's murder?

7. As Lady Macbeth is fainting, what do Duncan's sons Donalbain and Malcolm decide to do and why?

Scene 4:

In Shakespeare's tragedies (*Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, and *Hamlet*, in particular), terrible supernatural occurrences often betoken wicked behavior on the part of the characters and tragic consequences for the state. The storms that accompany the witches' appearances and Duncan's murder are more than mere atmospheric disturbances; they are symbols of the connection between moral, natural, and political developments in the universe of Shakespeare's plays. By killing Duncan, Macbeth unleashes a kind of primal chaos upon the realm of Scotland, in which the old order of benevolent king and loyal subjects is replaced by a darker relationship between a tyrant and his victims.

1. Ross (a Scottish nobleman) and an old man discuss the recent unnatural events. Ross says,
"Thou seest the heavens, as troubled with man's act,/ Threaten his bloody stage. By the clock 'tis day,/ And yet dark night strangles the traveling lamp" (II, iv, 6-8).
What does this mean?
2. What other strange things have happened?
3. Why do some people suspect that Duncan's sons had him murdered, and how does it help Macbeth?
Foreshadowing: notice that Macduff has no plans to go to Scone to see Macbeth crowned and seems to fear what life will be like with Macbeth as king; this establishes Macduff as Macbeth's future opponent.

Student Section:

1. Write the most significant quote in the space below (including Act.scene.line)—and state how/why it is the most significant quote in this Act.
2. Write down one question you find worthy of discussion from this Act.
3. Select one of the ideas listed on the cover of this study guide to discuss in a brief paragraph of 3-5 sentences).

Act II: Quotable Quotes: Several of these will resurface on quizzes—be ready—
(this means you need to understand them AND be able to relate them to literary devices;
a few, for example, contain a type of irony...)

1. "A heavy summons lies like lead upon me, / And yet I would not sleep. Merciful powers, / Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose" (II.i.8-11). "I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters. / To you they have showed some truth" (II.i.25-26).
2. "I think not of them. / Yet when we can entreat an hour to serve, / We would spend it in some words upon that business, / If you would grant the time" (II.i.27-30).
3. "But still keep / My bosom franchised and allegiance clear, / I shall be counselled" (II.i.35-37).
4. "This is a sorry sight" (II.ii.31).
5. "Consider it not so deeply" (II.ii.45).
6. "These deeds must not be thought / After these ways; so, it will make us mad" (II.ii.49-50).
7. "Macbeth thinks he hears a voice cry this out, and afterward he will be sleepless, since he is guilty he will be denied the "chief nourisher in life's feast" (39). 'Sleep no more! / Macbeth does murder sleep' " (II.ii.51-2).
8. "Infirm of purpose! / Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead / Are but as pictures" (II.ii.72-74).
9. "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" (II.ii.81-84) "*Incarnadine*" means to *turn something pink or red*. "'My hands are of your color, but I shame to wear a heart so white... Retire we to our chamber. / A little water clears us of this deed / How easy it is then!" (II.ii.88-89).
10. "Had I but died an hour before this chance, / I had lived a blessed time; for from this instant / There's nothing serious in mortality: / All is but toys. Renown and grade is dead, / The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees / Is left this vault to brag of" (II.iii.103-108). "Let's briefly put on manly readiness / And meet it 'th' hall together" (II.iii.158-9).

11. "To Ireland I. Our separated fortune / Shall keep us both the safer. Where we are / There's daggers in men's smiles" (II.iii.164-166).
12. "Malcolm and Donalbain the King's two sons, / Are stol'n away and fled, which puts upon tem / Suspicion of the deed" (II.iv.33-35).