

# Macbeth Study Questions: Acts 1-5



## ACT ONE

In the first three scenes of Act One, rather than meeting Macbeth immediately, we are presented with others' reactions to him. **Scene One** begins with the witches who are symbols of evil and superstition. They arrange to meet Macbeth sometime in the near future when a battle is concluded. They also introduce the central paradox of the play: fair is foul, foul is fair.

**Answer the following questions:**

1. Why is Macbeth first introduced through the witches?
2. Explain what you think is meant by the paradoxical: "Fair is foul, foul is fair."

**Scene Two** introduces us to Duncan, the King. The bloodied Captain who has just returned from battle reports on Macbeth's victories.

3. Summarize the Captain's description of the battle and the part Macbeth played in securing victory.
4. What impression do you gain of Macbeth from this description?
5. The Thane of Cawdor was obviously a traitor. What does Duncan's comment:  
No more that Thane of Cawdor shall deceive  
Our bosom interest:  
suggest about Duncan's former relationship with him?

**Scene Three** sees the return of the witches:

6. Carefully read their discussion of their attempt to take revenge on the sailor's wife. What does this episode suggest about the extent and the limits of their powers?
7. Macbeth's entry is a shock because his first words echo those of the witches in scene one: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen". Explain why Macbeth says this line?
8. What literary purpose does it serve for Macbeth's first line to echo the witches?
9. Macbeth and Banquo are confronted by the witches who predict both Macbeth's and Banquo's future. Analyze Banquo's reaction to their prediction about Macbeth.
10. What does his challenge to the witches suggest about his character?

Immediately following the disappearance of the witches, Ross and Angus bring the news that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor (which we learned in Scene Two). This situation where the audience knows more than the characters is called **dramatic irony**.

11. Macbeth's reaction takes the form of a metaphor: "why do you dress me In borrowed robes". Explain this metaphor and watch for more metaphors related to clothing throughout the play.
12. Why does Banquo warn Macbeth about his reaction to the prophecies? What does this warning suggest about Banquo's understanding of Macbeth's character and ambitions?
13. Macbeth's response comes in the form of a soliloquy. What does the soliloquy suggest about Macbeth's state of mind? What conclusion does Macbeth come to?

**Scene Four:** Macbeth and Banquo are received by Duncan.

14. Duncan greets Macbeth by saying, "There's no art Find the mind's construction in the face". How does this reflect the fair is foul theme?
15. How would you describe Duncan's character up to this point?
16. How does Macbeth react to the naming of Malcolm as heir to the throne?
17. What does Macbeth mean when he says:  
Stars hide your fires;  
Let not light see my black and deep desires:  
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be  
What the eye fears, when it is done, to see?

**Scene Five** introduces Lady Macbeth who has just received a letter from her husband.

18. What does the tone of Macbeth's letter suggest about his relationship with her?
19. Explain her assessment of Macbeth and his ambition. Find a quote to support your answer.
20. Carefully read her soliloquy. a) What is she attempting to do?, b) What do these lines suggest about her psychological state?  
Come thick night,  
and pall the in the dunest smoke of hell,  
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,  
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,  
To cry 'Hold hold!'

**Scene Six** begins with Duncan's arrival at Macbeth's castle.

21. Why is Duncan's opening line in Scene Six ironic?

**In Scene Seven**, Macbeth is convinced by Lady Macbeth to proceed with the assassination.

22. What does Macbeth mean when he says,  
If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well  
It were done quickly. If th' assassination  
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch,  
With his surcease, success; that but this blow  
Might be the be-all and end-all-here,  
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,  
We'd jump the life to come. ?

23. What arguments does he provide against the murder? What motive does he provide for the murder?
24. How does Lady Macbeth persuade Macbeth to go ahead with the plan?
25. Describe how they will carry out the plan.

## ACT TWO

Act Two is concerned with the murder of Duncan and its immediate aftermath. **Scene One** builds tension as Macbeth prepares to commit the act.

1. Examine the dialogue between Macbeth and Banquo at the start of the scene.
  - a) How would you describe Macbeth's state of mind?
  - b) In what ways is he different to the man we saw at the end of Act One?
2. Read the "Is this a dagger..." soliloquy carefully. Paraphrase the soliloquy.
3. How does this speech use imagery of light and darkness?
4. Choose three metaphors from the speech and explore how they are used.

**Scene Two** begins with Lady Macbeth. In these speeches she admits to having consumed alcohol in order to be able to fulfill her role in the murder.

5. What does this suggest about her strength of character?
6. Explore how Shakespeare builds tension throughout the scene.
7. What does Macbeth mean when he says that he has murdered sleep?

8. What is the importance of Lady Macbeth's comment:

These deeds must not be thought  
After these ways; so, it will make us mad. ?

9. When Lady Macbeth realizes that Macbeth has failed to remove the daggers from the scene she appears strong and angry. How does she respond to Macbeth's weakness?

10. How is water used as an image in this scene?

**Scene Three** introduces a brief moment of comic relief. This is a technique used to relieve the tension that has been built up in the audience so that they are emotionally able to cope with the tension that is to follow. The Porter is a drunken peasant who jokes about a range of people well known to a Shakespearean audience who he believes will go hell for their pretentiousness. He also makes a number of sexual jokes. Following the appearance of the Porter, the tension rises with the arrival of Macduff and the discovery of the murder.

11. How does Macbeth justify his murder of the grooms?

12. Why do you think Lady Macbeth faints at this point?

13. How does Banquo respond to the murders?

14. Why do Malcolm and Donalbain flee?

**Scene Four** begins with a discussion between Ross and an old man.

15. What is interesting about the events they discuss?

16. What do you think these events symbolize?

17. What does Macduff's decision not to attend the coronation suggest about his attitude toward Macbeth?

## ACT THREE

**Scene One** begins with a soliloquy by Banquo.

1. In what ways does this speech show that Banquo is a threat to Macbeth?

2. Read Macbeth's soliloquy :

"To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus-" Paraphrase the soliloquy.

3. Given Banquo's earlier soliloquy, to what extent do you feel Macbeth's fears are justified?

4. Why does Macbeth employ professional killers to murder Banquo?

### Scene Two

5. In what ways do each of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth show that the crown has not brought peace of mind?
6. In many ways the roles of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have been reversed. Show how their relationship has altered. Pay particular attention to the way the "fair is foul" theme is used to emphasize this change.

In **Scene Four** Banquo's ghost appears.

7. In many of his plays Shakespeare uses ghosts. However, usually the ghost is seen by a number of characters. What does the fact that only Macbeth can see this ghost suggest about the nature of the ghost?
8. How does Lady Macbeth respond to his "fit"?
9. Why do you think Macbeth decides to visit the witches again?

10. Examine the following lines and explain Macbeth's meaning:

For my own good  
All causes shall give way. I am in blood  
Stepped so far that, should I wade no more,  
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.  
Strange things I have in head that will to hand  
Which must be acted ere they may be scanned.

### Scene Five

11. Read Hecate's (Queen of witches) speech closely. What does she suggest about the witches' plans for Macbeth?
12. In many productions of the play, this scene is left out. What effect does leaving the scene out have on our understanding of the role of the witches in determining Macbeth's actions?

**Scene Six** provides us with insight into Macbeth's reign and the way in which he is viewed by the Thanes.

13. Briefly describe these views.

## ACT FOUR

In **Scene One**, Macbeth returns to the witches, apparently placing his trust in their knowledge. However, as the audience knows through the dramatic irony of the Hecate speech, he will be deceived by them playing upon his own illusions and their creation in him of a state of false security.

1. Read the opening of the scene, prior to Macbeth's entrance. What do you think is the purpose of this scene?
2. Look carefully at the three prophecies. In what ways does each encourage a sense of false security in Macbeth?

**Scene Two** contains the murder of Lady Macduff and her children.

3. Why do you think Shakespeare includes a scene showing the relationship between Lady Macduff and her son?
4. This is the first murder to be committed on stage. What effect does this have on the audience?
5. Why do you think Shakespeare deems it necessary to create this effect at this particular point in the play?

**Scene Three** is a long and complex scene in which Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty, not to him, but to Scotland.

6. Why does Malcolm need to do this?
7. What do Ross's comments suggest about the state of Scotland under Macbeth's rule?

## ACT FIVE

Lady Macbeth is sleepwalking in **Scene One**.

1. What is one major difference in the style Shakespeare uses for this scene versus the others? Why does he do this?
2. In what ways is this scene linked to her unsex me speech in Act One, Scene Five?
3. Look carefully at the images that come out of her subconscious mind (light, water...). What do they suggest about her state of mind?
4. What is wrong with her hands? What theme does this reinforce?

In **Scene Three** Macbeth makes a speech which begins with : I am sick at heart...

5. Why is he disillusioned?

6. To what disease is Macbeth referring? How is this ironic?

#### **Scene Four**

7. How are the forces going to camouflage themselves?

In **Scene Five** Macbeth makes a speech in response to Lady Macbeth's death.

8. What metaphors does he use for life?

9. What admirable quality does Macbeth finally display?

#### **Scene Seven**

10. Why does Macbeth kill again? What is his motivation?

11. How is Macduff's motivation different?

#### **Scene Eight**

12. What does Macbeth's line: "My soul is too much charged... already" mean?

13. What is significant about Macbeth being tricked in a "double sense"?

14. Macbeth is killed brutally. How does this parallel another event early in the play?

#### **Scene Nine**

15. Who is King in the end?

16. What prophesy was not fulfilled?