

Synopsis of 'Macbeth'

Macbeth is a Scottish nobleman and a general in the King of Scotland's army. During a thunderstorm, Macbeth and Banquo, another Scottish general, meet three witches who prophesy that Macbeth will become King of Scotland and that Banquo will have children who will also rule Scotland (**Image 1**).

Encouraged by the prophesy, and by his ambitious wife, Macbeth secretly plots to kill King Duncan (**Image 2**). After the murder, Duncan's two sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, flee to England and Ireland and Macbeth is declared King of Scotland.

Macbeth remembers the witches' prophesy that Banquo's children will eventually rule Scotland. He hires men to kill Banquo and his son Fleance. Banquo is murdered, but Fleance manages to escape. Soon afterwards, Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost during a banquet (**Image 3**).

Meanwhile, Malcolm and Macduff, a Scottish nobleman who is hostile to Macbeth's kingship, agree to fight together against Macbeth. Lady Macbeth is overcome with guilt about King Duncan's murder, and starts to sleepwalk. She eventually kills herself.

Malcolm and Macduff lead their army from England into Scotland. Macduff kills Macbeth (**Image 4**), and Malcolm is crowned the new King of Scotland.

'Macbeth' for children and young people

The following versions of 'Macbeth' are designed to be read and enjoyed by a younger audience:

'Manga Shakespeare: Macbeth' by Robert Deas, William Shakespeare, and Richard Appignanesi
Published by SelfMadeHero, 2008
ISBN-13: 978-0955285660

'Macbeth (Shakespeare Stories)' by Andrew Matthews and Tony Ross
Published by Orchard, 2003
ISBN-13: 978-1841213446

'Macbeth The Graphic Novel: Quick Text'
Published by Classical Comics, 2008
ISBN-13: 978-1906332051

The following book compares the known historical facts about Macbeth with Shakespeare's version of the story:

'Macbeth and All That' by Allan Burnett and Scoular Anderson
Published by Birlinn Ltd, 2007
ISBN-13: 978-1841585741

Looking at pictures: Macbeth

The online resource includes four images of Macbeth. Three of them are book illustrations, and one is a photograph of two actors playing the parts of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth at the Globe Theatre in London.

You might like to use the following questions as prompts for introducing the story of Shakespeare's 'Macbeth'. The questions are also designed to encourage pupils to start analysing visual sources to gather information.

Image 1: Illustrated scene from Macbeth, 1901

Question 1

What's the first thing you notice about this picture?

Question 2

Where is this scene taking place?
What time of day is it? What is the weather like?

Question 3

Describe the three figures on the left of the picture?
Do you think that they are friendly towards the men on horses?

Question 4

What do you think might be happening in the picture?

Image 2: Actors playing Macbeth and Lady Macbeth at the Globe Theatre, London

Reproduced by kind permission of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre

Question 1

What might each person be thinking, feeling or saying in this picture?

Question 2

Choose three words to describe the mood of this scene.

Question 3

Who do you think has most power in this scene – Macbeth or Lady Macbeth?

Image 3: Illustrated scene from Macbeth by Thomas Heath Robinson, 1902

Question 1

What do you first notice about this picture?

Question 2

Where do you think this scene is taking place?

Question 3

Can you identify Macbeth, King of Scotland, in this picture?

Question 4

Which people in the picture do you think have seen the ghost?
How are they reacting?

Image 4: Illustrated scene from Macbeth by J Quartley, 1886

Question 1

What might the two characters in this picture be thinking or feeling?
Which one do you think is most frightened?

Question 2

Which of the two men do you think is Macbeth, King of Scotland?

Question 3

Imagine this scene coming to life.
What do you think might happen next?

Ideas for creative writing: Macbeth

- 'Macbeth' explores the themes of ambition and power. Work with your class to explore what the word 'ambition' means, and to think of modern day settings or contexts where people are ambitious, for example: a sporting contest, a talent show, politics, an examination or test.
- Ask the pupils to choose one of these settings and to imagine what lengths someone might be willing to go to achieve their goal, for example: cheating in an exam, deliberately spoiling someone else's chances in a talent contest. Encourage the pupils to write a short story based on this scenario. Ask them to think about what the consequences of the character's behaviour might be, for themselves and other people.
- Work with your class to look closely at **Image 1**, which shows the moment when Macbeth and Banquo first meet the three witches. Explore the setting where this scene takes place, and the reactions of Macbeth and Banquo to seeing the witches.
- Encourage the pupils to write a short first-account based on this scene. It could be narrated by either Macbeth or Banquo looking back at what happened that night. How did they feel when the witches first appeared? Did they believe the witches' prophecies? What are they planning to do next? Are they going to tell anyone else about what they have seen?
- Work with your class to look closely at **Image 3**, which shows the moment when Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo at the banquet. Macbeth is the only person in the room who is able to see the ghost.
- Ask the pupils if they have read, heard, or remember any other stories where one person is able to see a ghost, or magical being, that no one else can see. Encourage the pupils to develop a short story based around this theme.

Ideas for drama: Macbeth

- **Image 2: Doubt and persuasion**

Work with your class to look closely at the photograph, and to discuss what each character might be thinking or feeling. Macbeth is having doubts about his plan to murder King Duncan. Lady Macbeth is ambitious for her husband, and is trying to persuade him to go through with his plan.

Divide the class into pairs.

Ask each pair to imagine a scenario when one person is reluctant or doubtful about doing something, and the other person is trying to persuade them that it's a good idea.

Encourage the pupils to think about the setting, and the motives of each character. What means or arguments will the one character use to persuade the other to take a certain course of action? How does the scenario end?

- **Image 3: 'The ghost at the feast'**

Work with your class to look closely at Image 3 which captures the moment when Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo.

Divide the class into small groups, and ask them to re-create the image, with each pupil taking on a different role. Remind the pupils that Macbeth is the only person who is able to see the ghost.

When the pupils are comfortably in position, ask them to freeze the 'image' for a few seconds. The other pupils in the class could be encouraged to ask each character a question about what they are thinking or feeling at that moment in time.

This activity can be extended by asking the pupils to re-wind the action, and to show what happens leading up to the main image. After freezing the image again, the pupils could then show what happens next. How do the characters react to Macbeth's strange behaviour? What does Lady Macbeth do to rescue the situation and to calm her guests?

Ideas for art: Macbeth

- **Encourage your pupils to create a comic strip or animated version of either:**

- Macbeth meeting the three witches and hearing their prophesies
- Macbeth seeing the ghost of Banquo at the banquet

For each scene, ask the pupils to decide on three or four key moments which help to tell the story or move the action along.

Encourage the pupils to create a storyboard based on these key action points, before they go on to complete the finished comic strip.

You might like to use the Manga or graphic novel versions of 'Macbeth', or the BBC 'Shakespeare: The Animated Tales' as inspiration.