

CHARACTERS

Characterization means chiefly two things: the emphasis which an author gives to the characters of his story (in contradiction to plot, atmosphere, fate, incident, etc.) and the manner in which he builds his characters. Character ranks very high in all of Shakespeare's plays. He builds his characters through the classical methods of the playwright: by letting the character talk, act and suggest; and by having others talk about him. (What he says, what he does, what others say about him, the results of his deeds.) One method Shakespeare never uses is pen-portraiture, or direct description. He does not say, for example: "Lady Macbeth is a small, lithe woman with a touch of cruelty about the lips", etc.; he leaves all this to the imagination. What she says and does are sufficient to establish her character.

Macbeth

Macbeth's character develops; that is, changes from stage to stage. (Lennox, even Banquo, are examples of rather static characters.) Macbeth, as we see him at first is brave, strong, dominant, loyal, peerless, affectionate, ambitious. Brave and strong as we see him in battle, dominant in imposing stern terms upon the vanquished; loyal and peerless in the testimony of his king; ambitious in that he shows keen interest in the predicted kingship. But we do not know how ambitious; nor whether he was guilty or innocent in his thoughts at first.



Macbeth under trial: Should he seek the promised kingship?

He is inscrutable, deep, self-absorbed, imaginative, fearful of his own mind, dishonest to his friends, vacillating, opportunistic, not good at heart. (I-3 to II-2) Informed that he is Thane of Cawdor he is "rapt" - carried away - he admits to horrible imaginings and confusion when faced with mental problems, deceives his friends when he says his mind is upon them; ambitious, and only superficially good in his wife's estimate of him; vacillating in deciding to kill Duncan and then deciding not to; lacking in principle when he finds how he may safely murder the king; imaginative and poetical in the dagger scene; shattered and remorseful when he has slain the king.

Macbeth after the murder of Duncan

He is resolute in evil, unrestrained, imaginative and poetical; (after the coming of Banquo's ghost) hysterical, shaken, resolved on evil of the worst kind. He kills the grooms without a thought, boasts of his love for the king (now dead) and cruelly plans the murder of Banquo. He is unnerved by the presence of the ghost, thoroughly uncontrolled and indiscreet, spying against the nobles of Scotland, determined to employ the worst means to bring about his purposes.

Macbeth at his worst

He is desperate, bloody, filled with contempt for self, disintegrated, empty - a failure. He seeks the witches, though he knows them to be evil and curses them, he resolves to murder all the Macduffs, he is filled with self-loathing and declares life an idiot's tale.

Key qualities in Macbeth are ambition, imagination, confusion of mind in the presence of his too much thought, and lack of any principle of moral goodness.

Lady Macbeth

During the early scenes, she is imperious, perceptive (she sees the significance of Macbeth's letter regarding the witches); resolute (thou shalt be what you are promised); analytical in mind (analyzes her husband's character quickly and truly); quick in resolve (come, and I will sour you on); sharp of tongue ("the valour of my tongue"). Ambitious to be queen, but not evil in deed; she must invoke the evil spirits to help her, to rob her of gentle qualities and fill her with cruelty; of swift and far-reaching imagination ("I see the future in the instant"). She is affectionate to her husband, ready to be the hypocrite (the serpent under the flower), powerful in her scorn (when he says he will proceed no further), resourceful in finding the argument that will win him.



We must note that Lady Macbeth, like her husband, departs from her true nature to perform the murder; there is in her, as in him, a struggle of self against self. This becomes apparent in II-2, the murder scene: she puts on an assumed bravery; drinks deeply to nerve her for the deed; forces her self to take back the daggers; smears her hands with blood as an act of bravado. During this same scene she shows tenderness and concern for her husband, and some feeling for her aged father - for she cannot kill Duncan who resembled him.

During the middle scenes Lady Macbeth is showing weakness - she faints (II-3) when she joins the assembly after the discovery of Duncan's murder; in III-2 she is disillusioned and sad, for her husband is keeping aloof from her; she almost envies Duncan, she shows concern for her husband but it is clear that she has lost all influence over him. III-4 shows her again resourceful in a desperate situation, but it is clear that she is at her wits' end. In despair she dismisses the guests. She is now helpless to restrain Macbeth.

In the final scene the woman's mind is giving way, or has given way. Her true self has left her, and she is a prey to errant thoughts. Fear, and perhaps remorse, are in her mind. The proud, keen, ambitious, strong-willed and resourceful woman is shattered. She is an object of pity.

Key qualities in Lady Macbeth are ambition, lack of any positive goodness, quickness in decision, a willingness to employ evil to attain her ends.

Malcolm

In the first scenes, Malcolm is young, brave enough to have been in battle; unskilled enough to have almost been taken prisoner. He is a forward youth with the gift of ready speech. In the scene following Duncan's murder, he shows himself alert and wary (he realizes who the murderer was), and swift in his leave-taking.

In the middle scenes, he is in England at the King's court. He is cautious before Macduff, careful in testing him; shows himself to be a patriotic Scot and a good man; he has won promise of assistance from England, rallies Macduff after his heavy news from Scotland and satisfies us that he is mature enough to lead the armies north to Scotland.

In the last scenes, Malcolm is portrayed as a competent leader who gives promise of victory. In the final speech of the play he shows a sense of gratitude, wisdom, moderation, a religious mind, and resolution. The boy has become a man.



Duncan

The character of Duncan does not change greatly, if at all. We see him at first as mild, inactive, unacquainted with the battle, at the mercy of his rebellious subjects and invading foreigners. He is easily guiled by Macbeth, and is extravagant in his praise of him. He seems too emotional for a king in such an age, and tactless in announcing before Macbeth and others the appointment of Malcolm as his heir.

Duncan has been a gracious and just king, and very popular. We learn this from Macbeth himself. His courtesy is apparent in I-6 (entering the castle) and in II-1, where he gives presents to one and all. In the scene following the murder the king is highly praised by Macduff and, indeed, by Macbeth - in whose words we now put no faith.

The mild Duncan is a foil to the rough and unscrupulous Macbeth.



Banquo

Banquo is not a clearly drawn character. In the beginning of the play, his qualities as a soldier seem to parallel those of Macbeth. He is equally brave and strong. He is praised by the King, but receives a more modest reward. He is not, like Macbeth, intrigued by the witches; nor does he permit his desires (for kingship) to play false with his reasoning. He sees as clearly as Macbeth the significance of the predictions and of the raising of Macbeth to the thaneship of Cawdor. In II-1 when Macbeth invites him to discuss with him the matter of the witches, Banquo says he must keep his loyalty unsullied. He takes the same stand immediately after the murder is discovered (II-3).

It is Macbeth who gives to Banquo his highest praise: he is daring, wise, cautious, and royal of nature. So far we have a very admirable character. However, we must raise a question: Why did not Banquo disclose the prophecies of the witches? Was his not a guilty silence? Did he wish for the kingship? He had his "cursed thoughts" at the castle, and he evidently feared Macbeth had in mind some evil scheme. His greatest offence was his remaining silent and for this he paid with his life and brought upon Scotland the evils of civil war.



Macduff



Macduff was a man of deep loyalty and strong feeling, if we are to judge from his outcry when he found Duncan murdered. He impresses us in this scene as a strong man of action, and suspicious of Macbeth. At any rate, in the next scene he is showing independence of Macbeth, for he will not go to Scone to the investiture. Discretion rather than fear prompted his flight to England. There, in the presence of Malcolm, he reveals himself as a loyal Scot and a good man. He bears the grievous news from Scotland as a brave man should, and we see in this pathetic scene how tender he was at heart.

His wife has called him unloving and afraid, but we do not think she means this, for at the attack of the murderers she hotly defends his honour. Ross has said that Macduff is wise, judicious, shrewdly aware of the situation, and of any action required. For his bravery, loyalty, independence, and his injuries sustained, it is fitting that he should be the one to punish Macbeth.

Lady Macduff

She is a good woman of noble qualities, the very opposite of Lady Macbeth. She seems rather gentle and weak for the situation in which she is placed; however her words are words of wisdom; she is a good woman in a very evil world. She can be light and playful with her son, even in the presence of death, which she faces bravely.



Ross

Ross is the herald and messenger of the play. There is little that is distinctive in his character. In fact, he seems neutral and colourless. At the beginning of the play he is on the side of Macbeth; during the banquet scene he shows no suspicion of him; in the later scenes he is with Macbeth's enemies. He shows some consideration of Lady Macduff, and loyalty to her husband. When he brings to Macduff, in England, his sad news, he evinces some feeling and also some manliness, for he summons Macduff to use his powers for the freeing of Scotland which he seems to love dearly.



Lennox, Angus, Menteith, Caithness

These are all, men of little colour, and might all change places with slight difference to the play. Lennox, however, has a gift of irony, and evidently a shrewd mind, for he early suspects Macbeth, and has the courage to reveal - cautiously - his suspicions. All have the qualities of soldiers.



The elder Siward is a likable character, He is every inch a soldier; in fact a little too much so, for he seems to regard lightly the death of his gallant young son. But he reverently commits him to God's keeping and calls him God's soldier.

The Witches

The witches are not describable in the ordinary terms of human character. They are simply forces of evil: malignant, devious, subtle, obedient to, and in the power of, their masters. There is no doubt that the audiences of the time of Shakespeare believed in them; Banquo treats them as actual beings. There is a modern trend to reduce them to the terms of psychology; the objective forms taken by Macbeth's desires or flighty, imaginative mind.



STRUCTURE IN SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

Tragedy in itself has one of the following characteristics:

1. It is concerned primarily with one person — the protagonist or the hero.
2. This hero is confronted with great obstacles or problems, and suffers as a result of these problems.
3. His struggle to overcome these problems inevitably ends in his death.

Shakespearean tragedy has the aforementioned characteristics. The hero in the tragedies of Shakespeare, however must have some high position, since his fall will thus be greater. In *Macbeth*, the hero is a heroic nobleman of Scotland.

The Shakespearean tragic hero also contributes to his own downfall. He makes a decision to end his internal or external struggle, and this decision eventually leads to a catastrophe for him. He may realize that he is doomed, but once he has set his plan in motion, he is unable to alter his path to catastrophe. The tragic hero is not necessarily a man but he is a "great" one.

The Shakespearean tragedy may be divided into three main sections:

1. A set of circumstances giving rise to the conflict. (The Exposition)
2. The development of the conflict.
3. The catastrophe.

The first section includes only the opening few scenes. Its purposes are to attract the attention of the audience and to impart necessary information. *Macbeth* begins with thunder and lightning and the witches, followed by quiet speeches explaining the background to the play and introducing the protagonist.

The second section consists of the remainder of Act I, all of Act II, Act III, and sometimes Act IV and often part of Act V. The opposing sides of the conflict are defined - they are not necessarily opposing persons or groups. Macbeth must decide whether or not to murder Duncan - an internal conflict. In Act III the CRISIS (turning point) or reversal is reached. The protagonist realizes that he is not going to be completely successful. In *Macbeth* we reach the crisis when Fleance escapes the murderers and we realize that the witches prophecies may continue to be true. Immediately following we have the banquet scene in which Macbeth is haunted by Banquo's ghost and in his ravings creates suspicion in the minds of his nobles. From then on Macbeth's fortunes are on a downward spiral.

The ending of the play presents Shakespeare with the problem of sustaining the audience's interest between the crisis and the catastrophe. The catastrophe cannot follow too swiftly after the crisis, as the build-up may seem too long for such a brief ending. Thus, the playwright found it necessary to create an interesting 'pause' before the catastrophe. This pause usually comprises Act IV and sometimes part of Act III and Act V. It is created in several ways:

1. After the crisis there may be exciting events to maintain interest. In *Macbeth* there is Macbeth's consultation with the witches for the second time.
 2. There may be an echo of an event in the first half. There is Lady Macbeth's dramatic sleepwalking scene in which she relives the night of Duncan's murder.
 3. There may be an appeal to a new emotion. Such an appeal is made in the death of Lady Macduff and her son and our sight of Lady Macbeth's agony of mind.
 4. Scenes of battle may be introduced; such as the storming of Macbeth's castle and his fight with young Siward.
- The third section of the play, the catastrophe, is found in the remainder or the whole of Act V. The suicide of Lady Macbeth and the death of Macbeth occur in this section of the play *Macbeth*.

Qualities of a Typical Shakespearean Tragedy

1. It has a hero with a tragic flaw. This is a man of mental and moral stature who has some defect or fault.
2. This flaw, alone, or combined with external conflicts, undermines the hero and he goes down in the struggle.
3. For his fault or weakness, retribution must be paid. Those who have suffered losses must be rewarded.
4. The disturbance aroused by the hero must subside to calm with the promise for a better future.

Macbeth as Typical Shakespearean Tragedy

1. Macbeth is a strong man with weaknesses; namely his superstition, ambition, indecisiveness, and moral hollowness.
2. All of his weaknesses are intensified by his strong-willed wife, lady Macbeth, and by his outward foes.
3. As his weakness within develops, his enemies increase and the inner Macbeth is shattered. He is slain by Macduff, thus retribution is gained, for Macduff avenges his crimes.
4. Malcolm is reinstated in his kingdom, his supporters are rewarded; punishment is implied for all evil-doers, and Malcolm's closing words give assurance of calm days to follow.

Macbeth is the shortest of all of Shakespeare's tragedies.

IDEAS . . .

"Fair is foul and foul is fair"

One of the most important ideas in Macbeth involves the witches' statement in Act 1, Scene 1 that "fair is foul and foul is fair." (I-1, 10) This phrase aptly describes the macabre status quo within the character Macbeth and without. When Macbeth and Banquo first see the weird sisters, Banquo is horrified by their hideous appearances. Conversely, Macbeth immediately began to converse with these universally known evil creatures. After hearing their prophecies, one can say that Macbeth considered the witches to be "fair" when in reality their intentions were quite "foul." Macbeth's possession of the titles of Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland came by foul means. Macbeth became the Thane of Glamis by his father Sinel's death; he became Thane of Cawdor when the former namesake was executed for treason; and he was ordained King of Scotland after murdering the venerable Duncan. Thus, Macbeth has a rather ghastly way of advancing in life.

This idea is further verified by King Duncan's statement "There's no art/ To find the mind's construction in the face..." (I-4, 11-12) Although Macbeth has the semblance of the amicable and dutiful host, ("fair") he is secretly plotting Duncan's death ("foul"). Furthermore, Lady Macbeth's orchestration of the murder exemplifies the twisted atmosphere in Inverness. Both a woman and a host, she should be the model of grace and femininity. She is described, however, as a "fiendlike queen" (V-6, 69) and exhibits a cold, calculating mentality. In addition, the very porter of Inverness likens the place to the dwelling of the devil Beelzebub. This implies that despite its "pleasant seat," (I-6, 1) Inverness is a sinister and evil place. It is also interesting to note that Macbeth is unable to say a prayer to bless himself after murdering Duncan. It is strange and "foul" that he should think of religion after committing such an unholy act. The very sanction of sleep and repose is also attacked in Macbeth. What is normally considered a refreshing and necessary human activity is "murdered" by Macbeth after he commits his heinous crime. Neither Macbeth nor his wife is able to sleep after killing Duncan. Macbeth's lack of sleep makes him a brutal killer; Lady Macbeth begins to sleepwalk and inadvertently reveals the source of her distress through her nightly babble. In addition, Macbeth gains an almost inhuman strength and courage after his first crime. He is more courageous in crime than he has ever been in virtuous deed, which is indeed bizarre.

. . . the tragic hero

A second idea in Macbeth is that of the tragic hero. A tragic hero is a character that the audience sympathizes with despite his/her actions that would indicate the contrary. Macbeth, in spite of his horrible murders, is a pitiable man. His saving grace is that he did not initially want to kill Duncan but later changed his mind after listening to his wife. In addition, Macbeth internally suffered because he could not enjoy his royal status. Fear, paranoia, exhaustion and sleeplessness plagued him despite his sovereignty. Lady Macbeth is also a tragic hero. Her initial courage and

daring did not last long, and she quickly deteriorated into a delusional, hapless somnambulist. She broke down mentally and physically because of the strain of the crime. Macbeth and his wife are pitiable characters because the reader is able to follow their every thought and action. Thus, the reader sees not only their gruesome effects on the Scottish people but also on themselves.

indecision . . .

Another important idea in Macbeth is that of indecision and internal conflict. Macbeth was indecisive up until the very night of the murder about whether or not he should kill Duncan. Afterwards, he was unsure of a course of action. He rashly decided to kill Banquo, visit the witches and remain confident even when his castle was besieged. Lady Macbeth's initial lack of indecision is what brought about the pair's downfall. Later, however, she becomes tentative about the potential benefits of Banquo's murder. By the end of the play, she has become a delusional recluse that is almost entirely ignored by her husband.

creation of hell . . .

A fourth important idea in Macbeth is the creation of an internal/external hell. This creation of a place of damnation begins when Macbeth freely converses with the sinister witches. Banquo calls the weird sisters "instruments of darkness," (I-4, 124) but Macbeth still decides to take their advice. At several times in the play both Macbeth and his wife invoke the night, a universal symbol of evil. Furthermore, many of the scenes in the play take place at night or in murky areas and are accompanied by the shrieks of ominous animals. Macbeth is unable to bless himself after the crime and he "murders sleep," (II-2, 35) one of the only positive associations with night. Thus, hallucinations, sleepwalking, disembodied voices and ghosts all pervade Inverness. One can recognize the climax of this creation of an external hell when the porter himself likens the castle to the residence of the devil. Furthermore, Macbeth is indirectly compared to Edward the King of England. Whereas Edward cures people, Macbeth kills them. In addition, Lady Macbeth commits suicide in the castle, an act considered worthy at the time of eternal damnation in hell.

This creation of an external hell also corresponds to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's internal suffering. Macbeth is never at peace - he is always delirious, enraged, brutal and paranoid. He cannot enjoy the material and mortal pleasures of being a king despite all of the sacrifice that it took on his part. Lady Macbeth's courage and resolve quickly deteriorates and she is left as an incurable somnambulist who unconsciously tries to erase her memory of the crime. Macbeth and his wife's unintentional creation of an external hell for Scotland is pitiable because they suffered internally as well.