BBC BITESIZE - MACBETH Episode 5

Carl: Hello, and welcome to the Bitesize English literature podcast. Now, you've clearly done something right because you've made it here. If you want to hear all the episodes in this podcast, make sure you download the BBC Sounds app.

Jean: And don't forget that whilst you're in the BBC Sounds app, there's loads of other things you can use to help you with revision - full versions of some of the texts you might be studying, revision playlists and other Bitesize podcast series to help with different GCSE subjects.

Jean: I'm Jean Menzies.

Carl: And I'm Carl Anka.

Jean: And in this episode, we're taking a closer look at the form, structure and language within Macbeth. So let's start with form. Macbeth is a dramatic play, and it's a tragedy. So let's start by looking at that a little more closely.

Carl: Before we get started here, maybe grab a pen and paper so you can make some notes if that's helpful to you.

Jean: So the earliest surviving literary explanation for tragedy came from the Greek writer, Aristotle. Now Aristotle was an ancient Greek philosopher and scientist, born in 384 BCE, and is known as one of the greatest intellectual figures of Western history. So let's break down how Aristotle defined tragedy against the story of Macbeth. So Aristotle told us that tragic plays involve a protagonist who's usually of some importance, perhaps royal or of noble birth

Carl: So that's Macbeth.

Jean: Perfect. And then through the course of the play, the protagonist reveals a fatal flaw, which causes him or her to have a reversal of their fortune. And success and happiness will be replaced by failure and misery.

Carl: So Macbeth - again, is ambition is his fatal flaw? Or his hamartia, which is the Greek term we learned about in Episode Four.

Jean: Exactly. The reversal of fortune is inevitable and irreversible, and tragedies often end with death at the hands of an antagonist.

Carl: Our antagonist here is Macduff.

Jean: Aristotle also tells us that a tragedy should bring up feelings of fear and pity in the audience.

Carl: I think that we can all agree that Macbeth ticks Aristotle's boxes for being a tragic play. On a very basic level, it is a story about how a good man does a lot of bad things and ends up on the wrong path. We know that Macbeth is violent in the beginning, but that violence is an act to serve and protect his king and his country. He ends up going astray by his ambition and his need for power. And that becomes his fatal flaw. That, in turn, puts him on a path toward his own destruction. Macbeth eventually does achieve his ambition to become king, but it's at the expense of not only his happiness, but his marriage, his good character, his best friend, and at the expense of his future. It does leave the audience with those feelings that Aristotle says - fear and pity. Right at the end of the play Macbeth, the man Macbeth has nothing and no one other than his crown.

Jean: It really is a great tragedy and I'm gonna go out on a limb here as an ancient historian and say the ancient Greeks would have loved it. It really does address all those points that Aristotle made and it keeps us, the audience, interested. So what about the structure? How does that work in Macbeth?

EXTRACT
Macbeth: Speak, if you can: what are you?
First Witch: All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Glamis!
Second Witch: All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!
Third Witch: All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!

EXTRACT
Macbeth: Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.

EXTRACT
Banquo: Thou hast it now: king, Cawdor, Glamis, all,
As the weird women promised, and, I fear,
Thou play'dst most foully for't.

EXTRACT
Witches: Double, double, toil and trouble
Fire burn and cauldron bubble

EXTRACT
Macduff: Despair thy charm;
And let the angel whom thou still hast served
Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb
Untimely ripp'd.

Carl: Now, when you hear it like that, you see how the story moves through and how it shapes as a tragedy that we were just talking about. It also shows a bit more about the structure of Macbeth, right,

which is chronological order. There's no flashforwards. There's no flashbacks. We are following a story in real time. It goes from point A to point B. Each of those clips we've just heard are in order.

Jean: And as we just heard, the events in Macbeth are organised into five acts, each with a number of different scenes. But did you know that Shakespeare himself most likely didn't even organise the play this way?

Carl: I didn't really - tell me more.

Jean: So Shakespeare wouldn't have written his plays with acts and scenes. They would have just been ready to perform. In fact, it probably would have been done in 1709 by Shakespeare's first editor who made the plays more accessible to a wider audience through including acts, scenes and lists of characters.

Carl: I do know a little bit more about the five-act structures of plays. Now, this is discussed as a model by a gentleman called Gustav Freytag, a German author from the 19th century. Gustav studied classical drama and suggested that there were five stages in a tragic, dramatic structure. He wasn't the person who reworked Macbeth into five stages. But he certainly studied the how and the why of the five acts that are used. Now, the five acts in a tragic play are: exposition.

Jean: So that's Act 1. We're introduced to the main characters, the witches make their prediction. And the idea of murder begins to take shape.

Carl: Then it’s rising action.

Jean: Act 2 - Macbeth keeps changing his mind. Lady Macbeth takes control of the situation and then the key moment - King Duncan's murder.

Carl: Then you have the climax, which is the turning point for the character.

Jean: It’s so interesting, because in this case, it would be Act 3 where Macbeth is now king. Banquo is murdered, and Macduff joins Malcolm in England. And that is a turning point because things then go downhill rapidly from this point. What's the fourth stage again?

Carl: Falling action. This is the main conflict between our protagonist and antagonist. That's where it all gets established. Shakespeare has a lot of very interesting Act Fours.

Jean: So in Act 4 that is exactly what happens. Macbeth returns to the witches, Macduff’s family is murdered, and Malcolm and Macduff plan their invasion.

Carl: And this all leads to catastrophe where the protagonist is defeated by the antagonist and things return to a state of normality. So in Act 5 of Macbeth, the invasion is carried out. Malcolm becomes the king, the witches’ predictions come true. And Macbeth and Lady Macbeth both die.

Jean: So we can see why the structure of having five acts is followed and that explains how Macbeth's five acts fit into Gustav Freytag's model.

Carl: Okay, we've given you a lot of information. So let's just pause here and take a moment. You can relisten to sections if you need to. Or just pause and grab a pen and paper, get those notes down. Remember, there's loads of resources on the BBC Bitesize website too. So take a look there for even more information on Macbeth.

Jean: Should we move on to language?

Carl: Let's do it.

EXTRACT
Duncan: What bloody man is that?

EXTRACT
Macbeth: And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood

EXTRACT
Macbeth: It will have blood; they say, blood will have blood

EXTRACT
Witch: Cool it with a baboon's blood,
Then the charm is firm and good.

EXTRACT
Lady Macbeth: Here's the smell of the blood still.

Carl: Looking at or hearing language of any of Shakespeare's plays is an absolute treat because the man was a genius with words. Did you know that it was estimated that Shakespeare had a vocabulary of 17,000 words. That's four times more than the average educated person of the time. Shakespeare brought over 1700 new words to the English language, as well as inventing new phrases and sayings that we still use today. So, if you've ever had someone go, "it's all Greek to me", they're quoting Shakespeare.

Jean: Oh, my goodness, I didn't even know that and I'm a Greek historian. That's brilliant. And there's also "be all and end all" or "one fell swoop", all first appeared in Macbeth.

Carl: William Shakespeare - an absolute wizard of words.

Jean: And there's two words that are repeated a lot in Macbeth and their meaning and use is important. Now, I think we've just made one of them pretty obvious with what we've just heard

Carl: I think there was a tiny, tiny clue. But in case anyone did miss it, one of the words is “blood”. The other one is “night”. The word “blood” is actually repeated over 40 times in the play. Not to mention the words bloody and bleeding. This is to show us a number of things. First, and probably the most obviously, this shows the violence of the setting and the action. Even at the start of the play Macbeth, the man is being described as violent, and with description of his soul in the battle as being “smoked with bloody execution”. Imagine that - literal smoke coming off his sword just covered in blood.

Jean: It's also a word that’s used to symbolise guilt. Macbeth sees a bloody dagger pointing towards King Duncan's room when he's on his way to kill him. He then worries that he won't be able to get the blood off his hands after the murder. And in Act 5, Lady Macbeth imagines that her hands are still covered in blood as she sleepwalks around, desperately trying to get it off.

Carl: Over 40 times is a lot of mentions of one word, but it's for a reason. It's a constant reminder to the reader and the audience of the full horror of what's occurred and the violent consequences of Macbeth’s actions.

Jean: And the word “night” is used as a reminder in a similar way.

EXTRACT
Lady Macbeth: Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,

EXTRACT
Banquo: go not my horse the better,
I must become a borrower of the night
For a dark hour or twain.

EXTRACT
Macbeth: Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day

Jean: Night-time is often associated with evil and it's the same in Macbeth. Darkness is used to conceal evil deeds and assist in making these plans a reality. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth both separately call the night and darkness to not only hide what they're doing from people around but also to hide their evil from heaven and their own consciousness.

Carl: Macbeth says, “Let not light see my black and deep desires: the eye wink at the hand” - so the darkness can even hide his actions from himself.

Jean: Exactly. Shakespeare uses light to symbolise hope and goodness and night to symbolise darkness and evil deeds. And there's some key moments where the evil of night really stands out. So after Macbeth kills Duncan, the sun doesn't rise and an unnatural night covers the land, which suggests that Macbeth's reign is evil and there's no goodness to be found about Macbeth being king.

Carl: He's not wrong is he? He's not wrong at all. There's also a lack of light that tends to go with the mentions of night. So on the night of Duncan's murder, it's where Banquo notices that the candles are still out in the sky, meaning there are no stars whatsoever. Macbeth has earlier said that the stars hide your fires and when he thinks about how to become king. So it all comes together - you can see how Shakespeare was going with his lack of light and the presence of darkness in the night itself.

Jean: There is also another really practical use to this as well, when we think of when this was written and performed. In Shakespeare's days, plays were regularly performed outdoors and in the daylight. So to keep reminding the audience that some of these key scenes were meant to be happening at night was really important.

Carl: Never really thought about that about that one actually – it's all really interesting. Like I said, William Shakespeare, he was a genius with words. So it's a treat to get a small insight into how and why he used the language he did.

Jean: Thanks for listening to Episode Five of the Bitesize English literature podcast all about the form, structure and language of Macbeth.

Carl: There's still a lot more to discuss. So have a listen to other episodes in this series on BBC Sounds. And be sure to share with your friends what you found useful. In Episode Six, we're gonna be diving into the dramatisation of Macbeth and the impact of casting, performance and staging as in the play. Oh, I can't wait for this one.