

# BBC BITESIZE - MACBETH Episode 1

**Carl:** Hello, and welcome to the Bitesize English literature podcast.

**Jean:** I'm Jean Menzies, author and ancient historian.

**Carl:** I'm Carl Anka, journalist and author.

**Jean:** We're here today to help you dive a little deeper into some of the texts in GCSE English literature.

**Carl:** It's worth noting that there will be spoilers in this as we look into each text as a whole. So if you're not quite finished reading, or you're not quite ready for spoilers, just come back later.

**Jean:** There's plenty here to get your teeth stuck into.

**Carl:** 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 your revision – full versions of some of the texts you might be studying, revision playlists, and other Bitesize podcast series to help with different subjects. In this series, we'll be covering some of the key things you need to know about Macbeth: the plot, the characters, the themes, and the language Shakespeare uses.

**Carl:** In this episode, we're going to look at the plot of Macbeth and I'm going to tell you something now Jean - Macbeth is my text. This is one of my favourites and I'm very excited to take a closer look at some of these key moments. Is it weird to say Macbeth is one of my favourites?

**Jean:** Absolutely not - there is so much to keep you hooked in this play. I completely get it.

**Carl:** Let's get into this one then.

## *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.

**Banquo:** Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear things that do sound so fair?

**Carl:** Right, we've stepped inside the story. And straight into Act 1 scene 3, where Macbeth has encountered three witches for the very first time. Now, Macbeth is the Thane of Glamis. And I should

probably say at this point in time that a thane is a nobleman who owns land that's been given to him by the king in exchange for his military services. Macbeth is on his way home from a battle with his best friend Banquo, where they've been successful against the Norwegians. Macbeth in particular has played a huge role in that success. He's killed someone. He chopped him from his chin down to his belly button. So yeah, very early on, we find out Macbeth is a good fighter - big, strong lad. And on the way back with him and Banquo they meet the three witches who predict a number of things, including that Macbeth will one day become the King of Scotland.

**Jean:** I mean, seriously, what would you do? You're heading home today and three witches stop you and tell you that one of your greatest dreams is going to come true. I mean, you think they were trying to wind you up, wouldn't you?

**Carl:** Yeah, it would be my first thing. But then the witches tell them a number of things. They first greet him as the Thane of Glamis, which is what he already is. And then they predict he's going to be the Thane of Cawdor, and then they say he's gonna be the King of Scotland afterwards. They also tell him that the sons of Banquo will be king one day as well, which is interesting. He doesn't think any of these predictions will come through. The first one comes true, like that - pretty much the moment he gets home, he finds that he's gonna be made the Thane of Cawdor when King Duncan awards it to him for his victory in the battle. So then Macbeth, the cogs start turning, Macbeth begins to wonder if the other predictions will become true.

**Jean:** And Macbeth is an ambitious man. So for this to feel like a possibility must be really exciting for him.

**Carl:** Macbeth's wife, who is referred to as Lady Macbeth, is even more ambitious and ruthless than Macbeth is. So, once when Macbeth tells her about the witches' prophecy, Lady Macbeth is fully on board with the plan for Macbeth to become king, which also includes a little spot of murder. She says, you know, maybe you should murder Duncan, when Duncan comes around to visit Macbeth in Macbeth's castle.

#### *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.

**Jean:** You can't discuss the plot of Macbeth without hearing this line - "Is this a dagger which I see before me", one of the most famous lines of the play, and of Shakespeare's actually.

**Carl:** This is just at the point where Macbeth is on his way to do the deed and murder Duncan, when he sees a dagger pointing him in the direction of the king. We don't know if it's a hallucination, but moments after saying this as Macbeth takes his own dagger from his belt and commences the deed. He murders Duncan. He hesitates just before he does it, but Lady Macbeth is very encouraging saying they have to go through with their plan.

**Jean:** Such a supportive spouse.

**Carl:** Of sorts...

**Jean:** So it's Macduff who finds Duncan murdered but Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are able to use the king's guard as a cover for their crime. Meanwhile, Duncan's sons disappear as they're scared for their lives, which means...

**Carl:** Dun dun dun dun dun. Macbeth becomes the King of Scotland, just like the witches said he would.

*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.

**Carl:** That extract that we just heard there - that is Banquo, Macbeth's best mate. He was there the day the witches told Macbeth about the prophecy, and he knows that everything isn't as what it seems.

*EXTRACT*

**Banquo:** And I fear Thou play'dst most foully for 't.

**Carl:** Now, what does that mean? You may have heard the term foul play. That is a sentence that is all about violence and murder in certain crimes. Banquo is suggesting that he's suspicious about Macbeth's involvement in the death of King Duncan. Now, we, the audience and the reader, know that Banquo's suspicions are correct. Macbeth did do a murder - Banquo's not totally sure. And then Macbeth decides something needs to be done about it.

**Jean:** He does another murder, obviously, because killing people is clearly what he does now.

**Carl:** Yeah. The first Macbeth that you meet when the play starts, Macbeth did murders but he was doing it in service of his king in battle. And this was described as noble, and to help his country of Scotland. But now, as things progress and Duncan has been murdered, and now that Banquo has been murdered, Macbeth is entirely self-serving. He's using violence and murder to push himself forward and to put others down. The whole play of Macbeth is about how ambition and the love of power can destroy someone and those around him. Right? This is something we're hearing unfolding every single scene. Banquo was Macbeth's best friend. But Macbeth turns against him, because Macbeth's need for power and the need to protect his own power warps him. And there's also Lady Macbeth, who helps convince him again and again that these deadly decisions are the right things to do.

**Jean:** And he has changed and started committing these acts of absolute evil since he heard the witches' prophecy. But there's reasons to think that there could be guilt there, too. I mean, one of the interpretations is that he feels so guilty that he actually sees the ghost of Banquo later on. And because he's the only one who can see him, those around him start to wonder if he's imagining it, including Lady Macbeth.

**Carl:** There's a decent argument to be made that he doesn't actually feel guilty at all. And that he's driven as a consequence of his sin of killing the king. People in the Jacobean era, which is the era between 1603 and 1625, believe that what behaviour was going on was punishment for Macbeth's sin.

**Jean:** Either way, the witches have a lot to answer for, but Macbeth wants to know more from them.

*EXTRACT*

**Witches:** Double, double toil and trouble. Fire burn and caldron bubble.

**Carl:** And there's the other famous line: "Double, double toil and trouble, fire burn and cauldron bubble." I love this line, so so much. It's the one that a lot of people quote when you say, "Oh, I'm studying Macbeth."

**Jean:** I'm not even sure everyone remembers it's from Macbeth. I mean, why would you, it's in so many other pieces of pop culture as well, but that is where it comes from. It's just a really popular line now that's synonymous with witches and spells. So Macbeth has come back to see the witches here, and they tell him three things. Beware Macduff, the Thane of Fife. None of woman born shall harm Macbeth. And Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill shall come against him.

**Carl:** Now these are slightly more complex prophecies than the first batch. Especially because two and three are supposed to be logically and physically impossible. None of woman born can harm him and a forest physically moving location, so it can hurt Macbeth makes Macbeth feel safe. Well, those things certainly can't happen. I'm absolutely cushty. But it's the first prophecy. Beware Macduff - that comes true quite quickly, because Macbeth finds out that Macduff, Thane of Fife, has gone to join Malcolm who is Duncan's son, in England. So what'd you think Macbeth is gonna do about this prophecy?

**Jean:** Yep, you've got it. He does a murder. He seizes Macduff's castle and has his wife and children killed. This in particular feels as if it's the most brutal murder up until this point in the play. But that does not prove to be a smart move, because Macduff is quite obviously devastated, and therefore vows to have revenge.

**Carl:** That's the thing about Macbeth. There is so much going on all the time.

**Jean:** Yeah, it really all is happening. And there's still a lot more to come. Because we haven't heard from Lady Macbeth for a while. That's because her own guilt has actually started to take its toll on her and she's sleepwalking around the castle, remembering all the evil things she's done.

**Carl:** Although that's the same thing we said about Macbeth. Some Jacobeans will believe that guilt is happening to Lady Macbeth. And some believe that this is insanity happening to Lady Macbeth as well.

*EXTRACT*

**Lady Macbeth:** Out, damned spot; out, I say!

**Carl:** So that we just heard now, “Out, damned spot” - that is one of the most famous speeches from Lady Macbeth. It's Lady Macbeth referring to imaginary blood that she can see on her hands. She can't get away from the guilt and responsibility for all the deaths that have occurred, and she's having a breakdown. In Act 5, the final act of the play, Macbeth finds out that Lady Macbeth has died. It's never fully explained how or why Lady Macbeth died. And Macbeth himself seems pretty resigned, uninterested. There is a small suggestion that Lady Macbeth may have taken her own life. And it's also some suggestion that basically, Macbeth doesn't care anymore. It is the tragic downfall, so we began this play with so much determination. But we know that Macbeth is all about ambition. And we know how love of power that motivated Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in the beginning is detrimental to both of them in the end.

**Jean:** Act 5 scene 6 - Malcolm and Macduff's invasion has begun. At this point, Macbeth still thinks he's protected by the witches' predictions, but he's wrong. When the invading army cut down the trees in Birnam wood to use as camouflage as they move to Macbeth's castle in Dunsinane, it seems as though the trees themselves are moving, and thus making the third of the witches' latest prophecies come true.

**Carl:** So they said that Macbeth will never be beaten until the woods moved, and here they are. Right?

**Jean:** Exactly. It's such a clever way to make that come about. I absolutely love that revelation in that moment in the play.

#### *EXTRACT*

**Macbeth:** I bear a charmed life, which must not yield,  
To one of woman born.

**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:** It's one of the greatest twists ever written I think, this one, because when you read it, that he can't be harmed by someone born of woman, you have no idea where Shakespeare is going with that. Are the witches lying? Are they trying to bring him down? And then Macduff answers them easily. He was from his mother's womb untimely ripped.

**Jean:** I know, another seriously clever way to spin that that I never could have come up with. I remember the first time I read that. And you're right. It's that moment, like when you're watching a great thriller, and it takes an unexpected turn that has you shouting at the TV. So Macduff was untimely ripped from his mother's womb. So we can assume, delivered by Caesarean rather than born of woman in the traditional sense. So he's able to kill and behead Macbeth. Malcolm becomes the new King of Scotland and we hear how accepting the witches' prophecies leads directly to Macbeth's downfall.

**Carl:** So, thank you for listening to Episode One of the Bitesize English literature podcast. And joining us as we explored the plot of Macbeth.

**Jean:** Well, there's actually still a lot more to learn. So take a listen to the rest of the episodes of the Bitesize English literature podcast on BBC Sounds to find out more. In Episode Two we'll be taking a look at some of the characters from Macbeth, particularly Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.