

# BBC BITE SIZE - MACBETH Episode 2

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

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

**Carl:** Audio can transport you into the world of a play or a book - it can bring alive for your imagination and it really helps you remember the story and the words.

**Jean:** I'm Jean Menzies.

**Carl:** And I'm Carl Anka. And in this episode we're taking a look at some of the characters within Macbeth. Macbeth is quite a small cast of characters. Macbeth and his wife, Lady Macbeth, are the main roles. Seeing as the play is named after him. It's probably makes sense to start with the man himself. Big Mackey B - Macbeth.

**Jean:** You can't learn about the play Macbeth without learning about the character of Macbeth.

## *EXTRACT*

**Captain:** For brave Macbeth - well he deserves that name -  
Disdaining fortune, with his brandish'd steel,  
Which smoked with bloody execution,  
Like valour's minion carved out his passage  
Till he faced the slave

**Jean:** So we're in Act 1, scene 2 here, and this is the captain reporting back to the King of Scotland, Duncan, and his sons about the victory the Scottish troops have had against an invading force. They're describing Macbeth here and saying how he was brave Macbeth with his "brandish'd steel, which smoked with bloody execution," describing how he had killed at the battle, beheading someone and fixing his head upon our battlements.

**Carl:** I think it's fair to start talking about Macbeth by saying he is a complex character - he changes throughout the course of the play. And in this introduction to him, we hear the captain really praising his bravery to Duncan, which shows at the beginning of the play, he's a warrior. He's a leader, and Macbeth is someone that you definitely want on your side when a fight goes down. Isn't that right?

**Jean:** Yeah, absolutely. He's the thane of Glamis when the play begins. But after this conversation with the captain, where he describes Macbeth's actions on the battlefield, Duncan immediately rewards him by making him Thane of Cawdor

**Carl:** And listen to the words - they're really strong verbs and adjectives, right? They really emphasise how brave Macbeth has been: "valour", "brandished", "smoke", "carved", "unseamed", "fixed". We get it, right – Macbeth's a warrior.

**Jean:** I think we can definitely agree that he's clearly brave and the leader, the star - someone to aspire to really. Although he's also still very violent at the beginning, but that is as he fights for his king and his country. He does return to his heroic self very briefly at the end, when he faces Macduff alone and realises it's all over for him. It's just a shame that he loses that for most of the play. Things take such a turn after he meets the witches. So let's fast forward, shall we?

#### *EXTRACT*

**Macbeth:** Stars, hide your fires;  
Let not light see my black and deep desires:  
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,  
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.

**Carl:** Let not light see my black and deep desires. See, this is what gave a hint of what he wants and it isn't pretty.

**Jean:** So this is Act 1 scene 4 - the witches have told Macbeth their predictions that he will become Thane of Cawdor, and then King of Scotland. He didn't see how either were possible. But now obviously he has been given Thane of Cawdor and so being king now doesn't actually seem unachievable.

**Carl:** This is another part of Macbeth's character. His ambition in this scene, we see that he's even worried about the strength of his own ambition, as he refers to them as his "black and deep desires", insinuating that they're dark and hidden.

**Jean:** I wonder if he always is this ambitious? Like, is it something that he always thought about? Or is it the witches' prophecies that plant this idea in his head, so that he can be more and it spirals from there?

**Carl:** The joy of Macbeth and the mastery of Shakespeare's writings, we'll never know for sure. Shakespeare never quite answers these questions for us. Alright. As we spoke in Episode 1, all these things are left for different interpretations. And you can come away with different learnings every single time. I think what's also important is Macbeth doesn't go directly into killing the king so he can take the crown. Right? He changed his mind a couple of times, he's unsure of himself.

**Jean:** Yeah, he goes back and forth a little bit. And you do wonder when you're reading or watching the play, if he might have gone the other way, and not gone ahead with killing the king if it wasn't for Lady Macbeth, who encourages him. She says herself that she doesn't know if he can do it. So she pushes him a little bit, you know, pushes those buttons that might encourage him to go on with it.

#### *EXTRACT*

**Lady Macbeth:** Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be  
What thou art promised: yet do I fear thy nature;  
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness  
To catch the nearest way

**Jean:** "Too full o' the milk of human kindness." Even Lady Macbeth thinks he may be too keen to actually kill Duncan and become king himself.

**Carl:** And he does seem to tell himself this as well. He tells himself that this isn't him. It's not who he wants to be. Macbeth definitely wants to become king. But does he want it enough to murder King Duncan for it? There's a moment in Act 1 scene 7 where he talks himself out of it completely. Duncan, the king, comes to see him. And Macbeth is adamant that he's not going to do it. He's not going to kill Duncan. He's like, "Hmm I'm not gonna do it. Why would I kill the King? The King's been really nice to me. Definitely not gonna do it."

#### *EXTRACT*

**Macbeth:** We will proceed no further in this business:  
He hath honour'd me of late; and I have bought  
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,  
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,  
Not cast aside so soon.

**Jean:** So he's saying there that King Duncan has honoured him of late by making him the Thane of Cawdor after the successful battle. He says it should be "worn now in their newest gloss, not cast aside so soon". So he's explaining how he should be enjoying and basking in this new honour, not just throwing it aside so quickly.

**Carl:** Yeah... It doesn't last too long.

**Jean:** Yeah, it's the next day, and it hasn't lasted. Especially if you've got a Lady Macbeth hanging around because she steps in. And we will look at her character in more detail shortly. But in the space of a couple of minutes, she manages to argue the case for Duncan's death. And Macbeth is once again set on murder. Lady Macbeth is incredibly persuasive. She is able to take control of the situation in such a short space of time and push Macbeth back in that direction.

**Carl:** Yeah. Lady Macbeth plays a huge part in the death of Duncan. And I think we hear in this moment that Macbeth himself isn't wholly a bad person. I know it's hard to take when Macbeth starts with him chopping people in half and being an absolute demon on the battlefield. But I do think we need to remember that Shakespeare wrote this play as the tragedy of Macbeth. Remember, Macbeth has good qualities in him. But it's fair to say these do change under the influence of his wife and the witches. Now, I don't want to completely blame the Lady Macbeth and the witches. Macbeth does have free will.

**Jean:** It's when he kills the King that he really finds himself caught in a spiral of evil. And he can't escape. He certainly is no hero now, and he'd be described as a coward rather than brave because he's swept up into this life of murder and terrorising people as he desperately tries to cling on to power.

**Carl:** And he suffers from it badly. He has a really guilty conscious about it, we think - at least there's a good argument for it. After Banquo gets killed he sees Banquo's ghost constantly. Let's have a listen.

*EXTRACT*

**Macbeth:** Avaunt! and quit my sight! let the earth hide thee!

Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold;

Thou hast no speculation in those eyes

Which thou dost glare with!

**Carl:** So, Macbeth is king. He got what he wanted and he's achieved his ambition, but he can't control his own emotions. He feels like he set on a path that he's on and he's paranoid and tormented by all the things he's become.

**Jean:** He begins as a warrior and Thane of Glamis. But his ambition leads him to betray and murder his king to take the throne of Scotland, encouraged by Lady Macbeth and the three witches, but still of his own volition.

**Carl:** Yes, Lady Macbeth wasn't in the bedroom when Macbeth killed Duncan. Macbeth did that. So let's talk about Lady Macbeth, shall we?

**Jean:** Absolutely.

*EXTRACT*

**Lady Macbeth:** All our service

In every point twice done and then done double

Were poor and single business to contend

Against those honours deep and broad wherewith

Your majesty loads our house

**Carl:** Right. That extract you just heard is an introduction to Lady Macbeth and think it's a really, really good way to understand who she is. Lady Macbeth, throughout the entire play, is more ruthless and ambitious than her husband. Right. And here, the bit you just heard is in Act 1 scene 6, where we see her welcome Duncan and the king into her home and flatter him. So Duncan is not going to suspect what Lady Macbeth's real plan is, which is to kill him as he sleeps.

**Jean:** She definitely knows how to butter him up, doesn't she? She's basically saying here, if everything we have done for you could be done twice and twice. Again, it would still be pure and single or inadequate, as we'd say, compared to the honours that Your Majesty has given her family.

**Carl:** This really shows us who Lady Macbeth is. She's cunning. She's able to play a 1600s stereotypical view of the ideal and supportive wife to the outside world. But she uses it to be deceptive.

**Jean:** Yeah, and that's exactly what she does when Macbeth has doubts as well. She uses every trick she can to think of to make sure he carries out their plan to murder Duncan. She's the dominant one in the marriage in this case and she gets her own way. I suppose it makes sense given that back in the day, women really only had access to power through their husbands. So if she wanted it, she had to push Macbeth to do it.

**Carl:** Indeed. Lady Macbeth craves power and as soon as the opportunity to gain power presents itself in the form of the witches' prophecies, Lady Macbeth has a plan in mind and nothing, absolutely nothing, is going to stop it. Lady Macbeth influences her husband by telling him that they're doing the right thing. They're not doing anything right or wrong. They're simply doing what the witches said is going to happen. And Lady Macbeth even commits a crime herself when she has to take the knives back from the murder scene and establishes an alibi.

**Jean:** I mean, she doesn't come across great when we're discussing her does she? She doesn't sound like someone you'd choose to be your friend. Deceptive and unusually dominant - they're not traits I necessarily look for. But she can't actually keep it up. She is all those things but it does start to unravel and whether through her guilt or as a consequence of her committing such a sin, we see her undoing unfold in front of us.

#### *EXTRACT*

**Lady Macbeth:** Out, damned spot! out, I say! - One: two: why, then, 'tis time to do't.- Hell is murky! - Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account? - Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him.

**Carl:** I almost, almost, feel sorry for Lady Macbeth at the "out, damned spot" scene. She goes from being someone who seems to have no conscious at all, someone tormented by her actions. By the end of things, Lady Macbeth is sleepwalking, remembering all the evil things she's done. "Out, damned spot" is her trying to wash the imaginary blood from her hands in the same way she washes the blood from the daggers. She's referring directly to Duncan's murder by saying, "who would have thought the old man had so much blood in him," which is just that incredible amount of detail. I remember the first time was at school and I studied Macbeth and I thought, should I be reading this?

**Jean:** Later in the scene too She also says "will these hands ne'er be clean? Because she can't wash that imaginary blood off at all. And really she's right figuratively, which means metaphorically or not in the literal sense, her hands won't ever be clean because she holds so much responsibility for the murders in the play.

**Carl:** which is a real contrast to Lady Macbeth earlier in the play when she says “a little water clears us of this deed” about Duncan's death. It shows us the change from this confident, hard woman to a woman who's now tormented by her actions.

**Jean:** Then she even dies a tragic death not long after this. It's even suggested that she takes her own life and her downfall proceeds Macbeth's in lots of ways.

**Carl:** Oh indeed. It's the guilt and isolation that lead to her eventual downfall and death. And it's hard to read - both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are really interesting, complex characters. But, you know, Jean, that's the power of Shakespeare. He certainly knew how to write his characters and we've got even more to discuss in next episode.

**Jean:** I'm looking forward to it already. Thanks for listening to Episode Two of the Bitesize English literature podcast all about some of the characters in Macbeth.

**Carl:** In Episode Three, we're going to take you on a closer look through Banquo, Macduff and the witches. You can listen to us now on BBC Sounds.