

# BBC BITESIZE - MACBETH Episode 4

**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 it 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.

**Jean:** In this series, we're actually heading to my neck of the woods, Scotland, to explore Shakespeare's Macbeth.

**Carl:** And in this episode, we're taking a close look at the themes within Macbeth. There are some key themes that really stand out within the play, we're going to explore three of the important ones. Particularly: one, ambition and power, two the supernatural, and three, appearances and reality.

**Jean:** And these three themes play a huge role in history of Macbeth. So let's just get straight into it.

## *EXTRACT*

**Macbeth:** I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself  
And falls on the other.

**Carl:** That extract you just heard is in Act 1 scene 7, where we hear Macbeth himself referring to his own "vaulting ambition". And coming to the conclusion that it is this ambition that is really the only motivation for him in killing Duncan. He's cut off there, because Lady Macbeth enters. If she hadn't come in at that point, would Macbeth have talked himself out of it? Because we know that Lady Macbeth does indeed encourage him. It's one of those questions that Shakespeare leaves us with.

**Jean:** Ambition and power is one of the fundamental themes and Macbeth. It's the driving force behind Macbeth's life and in terms of Macbeth's tragic ending, it's his greatest weakness that ultimately leads to his downfall. There's actually an ancient Greek term which describes this perfectly. And that's hamartia. Hamartia is defined as being a fatal flaw that leads to the downfall of a tragic hero or heroine. And Macbeth's hamartia is definitely his ambition. Let me spell that out, just in case you want to make a note of it. It's H, A, M, A, R, T, I, A - hamartia.

**Carl:** I love that word. Hamartia. In some of the best ever stories, your greatest flaw is your greatest strength at the same time. The ambition that Macbeth showed on the battlefield repelling the invasion ends up being his great weakness that sees him ultimately doomed. We've spoken about Macbeth's ambitions in other episodes before, particularly in Episode Two. We talked about Macbeth's character, and how the witches and Lady Macbeth played a key role in spurring Macbeth on. However, the power they have over him is only possible because his ambition is already there, as shown in his reaction to the prophecies in comparison to his best mate Banquo.

**Jean:** Part of the conversation around ambition and power also has to be in the different types of leadership we've seen in Macbeth.

#### *EXTRACT*

**Malcolm:** he king-becoming graces,  
As justice, verity, temperance, stableness,  
Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness,  
Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude,  
I have no relish of them, but abound  
In the division of each several crime,  
Acting it many ways.

**Jean:** So this is Malcolm, King Duncan's son. And here he's testing Macduff's loyalty by listing all the qualities needed in a king and pretending he has none. It's quite clear from the list - devotion, patience, stableness - that this doesn't describe Macbeth. Even the courage he has at the beginning is long gone. And this is now almost a list of opposite traits to what Macbeth has, showing us what a poor leader he is. He's too selfish and driven by this ambition to be an effective king.

**Carl:** Now, arguably, what's really interesting about this play is that Duncan isn't shown to be a great king either. Shakespeare set Macbeth in the distant past and in a part of Britain that not many people in the audience would have been familiar with. So while this play was first performed in the very early 1600s, it was actually set in the 11th century.

**Jean:** Yeah, Scotland is shown as wild and savage. And it's a place that has a weak king in Duncan, who needs warrior thanes to keep any control, and both kings of Scotland we see in power aren't great. Duncan almost doesn't have enough ambition or power to be a good king, whereas Macbeth has too much and that's even worse.

**Carl:** And we don't get to see much of Malcolm, Duncan's son, in his role as king at the end of the play. But we do see qualities throughout the play that seem to show he strikes a balance between his two predecessors and that he will be a much fairer leader and will treat people well.

**Jean:** We can only hope. It feels like the people of Scotland have suffered enough during this play, so they really do deserve someone who's good at the job at this point.

**Carl:** Yeah. Now should we look at another theme? Maybe the supernatural?

**Jean:** Yes, I'm excited about this one.

*EXTRACT*

**First Witch:** Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o' the Tiger:

But in a sieve I'll thither sail,  
And, like a rat without a tail,  
I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.

**Second Witch:** I'll give thee a wind.

**First Witch:** Thou'rt kind.

**Third Witch:** And I another.

**First Witch:** I myself have all the other,

And the very ports they blow,  
All the quarters that they know  
I' the shipman's card.

I will drain him dry as hay:  
Sleep shall neither night nor day  
Hang upon his pent-house lid;  
He shall live a man forbid:  
Weary se'nnights nine times nine  
Shall he dwindle, peak and pine

**Jean:** I find this part of Macbeth really fascinating because it's also so representative of the time. So how it would have been perceived then is really different to now. In the early 1600s, when this play was first performed, most people believed in witches, the devil, evil spirits and magic. They believed that hell was an actual place. And this caused real fear in people's day to day lives.

**Carl:** Yes, this is a time we've got to bear in mind that loads of innocent people, mainly women, were being executed because they were suspected of being witches.

**Jean:** And that actually came straight from the top, King James the Sixth of Scotland and the First of England, the first king to unite the kingdoms, himself was utterly convinced about the reality of witchcraft, and believed it was a huge danger to his life. He even published a book on this subject called *Demonology* in 1597. The audience who would be coming to watch this play would have been completely engaged with this topic because the anxiety around witchcraft was already so prevalent in their lives.

**Carl:** There's a quote we've just heard as the witches discuss the wicked acts they carry out against ordinary men and women. One of the witches describes how a sailor's wife has insulted her and now this witch is planning to take revenge. "I'll drain him dry as hay, sleep shall neither night nor day". So these witches are planning to drain the life from him by not allowing him to sleep. These witches are definitely living up to the expectation of an audience who are already fearful of them.

**Jean:** Yeah, there's really not much ambiguity in terms of what kind of people they are. They're not exactly friendly. But you're right, they definitely represent the feeling towards the supernatural at the time, and those feelings of evil around it.

*EXTRACT*

**Lennox:** The night has been unruly: where we lay,  
Our chimneys were blown down; and, as they say,  
Lamentings heard i' the air; strange screams of death,  
And prophesying with accents terrible  
Of dire combustion and confused events  
New hatch'd to the woeful time: the obscure bird  
Clamour'd the livelong night: some say, the earth  
Was feverous and did shake.

**Carl:** That extract there was another way we hear how the witches are shown to be unnatural, which is through the unnatural events that followed Duncan's murder, before they even hear the murder. This quote is from Lennox, another Scottish nobleman who we see travelling with King Duncan earlier on in the play, who speaks of an earthquake and animals behaving strangely. This is further reinforcing the notion that Duncan's murder is of supernatural influence. And also, things aren't gonna go great after this.

**Jean:** Shakespeare didn't just include the supernatural to appeal to his audience though, both the supernatural and witchcraft play really important roles in this play. It helps to expose the evil that's within Macbeth - and the way he handles the predictions from the witches seems to give that evil a direction. It also highlights the evil that's at work in the world already, which creates a very powerful and sinister atmosphere to the play.

**Carl:** It's not just the witches that represent the supernatural. Lady Macbeth calls on the dark forces to help with the task of murdering Duncan. And Macbeth, is haunted by visions of the ghost of Banquo and the dagger.

**Jean:** Which probably leads us very nicely into our third key theme, which is appearance and reality.

**Carl:** Look at that - that's a great segue from you. In Macbeth, nothing is ever quite as it seems.

*EXTRACT*

**Macbeth:** Mine eyes are made the fools o' the other senses,  
Or else worth all the rest; I see thee still,  
And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,  
Which was not so before. There's no such thing:  
It is the bloody business which informs  
Thus to mine eyes.

**Jean:** So, as you already said, in Macbeth things are never quite what they seem. We see characters say one thing, but actually mean the opposite. Awful, terrible actions like murder are covered up, or the blame is shifted onto someone else. A great example of this is the murder of Duncan, which is initially blamed on his sons.

**Carl:** And like in this scene, Macbeth sees a dagger before him. Here, Macbeth says “Mine eyes are the fools o' the other senses, or else worth all the rest”. He's saying that either his eyes aren't working correctly, or actually they're the only thing that's working correctly.

**Jean:** And he says there's no such thing. It is the bloody business which informs thus to mine eyes. Now he's telling himself that this isn't real, and that it's the murder he's planning that's affecting his eyes and showing him this dagger.

**Carl:** So Macbeth sees this ghostly dagger pointing him towards Duncan's room. He also sees Banquo's ghost at the banquet. And Lady Macbeth tries to scrub imaginary blood from her hands that just won't budge. None of these things are real. But they all show us something that's going on inside these characters' minds. So they either show us how Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are either suffering because they feel guilty or they're being punished for their sins.

**Jean:** It's another way that Shakespeare tells us that almost nothing is as it should be. And that appearances are deceptive and the reality behind them is often not nice at all. We should have known really from the first line - “Fair is foul and foul is fair” - which sets up this notion, and remember, Macbeth is King when he sees Banquo's ghost and when Lady Macbeth sees the blood on her hands. Both of them should be happily living the life they wanted so badly they murdered for it. But that's not the reality because they now have ambition for more and they're living with the paranoia that something may tear this all apart from them and what the consequences of their own actions might become.

#### *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:** Nothing in Macbeth is as it seems. If I do ever one day make my film version of Macbeth, I think that's a contender for the tagline, actually, because this is another area that we see in action. The witches mislead Macbeth, or at least they make suggestions that allow Macbeth to mislead himself, thinking that he can't be harmed, and give him a false sense of security and belief in his own safety. He really has no idea what's happening until it's already happened.

**Jean:** The prophecies given by the witches are definitely not as they seem. To believe he can't be harmed by anyone born of a woman gives him the ultimate belief that he's safe. He's completely fine.

Nothing to worry about here. Which makes sense because the audience would presumably assume the same from such a bold statement. But as we discussed, when we spoke about the witches in Episode Three, a lot of their predictions are ambiguous and therefore not what they first seem.

**Carl:** Imagine. "Macbeth. Nothing is what it seems."

**Jean:** I'm buying a ticket right now.

**Carl:** Those are our three key themes from Macbeth: number one, ambition and power. Number two, the supernatural and number three, appearance and reality.

**Jean:** Thanks so much for listening to Episode Four of the Bitesize English literature podcast all about the key themes of Macbeth.

**Carl:** In Episode Five we're going to be looking at form, structure and the language used in Macbeth and you can listen to that right now on BBC Sounds.