

# Themes in *Macbeth*

This resource is designed as a reference guide for teachers. We have listed the major themes and motifs within *Macbeth* and provided examples of scenes where you can study them.

## Themes

- Ambition
- Kingship
- Fate and free will
- Appearance and reality

## Motifs

(Recurring elements and patterns of imagery in *Macbeth* which support the play's themes)

- Nature / The natural world
- Light and darkness
- Children
- Blood
- Sleep
- Visions

## Themes

**Ambition** and the devastation which follows when ambition oversteps moral boundaries.  
Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 5: Lady Macbeth receives Macbeth's letter, analyses his character, and invokes the forces of evil.
- Act 1 Scene 7: Macbeth reflects on what is needed to achieve his ambition and Lady Macbeth taunts him to 'screw your courage to the sticking place.'
- Act 3 Scene 1: Macbeth determines to kill Banquo in order to prevent his children succeeding to Scotland's throne.

**Kingship** and the difference between appropriate use of power and tyranny.  
Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 7: Macbeth reflects on Duncan's qualities as king.
- Act 3 Scene 6: Lennox and another lord discuss life under Macbeth's rule.
- Act 4 Scene 3: Malcolm and Macduff compare tyranny to honourable kingship.

**Fate and free will** and the extent to which we control our own destinies.  
Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 3: Macbeth and Banquo encounter the witches on the heath. Macbeth reflects on their prophecies.
- Act 2 Scene 1: Macbeth talks with Banquo about their encounter with the witches, sees a visionary dagger and makes his decision to kill Duncan.
- Act 6 Scene 1: Macbeth visits the witches who offer him further prophecies.

**Appearance and reality**, and how people and events are often not as they seem.  
Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scenes 1 and 2: The witches invoke confusion ('Fair is foul, and foul is fair').
- Act 1 Scene 4: Duncan reflects on the traitorous Thane of Cawdor and ironically rewards Macbeth with this title, saying, 'I have begun to plant thee, and will labour/To make thee full of growing.'
- Act 1 Scene 6: Duncan remarks on the Macbeths' castle having 'a pleasant seat' as the Macbeths plot his murder.

## Motifs

**Nature /The natural world** and its disruption when the bounds of morality are broken.

For example:

- 'Against the use of nature'  
Act 1 Scene 3
- 'Tis unnatural,/ Even like the deed that's done.'  
Act 3 Scene 4
- 'And his gash'd stabs looked like a breach in nature'  
Act 3, Scene 1
- 'Boundless intemperance/ In nature is a tyranny.'  
Act 4, Scene 3

**Light and darkness**, representing innocence and evil.

For example:

- 'Stars, hid your fires; Let not light see my black and deep desires'  
Act 1 Scene 4
- 'that darkness does the face of earth entomb,/When living light should kiss it?'  
Act 4 Scene 2
- 'Come, seeling night,/ Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day'  
Act 3 Scene 2

**Children**, representing the future and highlighting evil when they are abused.

For example:

- 'Your children shall be kings.'  
Act 1 Scene 3
- 'And pity, like a naked new-born babe,'  
Act 1 Scene 7
- 'I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me'  
Act 1 Scene 7
- 'He has no children. All my pretty ones?'  
Act 4 Scene 3

**Blood**, representing evil plans and consequences of overreaching ambition.

For example:

- 'Make thick my blood'  
Act 1 Scene 5
- 'And on thy blood and dungeon gouts of blood/Which was not so before. There's no such thing:/It is the bloody business which informs thus to mine eyes.'  
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?'  
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'Here's the smell of blood still.'  
Act 5 Scene 1

**Sleep**, a natural process and its disruption as caused by the fracture of the moral order.  
For example:

- 'Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse / The curtain'd sleep'  
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'There's one did laugh in's sleep, and one cried 'Murder!''  
Act 2 Scene 2
- 'Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more! / Macbeth does murder sleep''  
Act 2 Scene 2
- 'we may again / Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights'  
Act 3 Scene 6
- 'A great perturbation in nature, to receive at once the benefit of sleep and do the effects of watching!'  
Act 5 Scene 1

**Visions**, representing the extensions of a guilty conscience.  
For example:

- 'Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible / To feeling as to sight?'  
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'Hence, horrible shadow! Unreal mockery, hence!'  
Act 3 Scene 4
- 'Wash your hands; put on your nightgown; look not so pale! I tell you yet again,  
Banquo's buried.'  
Act 5 Scene 1
- 'My wife and children's ghosts will haunt me still'  
Act 5 Scene 7