

Key Stage 3  
SATs Preparation  
*Macbeth*

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(Sample pages)



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# Characters

## Macbeth

Clearly, as the play is named after Macbeth, he is the most important character in it. He is also its **tragic hero**. This is a very interesting fact, as Macbeth is far from being a typical hero. The play is a tragedy, and so its hero has to be someone noble, courageous, and to be admired. This hero is, however, completely human and is therefore not perfect. Being human, the hero can make mistakes. In fact, the tragic hero's downfall is usually caused by a fatal weakness or mistake – along with being a victim of fate in some way.

So, from what you know of Macbeth, is he heroic? Decide for yourself as you read on.



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## Bravery

Early in the play, in Act 1, scene 2, we hear from the Sergeant of Macbeth's bravery in battle. He is a man of action. His sword seems to 'smoke' with the blood of his enemies. He may seem brutal, but at the time (Macbeth's and Shakespeare's) it was perfectly acceptable to behave like this towards one's enemies – and especially those of the King.

Macbeth, however, becomes less brave, and less confident, when he is uncertain about what to do, and when he is torn between ambition and guilt. Even in Act 1, scene 3, when he thinks of killing Duncan, his king, his hair stand on end and his heart beats fast. In Act 2, scene 1 he is horrified at the thought of killing Duncan. He has to be persuaded by Lady Macbeth. She gets the better of him by suggesting that a 'real man' would do it and seize greatness by force. If he refuses, he must be a coward. What do you think of her reasoning?

Even just before the crime, Macbeth seems almost hysterical. He hallucinates a floating dagger that seems to lead him towards Duncan's chamber. This is when he speaks his famous line, 'Is this a dagger I see before me ... ?' Afterwards, he is terrified by what he has done. It takes Lady Macbeth to make him pull himself together.

In one of the set scenes for 2005, Macbeth insists that he would happily fight any kind of fierce wild animal rather than face the ghost of his old friend and murder victim Banquo. Which would you prefer?

## ***Macbeth's dilemma***

Macbeth begins the play as a loyal, honest servant of his king, Duncan. You could see him as the victim of fate or even of evil, because it is only when he meets the Witches that he thinks of doing evil things. However, they predict something that he finds both frightening and exciting – that he will be King. It is frightening because he thinks he has to kill Duncan in order to make this prediction come true. Do you think he has any other choice?

## ***A hero?***

So, a murderer, a liar, perhaps a near-hysterical coward – for example when faced by Banquo's ghost. Is this man a hero?

In Shakespeare's play, Macbeth is indeed a hero, for several reasons:

- 1 He stops being indecisive and leaning on his wife, and takes responsibility for his own crimes. We know he is changing when, in Act 3, scene 2, he decides to kill Banquo and doesn't even ask her advice. Instead, when she asks him what he plans to do, he keeps his plan secret and says: 'Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck.'
- 2 When things turn against him, he fights on anyway, declaring: 'I'll fight till from my bones my flesh be hacked' (Act 5,

scene 3, line 33). When he realises that the Witches have tricked him and he is probably doomed, he declares: 'Blow wind, come wrack,/ At least we'll die with harness [armour] on our back.'

- 3 At the very end, he tries to avoid fighting Macduff, because he still feels guilt at having killed his family, but then he fights Macduff to the death rather than be captured and paraded in a cage.
- 4 Shakespeare makes us understand what he feels, and even have sympathy for him. Perhaps he is a victim – of his wife, of the Witches, and even of the evil times in which he lives.

## **Activities**

- 1 Explain your view of Macbeth from what you know of the whole play and especially your set scenes.
- 2 Write an account defending and sympathising with Macbeth, backing it up with evidence from the play.
- 3 Write an account attacking or prosecuting Macbeth as an evil tyrant – again, backing it up with evidence from the play.