Macbeth Background

The most influential writer in all of English literature, William Shakespeare was born in 1564 to a successful middle-class glove-maker in Stratford-upon-Avon, England.

In 1582 he married an older woman, Anne Hathaway, and had three children with her.

Around 1590 he left his family behind and traveled to London to work as an actor and playwright. Public and critical acclaim quickly followed, and Shakespeare eventually became the most popular playwright in England and part-owner of the Globe Theater. His career bridged the reigns of Elizabeth I (ruled 1558–1603) and James I (ruled 1603–1625), and he was a favorite of both monarchs. Indeed, James granted Shakespeare’s company the greatest possible compliment by bestowing upon its members the title of King’s Men. Wealthy and renowned, Shakespeare retired to Stratford and died in 1616 at the age of fifty-two. At the time of Shakespeare’s death, literary luminaries such as Ben Jonson hailed his works as timeless.

Some people have concluded from this fact and from Shakespeare’s modest education that Shakespeare’s plays were actually written by someone else—Francis Bacon and the Earl of Oxford are the two most popular candidates.

In the absence of credible evidence to the contrary, Shakespeare must be viewed as the author of the thirty-seven plays and 154 sonnets that bear his name.

Shakespeare’s shortest and bloodiest tragedy, Macbeth tells the story of a brave Scottish general (Macbeth) who receives a prophecy from a trio of sinister witches that one day he will become king of Scotland. Consumed with ambitious thoughts and spurred to action by his wife, Macbeth murders King Duncan and seizes the throne for himself.

Macbeth was most likely written in 1606, early in the reign of James I, who had been James VI of Scotland before he succeeded to the English throne in 1603.

In focusing on Macbeth, a figure from Scottish history, Shakespeare paid homage to his king’s Scottish lineage. Additionally, the witches’ prophecy that Banquo will found a line of kings is a clear nod to James’s family’s claim to have descended from the historical Banquo.

Macbeth is not Shakespeare’s most complex play, but it is certainly one of his most powerful and emotionally intense. Macbeth tumbles madly from its opening to its conclusion. It is a sharp, jagged sketch of theme and character; as such, it has shocked and fascinated audiences for nearly four hundred years.

Macbeth Character List

**Macbeth** - is a Scottish general and the thane of Glamis. Macbeth is a brave soldier and a powerful man, but he is not a virtuous one.
Lady Macbeth - Macbeth’s wife, a deeply ambitious woman who lusts for power and position.

The Three Witches - Three “black and midnight hags” who plot mischief against Macbeth using charms, spells, and prophecies.

Banquo - The brave, noble general whose children, according to the witches’ prophecy, will inherit the Scottish throne.

King Duncan - The good king of Scotland whom Macbeth, in his ambition for the crown, murders.

Macduff - A Scottish nobleman hostile to Macbeth’s kingship from the start. He eventually becomes a leader of the crusade to unseat Macbeth.

Hecate - The goddess of witchcraft, who helps the three witches work their mischief on Macbeth.

Fleance - Banquo’s son, who survives Macbeth’s attempt to murder him.

Lennox - A Scottish nobleman.

Ross - A Scottish nobleman.

The Murderers - A group of ruffians conscripted by Macbeth to murder Banquo, Fleance (whom they fail to kill), and Macduff’s wife and children.

Porter - The drunken doorman of Macbeth’s castle.

Lady Macduff - Macduff’s wife. The scene in her castle provides our only glimpse of a domestic realm other than that of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

Donalbain - Duncan’s son and Malcolm’s younger brother.

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Macbeth : Themes and Motifs

Fair and foul. To the Weird Sisters what is ugly is beautiful, and what is beautiful is ugly: "Fair is foul and foul is fair." Throughout the play, fair appearances hide foul realities.

Nature and the Unnatural. In Macbeth the word "nature" usually refers to human nature, and one might say that the whole play is about Macbeth's unnaturalness.

Blood. In the second scene of the play, the report of Macbeth’s heroic victory is delivered by a "bloody man." Thereafter, we see and hear of much more blood.

Hands. We associate hands with many different kinds of experiences. We "walk hand-in-hand," are "caught red-handed," "give a helping hand," have a "hand on the
throttle," fear someone's "heavy hand," and say that "the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing." In Macbeth all of these senses of the word "hand" come into play, and Macbeth and Lady Macbeth both have scenes in which they are transfixed by the sight of blood on their hands.

**Sight, Light, Darkness, and Blindness.** Much of Macbeth takes place in the dark, and both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth seem to believe that the dark can hide their crimes, perhaps even from themselves.

**Sleep.** We often say that we need to "sleep on" a problem, but what do you do when you murder sleep, as Macbeth does?

**Birds.** There are many birds in the play, most of them of ill omen.

**Heaven and Hell.** In Macbeth both of these places seem very close to earth.