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| **Tragic Genre and Context** | | | | |
| **Tragedy**: the play deals with **tragic** events. Tragedy is a specific category of drama that features a ‘good’ man experiencing a disaster due to personal failing (their tragic flaw) and/or fate.  **Hamartia:** a fatal flaw leading to the downfall of a tragic hero- Macbeth’s **ambition**.  **Published 1606**: Written a year after the Gunpowder Plot (an attempt to kill King James I); the downfall of traitors and the restoration of the ‘rightful’ heir (Malcolm) would have appealed to the King. King James (who the play was performed for) was supposedly related to Banquo, as alluded to in the Witches’ prophecy ‘you shall get kings’.  **Divine right of Kings:** the belief that the right of the King to rule was given to him by God, making any attack on the King not just an act of treason but a sin.  **Witchcraft:** widespread belief in Jacobean England; there were laws against witchcraft (which King James strengthened). | | | | |
| **Key Themes** | | | | |
| **Ambition/power:**  Macbeth and Lady Macbeth share a desire for power (to varying degrees throughout the play) and are prepared to do anything to gain it. However, Shakespeare does not allow them to enjoy their goal; they are consumed with paranoia/guilt. Once the initial crime has been committed, Macbeth’s actions become more bloody and cruel as he desperately attempts to hold on to power; his rule is characterised by fear and violence. In the final moments of the play it is clear that his men have no loyalty to him ‘those in command, move only in command, nothing in love’  **Loyalty/leadership**:  The play considers frequently what makes a good leader; as well as showing us an example of someone who was a strong leader (‘brave Macbeth’) becoming a tyrant, Malcolm and Macduff’s conversation in Act 4 reflects the moral responsibilities of a King. Treachery is a constant in this play and is present from the very first scene – the battle Macbeth performs so well in is a rebellion by another traitor.  **Gender:** The partnership of Macbeth and his wife did not meet the gender expectations of the time period. Lady Macbeth appears to surpass her husband in ambition and violent cruelty, explicitly asking to be ‘unsexed’ so she can perform whatever dark actions her ambition requires. Lady Macbeth provokes Macbeth to action through insulting his manhood, and Macbeth then uses this technique when encouraging the murderers to kill Banquo; these taunts contrast with the ideas expressed by Malcolm and Macduff about what it means to be a man.  **Guilt/ justice:** Macbeth is very clear when he reflects on the immorality of killing Duncan (his king, cousin and guest) simply for his ‘vaulting ambition’. Lady Macbeth assures him that ‘a little water’ will wash away the guilt, yet ironically she is driven mad by the metaphorical blood on her hands. Shakespeare suggests that natural justice will punish those who defy the natural order of the world.  **Appearance vs. reality/duplicity:** Witches set the scene for confusion ‘fair is foul and foul is fair’. Macbeth is first introduced as a nobleman, a fearless warrior who renders worthy service to his king – yet this same man is then revealed to have murderous thoughts in his heart, capable of plotting against his king and usurping the throne. Lady Macbeth encourages this ‘look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it’. Theme of hiding/revealing true desires throughout. | | | Act 1 –Weird Sisters setting up the entire theme of the play: Fair is foul and foul is fair. War taking place between Scotland and Norway. Scotland=victorious due to valiant efforts of Macbeth. Traitorous Thane of Cawdor captured and executed. King Duncan rewards Macbeth with title of Thane of Cawdor to show gratitude. Weird Sisters confront Macbeth and Banquo, telling Macbeth that he will become Thane of Cawdor and King. Macbeth’s new title fulfils the first part of the prophecy.  Lady Macbeth receives the news and immediately plots the death of King Duncan. Lady Macbeth manipulates Macbeth into following her plans, and he agrees to murder Duncan. By the end of Act I, Macbeth is determined to follow through with the plan. | |
| **Act 2 -** Macbeth has doubts (and visions) but he talks himself into the murder. Macbeth is affected by this -Lady Macbeth has to complete the plan by wiping blood on the drunk guards. Macduff discovers the dead body of King Duncan. Malcolm and Donalbain, the King's sons, flee the castle because they are afraid that they will be blamed for the murder of their father. | |
| **Act 3 -** Banquo begins to suspect Macbeth for the murder of King Duncan and Macbeth in turn feels that Banquo will reveal that it was he that killed the King. Therefore, Macbeth sends out some thugs to murder Banquo and his son, Fleance. Banquo is murdered, but Fleance escapes. Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Lennox, Ross, and other lords attend a banquet. The ghost of Banquo presents itself to Macbeth. Macbeth begins to rant and rave, making the other guests uneasy. Lady Macbeth tries to cover up the situation by saying Macbeth is prone to fits. By the end of this Act, we learn that Macduff has not attended the banquet because he has gone to England, looking for aid because he is suspicious of Macbeth. | |
| **Act 4 -** Macbeth confronts the three Weird Sisters and they show him more visions. The visions lead Macbeth to believe that he cannot be killed by any man, giving him a false sense of security. He then plans to send murderers to the castle of Macduff in order to kill his family. Meanwhile, Macduff is in England begging Malcolm to return to Scotland and seize the throne from Macbeth who has become a tyrant. Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty to Scotland and himself and after being satisfied with Macduff's responses, he agrees to wage war against Macbeth. | |
| **Act 5 -**Lady Macbeth has finally gone mad with guilt over the murders. The once strong and ruthless woman is now a timid/terrified. Doctors are unable to help her. Macbeth believes the prophecy that he cannot be killed by any man born of woman. Macbeth confronts Macduff and learns that Macduff was ripped from his mother's side and not born naturally. Macbeth and Macduff fight and the natural order is restored by the end of the play. | |
| Key Characters | | | | |
| **Macbeth (Thane of Glamis):** A distinguished general who has been loyal to King Duncan and served him well; the Witches prophecy and his wife’s urging kindle an ambition that turns into an all-consuming obsession; he acts immorally, betraying his king and killing his friends; as the play progresses he becomes tyrannical and paranoid; his death is presented as just and necessary for the restoration of order. | **Lady Macbeth**: Defies traditional perceptions of females as weak or passive; initially appears to be the stronger, crueller and more ambitious partner in her marriage; plans and helps carry out Duncan’s murder, tempting and encouraging Macbeth (here, she fits the stereotype of the time of women as seductive characters who corrupt men-Eve); sleepwalking scene betrays her guilt-ultimately leads to madness and suicide. | **Banquo:** Macbeth’s friend and peer (both fought bravely); he does not appear as tempted by the Witches’ prophecy as Macbeth is; he is murdered (his son Fleance escapes) as Macbeth’s paranoia and cruelty grows and he sees him as a threat; his bloody ghost appears to haunt Macbeth forcing him to realise that ‘blood will have blood’ | | **Duncan** (King of Scotland): Is described by Macbeth as a noble and effective king, yet he appears to be too trusting since Macbeth is the second Thane of Cawdor to betray him; he is Macbeth’s cousin, king and guest (making his murder all the more immoral) and the rest of the nobles appear to be distraught at his death  **Macduff** (Thane of Fife – Macbeth’s nemesis): Another highly ranked Scottish lord-provides a contrast with Macbeth’s disloyalty; the first person to suspect Macbeth’s guilt. He was born by caesarean (making him ‘not of woman born’) forces Macbeth to realise that the Witches have misled him and to accept his downfall and death. |
| **Key Symbols and Motifs** | | | | |
| **Blood:** Is referenced many times throughout the play, especially in relation to guilt; Lady M assumes that ‘a little water’ can wash it away, but by her final scene she is being driven mad by a ‘damn spot’ that she cannot wash from her hands. Blood symbolizes the guilt that sits like a permanent stain on the consciences of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, one that hounds them to their graves. | **Milk and children**: Macbeth has no heir (essential for success); Lady M rejects milk, wishing her breast to be full of ‘gall’ (poison) and suggests she would kill a child for power; by contrast, Duncan, Banquo and Macduff are loving fathers who care for their children.  ‘Yet do I fear thy nature; it is too full of the milk of human kindness’  ‘Come you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here’ | **Nature:** The play is full of references to animals, many of which were assumed to be ill-omens (ravens) or have supernatural powers.  **The Weather:** Pathetic fallacy mirrors Macbeth’s subversion of nature. **T**hunder and lightning that accompany the witches’ appearances to the terrible storms that rage on the night of Duncan’s murder, these violations of the natural order reflect corruption in the moral and political orders. | | **Clothes**: Honour is frequently referred to as a garment to be worn; when Macbeth is first told he is Thane of Glamis he asks why he is being ‘dressed in borrowed robes’; this suggests the impermanence of such title and power – like clothes, they can easily be worn by multiple people.  ‘The Thane of Cawdor lives. Why do you dress me in borrowed robes?’ |
| **Key Vocabulary/Literary Devices** | | | | |
| Dramatic irony  Foreshadowing  Antithesis  Soliloquy  Aside  Metaphor  Repetition | Hamartia  Nemesis  Hubris  Hubris  Symbolism  Motifs  Juxtaposition | Pathetic fallacy  Euphemism  Catharsis  Rhyming couplet  Iambic pentameter  Fate  Equivocation | | Conscience  Obsession  Tyranny  Machiavellian  Regicide  Treason  Usurper |