



Macbeth by William Shakespeare

Before reading

- 1 Ask students if they know the play *Macbeth* and explain or elicit that it is a Shakespearean tragedy. Students work in pairs to recall the features of a tragedy. If they are unsure, write these prompts on the board: *protagonist, hero, fatal character flaw, tragic, outcome.*

Answers

A tragedy has a protagonist (main character) who is a hero, usually of high social standing, and who has a fatal character flaw. This flaw causes his downfall. It ends with a tragic outcome, usually the protagonist's death.

- 2 In pairs, students read *About the play* and discuss the questions. Discuss their ideas as a class but don't confirm anything yet.

Possible answers

- 1 He fits the definition as he is of high social standing (a well-respected general) and has a fatal character flaw (see question 2 below).
- 2 It could be one of several things: greed (wanting to be king despite having a good position already), guilt (which causes him to commit more crimes), or a weak character (being influenced by his wife).
- 3 He probably dies.
- 4 death, betrayal, greed, ambition, revenge, power
- 3 Students think about the two main characters and brainstorm adjectives to describe them. Again, discuss their answers but don't confirm anything.

Possible answers

Macbeth: greedy, guilty, weak, easily-influenced
Lady Macbeth: ambitious, ruthless, strong, determined

While reading

- 1 Students read the extract and choose the correct options.

Answers

- 1 a 2 b 3 a 4 b 5 a 6 a
- 2 Students read the extract again and answer the questions.

Answers

- 1 kill King Duncan
- 2 Yes, but she worries he will not be determined enough to take the throne for himself (*I fear you do not have the will to get what you desire*)
- 3 Macbeth
- 4 She asks them to make her less weak (*'Take womanly weakness from me'*). She wants to become more powerful
- 5 Lady Macbeth
- 6 She thinks it is too easy to see his real thoughts.
- 3 Students focus on Lady Macbeth's opinion of Macbeth. If necessary, point out that the information they need can be found in lines 6–11 and 47–48. They find examples from the extract to support their answers.

Answers

adjective	yes / no	evidence from text
determined	no	You do not have the will to get what you desire
ambitious	yes	You are ambitious
daring	no	not bold enough/To do what must be done
fearless	no	fear to do that wrong
honest	yes	Your face is like a book

CULTURAL INFORMATION

Most of the characters in *Macbeth* were real people and it is loosely based on actual events. Macbeth ruled as King of Scotland for 17 years between 1040 and 1057. As in the play, he claimed the throne by killing King Duncan but was himself killed by King Duncan's son, Malcolm. Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* at a time of great political unrest during which kings and queens changed frequently. He changed many aspects of the original plot to intensify the drama.

- 4 Students decide whether the adjectives in exercise 3 apply to Lady Macbeth and suggest any other adjectives they might use to describe her.

Suggested answers

determined: calls upon the spirits to make her stronger so she can do the 'dreadful deed';
ambitious: willing to do anything necessary so Macbeth can be king;
fearless: ...my bolder spirit will help you...
also possibly: ruthless, dominant (*Leave all the rest to me*), or other similar adjectives

- 5 Refer students back to the questions they discussed in *Before reading*. As a class, discuss what they think Macbeth's fatal flaw is. Do they think he or his wife is responsible for what happens? Is Macbeth's fatal flaw to do with his wife - would he have killed King Duncan without her? Or is his fatal flaw his weak character or his desire to be king?

After reading

- 1 Discuss the position of men and women in society at that time (women were usually less dominant and seen as weaker, men were seen as stronger). Discuss how Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are unusual in that Lady Macbeth has what could be considered a more 'male' personality and calls on the spirits to get rid of her weak personality traits that she considers 'female'.
- 2 Students work in pairs or small groups to brainstorm what Macbeth might have wanted to talk about.
- 3 In pairs, students role-play the conversation in which Macbeth says what he wants to. If your class need extra support, they can write the conversation first. Ask volunteers to act out their conversation for the class.