UNIT 10: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *MACBETH* II

UNIT STRUCTURE

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTICVES

After going through this unit, the learner will be able to:

- discuss the content of the play
- discuss the major characters in the play
- analyse the emergent themes in the play
- explain the style and language employed in the poem

10.2 INTRODUCTION

The present unit is a continuation of the previous unit on William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Let us now delve into the details of the text and explore the nuances of this widely read and anthologised play.

10.3 EXPLANATION OF THE TEXT

The play *Macbeth* opens in an **eerie** way with the description of three witches engaged in black magic. Their spells and words match the bleak setting of the play and their words are written in the form of riddles such as "Fair is foul and foul is fair." These riddles are very meaningful as they tell us about



Eerie: Strange and unnatural



Thane: Nobleman
Harbour: Believe in (Verb); Port (noun)
Hesitation: Uncertainty

the changes that would take place in the personality of the characters. The three Witches decide to meet Macbeth. In the next scene, a Sergeant comes to Duncan, King of Scotland to inform him about the victory of Macbeth and Banquo over the rebels and their leaders Macdonald and the **Thane** of Cawdor. Duncan praises the bravery of Macbeth and declares that he would be made the new Thane of Cawdor. Unaware of the decision made by Duncan, Macbeth and Banquo are riding across the wilderness when they come across the witches.

The three witches greet the two men and prophesise that Macbeth would be made the thane of Cawdor and after that he would become the king. Macbeth is surprised by the prediction and remains silent while Banquo asks about his own destiny. To this, the witches predict that he would be less than Macbeth but greater than him, and though he would not be a king, he will be the father of a line of kings. After this the three strange women disappear and the two meet Ross, a thane who informs them that Macbeth has been made the Thane of Cawdor. As the first prophesy is fulfilled, Macbeth begins to wonder whether the second prediction would really be true and he would become the king of Scotland. He thus begins to **harbour** the ambition of becoming the king.

On their return, they find Duncan, Malcolm and other attendants awaiting them. Duncan warmly welcomesand appreciates Macbeth and the Banquo, and declares that he will spend the night at Macbeth's castle in Inverness and announces the decision of making his son, Malcolm, heir to the throne. Soon, Macbeth sends his wife a letter about the king's visit as well as the witches' prophesies regarding him. He writes with **hesitation** and wonders whether there is any possibility of the second prediction becoming a reality. Lady Macbeth, however, seemed to have no objection in getting rid of Duncan so that her husband could obtain the crown. She chides her husband, when he arrives, and questions his manhood. She succeeds in manipulating his mind and persuades him to kill Duncan that very night. They plan to drug the two guards who wait outside Duncan's chamber and put the blame on them for the murder as the two will remember nothing about the previous night's events.

In the Second Act, the conspiracy to kill Duncan is finally materialised by Macbeth when the latter stabs the old king in his sleep.Initially, Macbeth was much shaken as he began to have hallucinations of ghosts and a floating dagger, but later kills the king. Lady Macbeth, as per the plan, places bloody daggers on the two guards so as to **implicate** them in the crime. The next morning, Macduff and Lennox, a nobleman arrives and they are led to the king's chamber by Macbeth. To the horror of two noblemen, they discover the bloodied corpse of Duncan. Macbeth taking the opportunity kills the two guards before they can prove their innocence, by claiming that the act was done in rage to avenge the death of the king. After receiving the news about the **demise** of their father, the two princes Malcolm and Donalbain flee to England and Ireland respectively, fearing that they would be the next victims after their father. However, their sudden departure only lead to the belief that they were involved in the murder of their father. Consequently, Macbeth is crowned as the kingof Scotland as he was also a cousin of Duncan. This is revealed to the reader by Banquo who was present during the witches' predictions. He remembers the prophecy concerning him that hailed him as the father of a line of kings. As such, he remains wary and suspicious of Macbeth.



Implicate: Blame, Connect, Involve
Demise: Death
Royal Banquet Royal Feast
Assassins: Killers

In the Third Act, we come to know about the gradually developing insecurities in the mind of Macbeth in spite of the fact he was successful in becoming the king. The insecurity was caused mainly by the presence of Banquo as Macbeth saw him as a threat who knew much about the witches' prophesies and whose sons would possibly become kings. So a plot develops in the mind of Macbeth concerning Banquo and his son Fleance. He invites Banquo and his son for a **royal banquet**, and hires three **assassins** to get them killed. The killers catch both the father and son as they were riding through the jungle and succeed in killing Banquo. But Fleance manages to escape from their clutches. This makes Macbeth even more wrathful as he fears that his power would be challenged very soon if Banquo's son remains alive. Nevertheless, he pretends of not knowing anything and invites his wife and the other lords to the royal banquet. As he enters the hall, he sees that the ghost of Banquo was sitting on his seat. Macbeth begins to speak

in a wild manner, pointing to the chair but the ghost was only visible to him and directing his guests to look that way. He continues to rave and the lords are troubled to see their king speaking like an insane person. Lady Macbeth attempts to control the situation by saying that it was caused by weariness and requests the lords to depart. The ghost too vanishes but Macbeth continues talking angrily. Here, it is seen that Macbeth is troubled by his guilty conscience and the ghost of Banquo essentially shows us that Macbeth is haunted by his own sins.



Repercussions: Effects; Outcome

Wreak Havoc: Cause destruction

In the Fourth Act, we come to know of the **repercussions** of the events that occurred in the royal banquet.Macbeth is so disturbed by the appearance of Banquo's ghost that he decides to visit the three witches again and question them about the truth of their predictions. The three strange creatures summon up spirits from the world of the dead to answer Macbeth. Each of these apparitions predicts something new and fuels the dead. First, an armoured head appears and warns Macbeth to beware of Macduff. Next, a bloody child appears saying that no one can kill him except someone not born of a woman. The last prophesy is made by a crowned child, holding a tree, who says that Macbeth's life is secured until the time when the Great Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill. The last two prophesies provides relief to Macbeth because there can be no person in the world who is not born of a woman. Also, it is not possible for a forest to move to another location. Macbeth also expresses his curiosity to the witches about the fate of Banquo's descendents.

In reply, the witches shows him vision of eight crowned kings in a queue who are similar in appearance to Banquo, and the last of the king was carrying a mirror that reflects even more kings. Macbeth realises that Banquo's successors will become kings in other countries. After the prophesies, the witches dance in a frenzy and vanishes. Soon Lennox comes and informs Macbeth about the escape of Macduff to England. Furious with rage, Macbeth orders his men to **wreck havoc** on Macduff's castle and hires assassins to murder him and his family. As Macduff was not found, his wife and child are killed mercilessly.

The next Act (Act V) begins with an account of Lady Macbeth's increasing **paranoia** and sense of guilt associated with the ruthless crimes committed by her husband. At the castle, a doctor and a lady-in-waiting discuss Lady Macbeth's deteriorating mental condition. She develops the habit of sleep-walking. As they talk, they notice Lady Macbeth holding a candle and walking in a trance. She expresses grief over the deaths of Duncan, Banquo and Lady Macduff, and attempts to wash away imaginary blood stains from her hands, reminding the reader of her own role in Duncan's murder. She also talks to herself about the terrible acts done by her husband and we see that she was very affected by the violence of her husband.



Paranoia: Fear or suspicion of something which is usually caused by mental illness

In another scene, Macduff comes to know about the brutal murders of his wife and child under the order of Macbeth. He is deeply anguished by the news but is consoled by Malcolm, and Macduff vows revenge upon Macbeth for the crimes committed by him. Macduff joins Prince Malcolm who has successfully raised an army in England. They are also supported by other Scottish noblemen who had enough of Macbeth's tyrannical rule and ruthless behaviour. Malcolm leads the army with the support of Macduff and the Englishman Siward, the Earl of Northumberland towards the castle in Dunsinane. As the soldiers reach Birnham wood, they are told to cut down the trees and carry the tree trunks to hide themselves and take their enemy by surprise. Before the troop of Malcolm's marching men arrive, Macbeth gets the news that Lady Macbeth has committed suicide.

This depresses him and he begins to wonder about the futility or meaninglessness of human life. As he prepares his fort against the onslaught of the approaching English troops, Macbeth is shaken with fear when he learns that the army was advancing towards Dunsinane was shielded by the trees of Birnham Wood is on the verge of fulfilment. Thus the first prophesy that his destruction would be near when Birnham Wood moves towards Dunsinane. Soon, the battle begins and Macbeth kills the young Siward first. The English men, however overpower Macbeth's army and seize his castle. Macbeth continues combating with Macduff claiming that no man born from his mother's womb can defeat him.

To this, Macduff replied that he is the one who was not born from the womb but ripped from his mother's womb before time (i.e, born by Caeserian section). This led to the fulfilment of another prophesy and Macbeth understood the real meaning of the witches' prophesies and knew it was too late since his end was near, but refused to accept defeat. He was finally decapitated by Macduff. In the climax of the play, Malcolm spoke to the people how peace and had finally been restored, and he also declared his intention for bringing happiness and satisfaction into the lives of his subjects through just and benevolent kingship. He welcomed the people to witness his crowning as the king of Scotland at the court.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What was Macbeth's claim while combating Macduff?

Q2.What happens in the climax of the play?

10.4 MAJOR CHARACTERS

In his section of the unit, the characters of the play will be discussed. In the play, we find that the characters can not be strictly placed under the categories of good or evil. Each character has strength or positive attributes and weakness or a negative attributes. As such we see that Macbeth is courageous but driven by too much ambition. Similarly, Lady Macbeth is an intelligent woman but uses her intelligence for a negative purpose. Duncan is the epitome of kingly qualities yet it is equally true that he has been naive enough not to see the threat posed by his own men. The play is not about the victory of good over evil, rather it is a cautionary tale. It tells us about over-ambition and how it corrupts an individual which further leads to chaos and tyranny in the society.

Macbeth

Macbeth is introduced in the very beginning of the play as a brave warrior and a victor, returning from the battle. He is one of the most skilled warriors and a captain in the army of King Duncan of Scotland. During the age of

chivalry, a man's military prowess allowed him to gain not only honour and praise, but also power and riches. We come to know that Macbeth played a major role in successfully defeating the rebels. In recognition of his bravery, he was honoured with the position of Thane by the king.

In spite of his courageous nature, Macbeth suffers from human weaknesses such as pride and over ambition. When he comes to know from the three witches that he is destined to become a king, he is no longer satisfied with the position of a Thane. Instead, he designs an unscrupulous plot with his wife to murder the king and all those whocome in the way of his attainment of the throne. Macbeth, even murders Banquo, who had been his companion during the battle because of the witches' prediction that Banquo's successors would be kings. We get a glimpse of his ambitions through the **soliloquies** and **asides** that Shakespeare has used in the play. In the process, Macbeth falls from the position of a hero to that of an **antagonist.**Macbeth, with his pride and willingness for bloodshed, is completely different from King Duncan who is depicted as an honourableperson.

Macbeth, in the beginning, is troubled by a sense of guilt as he plots against the king on the suggestion of his wife. But soon, he loses his humanity and slowly it is his political ambition that draws him closer to madness and ultimately death.



Soliloquy: A dramatic technique used where a character talks to himself/herself.
Aside: A dramatic technique where a character expresses his/ her opinion to the audience alone.
Antagonist: One who stands in opposition to the hero; Villain

Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth has been one of the most ambitious and shrewd woman characters ever portrayed in the history of English literature. She is depicted as a highly clever woman, skilled in manipulating situations in her favour. Lady Macbeth deliberately refuses to let her womanly qualities of gentleness and timidity, come in the way of her aim to become the Queen of Scotland. She is determined from the very beginning, and constantly mocks her husband for his lack of courage to kill Duncan. In public, she gives the impression, especially her guests of being a wonderful hostess. In fact, she played an active role in the murder of the king with her husband. She drugs the men who were guarding the king's room and kept blood stained weapons near them, to falsely implicate that it was the guards who murdered the king.

Lady Macbeth suppresses her humanity in her desire to see her husband as the king of Scotland. But the violent events that follow the death of Duncan slowly leads to her loss of sanity. In Act V, we see that she has started hallucinating that her hands are stained with blood. She grows more paranoid and keeps on cleaning her hands to remove the imagined odour and stains of blood. Her subsequent death leads Macbeth to think over the nature of time and mortality in his speech: "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow."

The Three Witches

The three witches or the three weird sisters are described as strange creatures, who seem to belong to a different world altogether. Their presence and words are eerie suggesting the ominous. They are ugly in appearance with thin waif-like fingers and beards on their face. The witches have been clearly inspired by the *Fates* of Greek mythology who control and manipulate the destiny of human beings. The witches are an active agent in bringing about the fall and subsequent death of Macbeth.

Macduff

In the play, Macbeth is the antagonist while Macduff is the archetypal avenging hero who fights for honour and a good cause. Macduff is an important characteras he represents a person avenging the injustice done. It is Macduff who discovers the dead body of Duncan killed under rather suspicious circumstances. He wishes the guilty to be caught and punished accordingly. However when the news of the murder of his wife and children reaches to him, it is then that he decides to take act against the tyrannical Macbeth. In the final combat between hero and antagonist, we see that it is the victory of humanity over inhumanity. While Macbeth kills people for his own interests, Macduff decides to kill Macbeth for the cause of his nation.

Banquo

In the historical account, the real Banquo was a co-conspirator of Macbeth in the murder of Duncan. But in Shakespeare's play, the role of the fellow conspirator has been assigned to Lady Macbeth while Banquo plays a minor character as the companion as well as rival of Macbeth. Banquo is somewhat similar to Macbeth as he too is a person curious to know what

destiny has in store for him. For example, when the three witches predict that Macbeth will become a king, Banquo expresses his desire to know whether destiny has similar plans for him. However, he is more humane than Macbeth. The reader can be more sympathetic towards him since he is unaware of what Macbeth had planned for Duncan and him. Also, he is shown as a concerned father, sharing an affectionate relationship with his son.

Duncan

Duncan is the symbol of the justice and honour that is essential for the smooth running of the country. This has been depicted through the formal and gracious speech that he makes in front of his subjects. Another important quality in Duncan is his modesty in accepting his flaws. For example, he admitted that he had been ignorant about the previous Thane of Cawdor's treachery. It is this ignorance perhaps that led to Duncan becoming a victim of Macbeth and his wife's treason. Modesty is a quality that Macbeth clearly lacked as a ruler, as he undermined all around him. The king was seen as the divine representative of God in earlier ages. And Duncan's personality essentially reflected this.

Malcolm and Donalbain

Malcolm and Donalbain are the two sons of Duncan. The two princes flee from the country soon after the murder of the father fearing that they would be wrongly accused of the murder. Donalbain escapes to Ireland while Malcolm escapes to England. Malcolm was declared as the successor of King Duncan which was accepted by everyone except Macbeth. Macbeth, privately, resented the fact that Malcolm would become the ruler of Scotland. And for this reason he decides to kill Duncan and usurp or take over the throne.

Between the two brothers, Malcolm could be seen as a more resourceful young man since he manages to win the support of King Edward in England and also form an army. This essentially reflects his ability to command respect and honour from others. At the same time, he is wise enough to psychologically test Macduff's loyalty towards Scotland. While Macbeth

works for his own advancement, regardless of Scotland's position, Malcolm desires the security and advancement of his country Scotland. As such, he is the rightful heir to the throne.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3. Describe the three witches in the play *Macbeth*

Q4. Who were the antagonist and the archetypal avenging hero in the play *Macbeth*?

10.5 MAJOR THEMES

William Shakespeare's plays reflect his deep understanding of human nature and the society. This is especially seen in the playwright's choice of the subject matter in the tragedies written by him.*Macbeth*, in the manner of the morality plays which originated in medieval England, reflects the battle between good and evil. One of Shakespeare's contemporary playwrights called Christopher Marlowe, had also written a play called *Doctor Faustus*, in which Marlowe showed how over-ambition and pride led to the downfall of his protagonist. In a similar vein, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* deals with various themes such as corruption and misuse of power, difference between kingship and tyranny, etc.

One of the major themes in *Macbeth* is the corruption of man brought about by uncontrolled ambition and lust for power. We see that the downfall and consequent deaths of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, are mainly caused because of their excessive desire for power and the throne of Scotland. It is shown that Macbeth is not an evil man, yet he succumbs to the human weaknesses for power and success. He murders Duncan because of this excessive desire for the throne but at the same time his conscience is haunted by guilt that later draws him closer to madness. Lady Macbeth is even more ruthless when she influences her husband and acts as the co-conspirator in the murder of the king. The crime committed by the couple only resulted in more bloodshed as Macbeth had to commit more murders to hide the truth and at the same time get rid of people who were seen as threats.

After the death of Duncan, Macbeth always felt threatened by Banquo, Macduff and Fleance because they were seen as potential threats, capable of sitting on the throne. The inhuman nature and mad rage which changed the personality of Macbeth, soon affected Lady Macbeth too. She could then see the real consequences of the sins committed by her, and as a result, her mind was filled with paranoia and distress at the sight of the violence perpetrated by her husband. She realised that she had lost control of her life and the conditions around her, and she finally ended her life.

Another theme that is evident in the play is the theme of violence. Violence is the obvious product resulting from the corrupting nature of uncontrolled ambition and desire for power. It is also seen that violence has been connected to masculinity. The characters associate the quality of masculinity to aggression or violence. Any kind of passive or gentle behaviour is seen as unmanly by the characters. For example, when Macbeth hesitates to plot against the king, Lady Macbeth questions his manhood. She taunts her husband by saying that she should have been a man herself. Even, Macbeth agrees that a woman, with such ruthlessness and scheming mind, should give birth only to sons. This is because women in that age were expected to be gentle and timid, and Lady Macbeth was a highly clever and ambitious woman. This is also evident, when Macduff breaks down after hearing about the murder his wife and child, Malcolm consoles him to accept the news in a manly manner and take revenge on Macbeth. So, it is this association of violence and masculinity that leads to much bloodshed.

Good governance and the duties of a king have also been major concerns in the plays of Shakespeare. This is also evident in *Macbeth*, where the playwright draws a line between good kingship and tyrannical rule. It is significant that throughout the play, Duncan is always referred in an honourable way as the “king” whereas Macbeth becomes notoriously infamous as the “tyrant”. In Act IV of the play, Malcolm and Macduff discuss about the kind of a person who would make a good king. Malcolm tells Macduff that a good king will have the qualities of “justice, verity, temperance, stableness/ Bounty, perseverance, lowliness.” King Duncan was honoured as he had all these qualities, and most importantly, he was loyal to the interests of Scotland rather than his own self-interests.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5. Write a short note on any one of the major themes of the play *Macbeth*?

Q6. Give a brief idea on the emergent theme or aspect as represented in Act IV of *Macbeth.*

10.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

William Shakespeare was a sixteenth century playwright and as such the language that he uses is essentially archaic in style. It is important to note that he had written the play in a language that held currency in his age and society. The use of symbols and images add to the intensity of the play.The symbol of blood has been a prominent presence throughout the play. It is specifically highlighted in the words of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to suggest their violent mindset. Also you will see, for example, that the witches speak in a way that suggests the presence of supernatural elements.For example, the play begins with the mysterious and cryptic words of the witches:

First Witch : When shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightening, or in rain?

Second Witch : When the hurly burly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

Third Witch : That will be ere the set of sun.

Their words have been composed by Shakespeare to show highly cryptic and unknown nature of destiny. Then again, Shakespeare makes use of formal, courtly language, especially in the words spoken by Duncan. Thus, it is seen that Shakespeare writes in a language keeping into view the subject and characters of his play.



10.7 LET US SUM UP

After having gone through the unit, you will be able to discuss the Act-wise content of the play. Discussions on the major characters and the emergent themes have been highlighted for your detailed understanding

of the play. Also, the use of style and language will give you an idea of the skills and mastery that William Shakespeare had acquired as one of the greatest dramatists. The unit aims to stir your interest to read the other interesting plays of William Shakespeare.



10.8 FURTHER READING

1) Albert, Edward. *(2000) History of English Literature*, Fifth Edition. Oxford : Oxfoer University Press

2) Birch, Dinah. (2009) *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Seventh Edition. Oxford : Oxford University Press



10.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Macbeth continues combating with Macduff claiming that no man born from his mother's womb can defeat him.

Ans to Q No 2: In the climax of the play, Malcolm speaks to the people how peace has finally been restored, and he also declares his intentions for bringing happiness and satisfaction into the lives of his subjects through just and benevolent kingship. He welcomes the people to witness his crowning as the king of Scotland at the court.

Ans to Q No 3: The three witches or the three weird sisters are described as strange creatures, who seem to belong to a different world altogether. Their presence and words are eerie suggesting something ominous. They are ugly in appearance with thin waif-like fingers and beard on their face.

Ans to Q No 4: Macbeth is the antagonist while Macduff is the archetypal avenging hero who fights for honour and a good cause.

Ans to Q No 5: One of the major themes in *Macbeth* is the corruption of man brought about by uncontrolled ambition and lust for power. We see

that the downfall and consequent deaths of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, are mainly caused because of their excessive desire for power and the throne of Scotland. It is shown that Macbeth is not an evil man, yet he succumbs to the human weaknesses for power and success.

Ans to Q No 6: In Act IV of the play, Malcolm and Macduff discuss what kind of a person would make a good king. Malcolm tells Macduff that a good king will have the qualities of "justice, verity, temperance, stableness/ Bounty, perseverance, lowliness." King Duncan was honoured as he had all these qualities, and most importantly, he was loyal to the interests of Scotland rather than his own self-interests.



10.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q.1. Discuss the action of the play *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare

Q.2. Analyse the major characters in the play *Macbeth*

Q.3. What are the emergent themes in the play *Macbeth*?

Q.4. Define the style and language employed by the dramatist William Shakespeare in his play *Macbeth*.

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