

Academic Reading: *Macbeth*

1. Witches in *Macbeth* – Act I, Scene iii

DO IT NOW TASK: INFERENCES FROM ART



Today we will be completing some academic reading. Consider the image below. What **BIG IDEAS** do you think are explored in the article we will be reading?

What do you notice about the colours used to depict the witches vs Macbeth and Banquo? What can we infer from this?



Consider the surroundings. What do you notice? What atmosphere do the surroundings help to create?

How are Macbeth and Banquo presented in this image? What does this tell us about their characters?

Using your copies of the play, label the image with **TWO** quotations from Act I, Scene iii.

TODAY'S BIG QUESTIONS

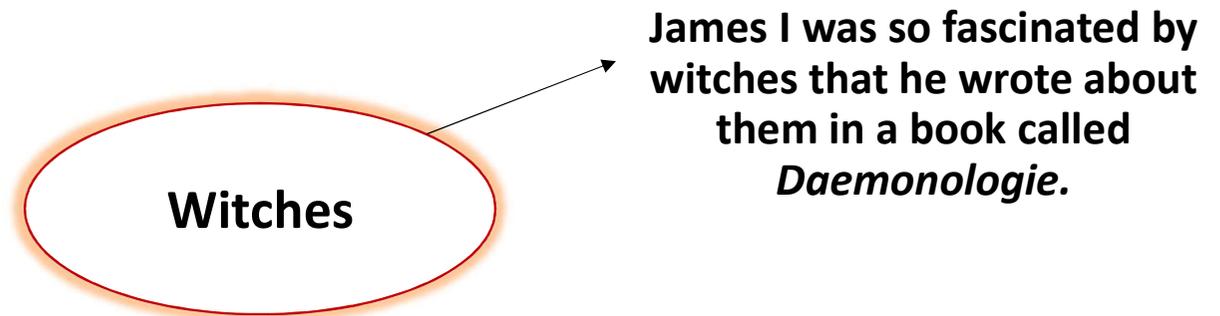
Who are the witches?

Why are the witches significant in *Macbeth*?



YOUR TASK: ACTIVATING PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

- What do you already know about witches and common beliefs about them in Shakespeare's time?
- What do you already know about the role witches play in *Macbeth*?



Extension: 'The witches are not to blame for the events that play out in *Macbeth*. They tell Macbeth he will be king but Macbeth is the one to act on their words.' To what extent do you agree?

YOUR TASK: CLARIFYING VOCABULARY

Consider the following vocabulary:

Word	Definition
hysteria	Exaggerated or uncontrollable emotion or excitement
convicted	Being declared guilty of a criminal offence
desolate	Uninhabited or empty
vindictive	Having or showing a strong or unreasoning desire for revenge
gluttonous	Extremely greedy
disproportionately	Too large or too small in comparison to something else
grievance	A real or imagined cause for complaint, especially unfair treatment
valiantly	With courage and determination
allusion	Making reference to something but not clearly
reverberates	To be repeated several times; having continuing effects

1. Based on these words, what ideas do you think the article is going to explore?
2. Highlight **THREE** words that you would associate with **witches or witchcraft** and explain why as annotations around your copy of the grid.
3. Choose **THREE** of the most challenging words and transform them into small images.

Extra Challenge: Group these words into categories. Explain the categories you have chosen and why each word is placed where it is.

YOUR TASK: CLARIFYING VOCABULARY

Character analysis: The Witches
Article written by Carol Atherton



hysteria

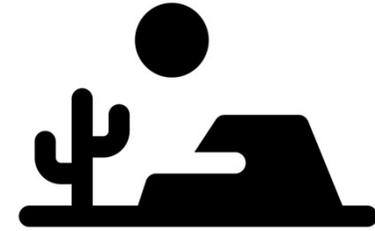
Exaggerated or uncontrollable emotion or excitement

Why have I chosen these icons for these words?



convicted

Being declared guilty of a criminal offence



desolate

Uninhabited or empty



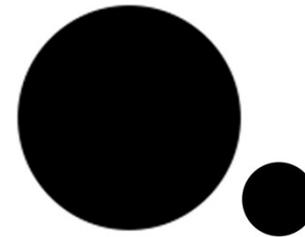
vindictive

Having or showing a strong or unreasoning desire for revenge



gluttonous

Extremely greedy



disproportionately

Too large or too small in comparison to something else



grievance

A real or imagined cause for complaint

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YOUR TASK: ACADEMIC READING

Character analysis: The Witches
Article written by Carol Atherton

1/6

Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* at a time when interest in witchcraft bordered on **hysteria**. Witches were blamed for causing illness, death and disaster, and were thought to punish their enemies by giving them nightmares, making their crops fail and their animals sicken. Witches were thought to allow the Devil to suckle from them in the form of an animal, such as ‘Graymalkin’ and ‘Paddock’, the grey cat and the toad mentioned by the Witches in Act 1, Scene 1. Those who were **convicted** were often tortured, their trials reported in grisly detail in pamphlets that circulated in their hundreds. Often, those accused of witchcraft lived on the edges of society: they were old, poor and unprotected, and were therefore easy to blame.

YOUR TASK: ACADEMIC READING

Character analysis: *The Witches*
Article written by Carol Atherton

2/6

King James VI of Scotland was deeply concerned about the threat posed by witches. He believed that a group of witches had tried to kill him by drowning him while he was at sea (a curse echoed here by the First Witch). During his reign thousands of people in Scotland were put on trial for witchcraft. In 1604, under his rule as king of England and Wales, witchcraft was made a capital offence, meaning that anyone who was found guilty of being a witch could be executed. When Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* in 1606, then, he knew that his audience would have felt a mixture of fear and fascination for the three 'weird sisters', their imaginations captivated by the mysterious meeting on the desolate heath with which the play begins.

YOUR TASK: ACADEMIC READING

Character analysis: The Witches

Article written by Carol Atherton

3/6

Shakespeare's portrayal of the Witches in Act 1, Scene 3 draws directly on many of the beliefs about witchcraft that his audience would have held. They harm animals (as when the Second Witch reports, matter-of-factly, that she has been 'killing swine'. Their power over the elements means that they can control the winds, raise storms and sail in sieves. They use gruesome ingredients such as body parts (the 'pilot's thumb) in their spells. They are also deeply **vindictive**. The First Witch vows to make the sailor suffer simply because his wife refuses to give in to her **gluttonous** demand. Her reaction is shockingly, **disproportionately** cruel: she vows to drain the life out of him until he is 'dry as hay' and curses him with a tortuous inability to sleep, declaring 'He shall live a man forbid' and that he shall 'dwindle, peak and pine'. This is a clear example of the crime known in Shakespeare's day as 'mischief following anger', a punishment inflicted as a result of some kind of **grievance**. Shakespeare uses this passage, then, to demonstrate the Witches' **vindictive** nature, leaving the audience in no doubt as to their connection with the powers of evil.

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4/6

This is the second time that we've met the Witches, and the second time that they've mentioned Macbeth, building a sense of anticipation for their forthcoming encounter. In Act 1, Scene 2, Macbeth is presented as a loyal warrior, a hero who fights **valiantly** on the battlefield to defend his country against invasion and treachery. Yet the association between Macbeth and the Witches introduces a different side to his character. The battle referred to by the Second Witch in Act 1, Scene 1 could be interpreted as not just a literal battle (the conflict raging between Scotland and Norway) but also a metaphorical battle: the battle for Macbeth's soul. It's significant, therefore, that Macbeth's first words to the Witches – 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen' – echo the Witches' chant, 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair', from Act 1, Scene 1.

YOUR TASK: ACADEMIC READING

Character analysis: The Witches
Article written by Carol Atherton

5/6

Banquo soon echoes the Witches, too, asking Macbeth, ‘Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?’ (1.3.51–52). This allusion is loaded with dramatic irony: while Banquo perceives the Witches’ prophecies as ‘fair’, the audience is already aware things are not necessarily what they seem. Banquo introduces an element of doubt, too, by framing his observation within a question. The Witches’ paradox – which indicates that appearances can be deceiving – is central to the play and reverberates through the major characters.

YOUR TASK: ACADEMIC READING

Character analysis: The Witches
Article written by Carol Atherton

6/6

When Macbeth and Banquo meet the Witches, their reactions give us an important insight into their personalities. Banquo is unafraid, but Macbeth ‘start[s]’, or flinches, and ‘seems rapt’, so mystified by their greeting that he is rendered speechless. Once he has regained his composure, he challenges the Witches to tell him more. They vanish, but it is not long before Macbeth finds that he is to become Thane of Cawdor – a ‘truth’ that immediately sets him wondering how the Witches’ final prophecy will come about, and losing himself in the ‘horrible imaginings’ that will eventually lead to the murder of King Duncan. Later in the play, it is Macbeth who seeks out the Witches, cementing his willingness to give himself over to the ‘instruments of darkness’.

YOUR TASK: ANSWER THE QUESTIONS IN FULL SENTENCES

1. What were witches blamed for in Shakespeare's day?
2. Using your knowledge of how witches were treated, why would a 'desolate heath' be a suitable place to meet?
3. The witches are described in the article as 'vindictive'. Why is vindictiveness a dangerous quality?
4. One witch is described as 'disproportionately cruel'. What does this mean?
5. Why does Macbeth repeat the first words of the witches?
What does this tell us about his character?
6. Why does *Banquo* repeat the first words of the witches?
What does this tell us about his character?

Extension:

Read the article again. Write down THREE words/phrases you could steal when writing about the witches.

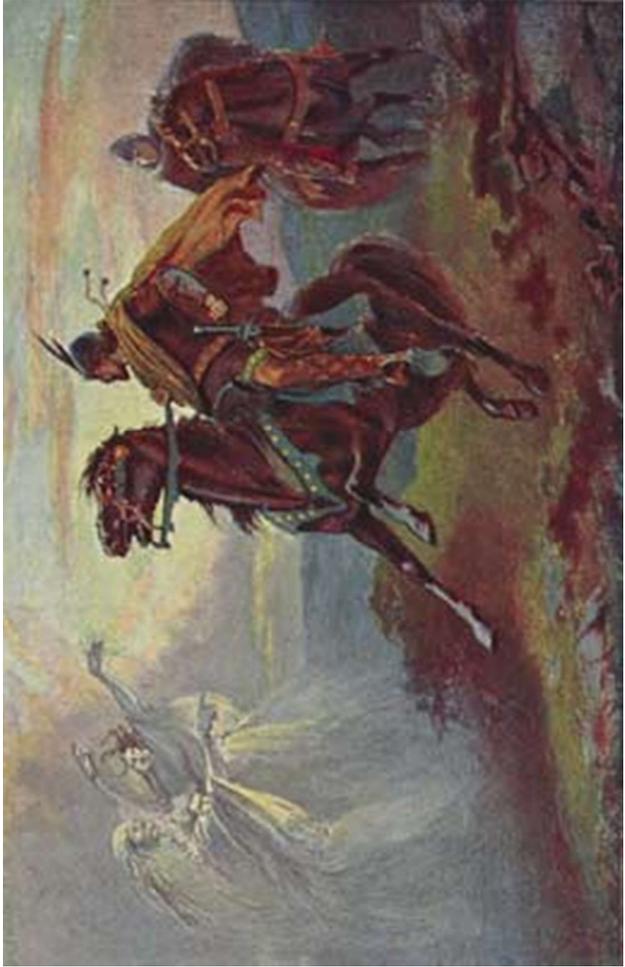
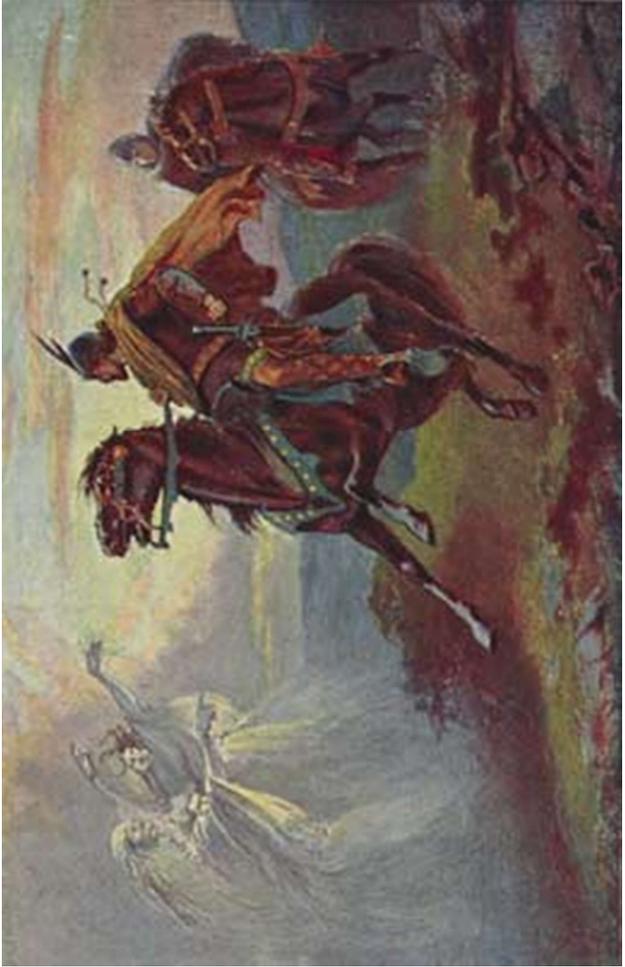
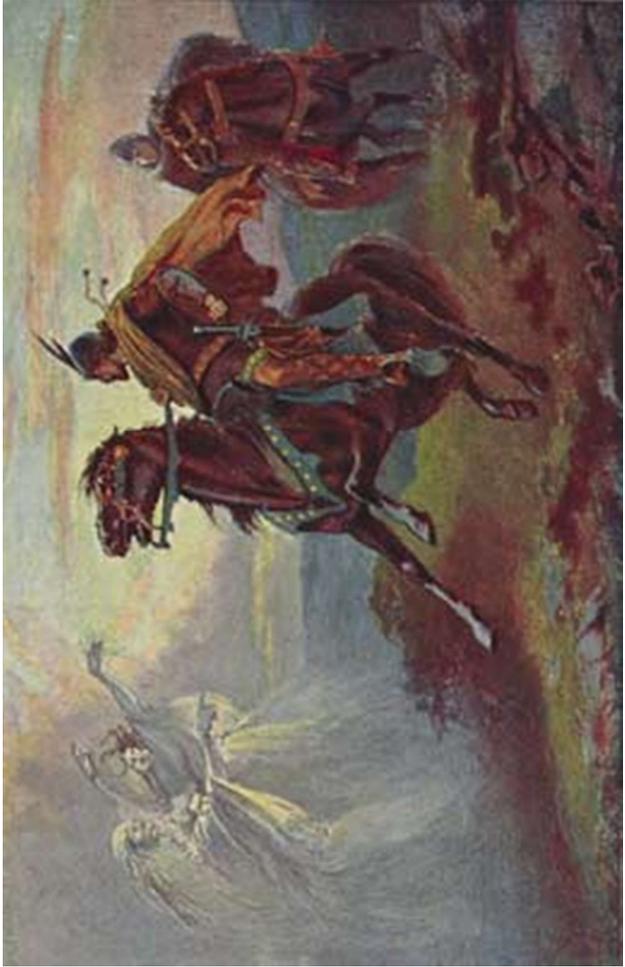
REVISITING TODAY'S BIG QUESTIONS

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Why are the witches significant in *Macbeth*?



Resources



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