

Academic Reading: *Macbeth*
The role of darkness in *Macbeth*

DO IT NOW TASK: ACTIVATE PRIOR KNOWLEDGE



Think: What role does darkness play in what we have read of *Macbeth* so far? Mind map your knowledge below:



Darkness is associated with the supernatural. This is evidenced when...

Share: Share ideas with others in the room. Add anything you have missed in a different colour pen. Be prepared to share as a class.

TODAY'S KEY QUESTION

What is the role of darkness in *Macbeth*?

YOUR TASK: PRE-READING - MAKING PREDICTIONS



Portrait of Sarah Siddons as Lady Macbeth by George Henry Harlow, 1814

We will be reading an article called
'Conjuring darkness in *Macbeth*'.

This image accompanies the article.

Based on the title and the image, what ideas do you think the article will explore? Be more specific than just 'darkness'!

1.

4.

2.

5.

3.

YOUR TASK: CLARIFYING VOCABULARY

Consider the following vocabulary:

Word
invoke
invocation
conjunction
facilitate
scruple
compunction
obscuring
amplified

Which words in this list have you heard of?

Which words are new?

Can you take a guess as to what any of these words mean based on how they sound or other similar terms?

YOUR TASK: CLARIFYING VOCABULARY

Consider the following vocabulary:

Word	Definition
invoke	Call on (a deity or spirit) in prayer, as a witness or for inspiration
invocation	A request for help or call for forgiveness from a higher power
conjunction	A magic incantation or spell
facilitate	Make (an action or process) easy or easier
scruple	A feeling of doubt or hesitation with regards to whether an action is moral (right/wrong) or not
compunction	A feeling of guilt that prevents or follows the doing of something bad
obscuring	Keep from being seen; concealing
amplified	Made more intense

1. Based on these words, what ideas do you think the article is going to explore?
2. Highlight **THREE** words that you could connect to literal and/or symbolic darkness and explain your choices as annotations around your copy of the grid.
3. Choose **THREE** words you would associate with moments in the play that are not connected with darkness and explain your choice as annotations.
4. Choose **THREE** words to transform into small images.

Extra Challenge: 'Darkness is more powerful than light in the play'. To what extent do you agree?

YOUR TASK: ACADEMIC READING

Conjuring darkness in *Macbeth*

Article written by John Mullan

1/7

Follow along as we read. Annotate your copies of the text with me as I use the visualiser.



Key scenes of the play are set at night, and even in many of the daytime scenes characters are aware of the fading of the light. The Witches who open the play agree that they will meet Macbeth 'ere the set of sun' (1.1.5); Duncan arrives at Macbeth's castle at evening (Act 1, Scene 6); the First Murderer, instructed by Macbeth to kill Banquo and Fleance, notes how 'The west yet glimmers with some streaks of day' (3.3.5). We often feel darkness coming, especially because both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth seem to **invoke** and invite it. They need darkness to do their worst.

YOUR TASK: ACADEMIC READING

Conjuring darkness in *Macbeth*

Article written by John Mullan

2/7

On a stage crowded with Duncan and his thanes, Macbeth speaks in one of his asides that allow us to hear his unspoken thoughts. ‘Stars, hide your fires, / Let not light see my black and deep desires’ (1.4.50–51). This is the first reference to darkness in the play. He has just found out that he has become Thane of Cawdor, as prophesied by the Witches, and that Duncan is to visit his castle. The underside of the roof covering much of the stage of the Globe was decorated with painted stars, so Macbeth’s **invocation** is like a spell to darken the very space in which he stands. In the next scene, Lady Macbeth, excited by the tidings that the king is to come ‘tonight’ to her castle, brings on a kind of **conjunction** of darkness. ‘Come, thick night, / And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell’ (1.5.50–51). She has not heard her husband’s words as we have done, yet she seems to echo them with her wish that ‘heaven’ not ‘peep through the blanket of the dark / To cry, ‘Hold, hold!’” (1.5.53–54)

YOUR TASK: ACADEMIC READING

Conjuring darkness in *Macbeth*

Article written by John Mullan

3/7

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth separately call on darkness not just to assist their plans but to hide their deeds from ‘Heaven’ or their own consciences. ‘Let ... The eye wink at the hand’ (1.4.51–52), says Macbeth, as if the dark might hide his own action from himself. Later he echoes his wife’s when he talks to her of his planned murder of his friend Banquo, but in such way that she might remain ‘innocent of the knowledge’ of what he is about to do (3.2.45). ‘Come, seeling night, / Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,’ he continues. *Seeling* is a metaphor taken from hawking, where a hawk has its eyelids sewed shut in order to be trained. Macbeth looks forward to the darkness that will **facilitate** his murderous plans. But it is more than this. Day is ‘pitiful’, and in his ruthless actions Macbeth must escape pity. In his imagining, darkness is a psychological space, where **scruple** can be shed, **compunction** lost.

YOUR TASK: ACADEMIC READING

Conjuring darkness in *Macbeth*

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4/7

Audiences will be most aware of the gathering of darkness when Duncan comes to stay at Macbeth's castle. What Lady Macbeth chillingly calls 'This night's great business' (1.5.68) must happen in the dark. Servants carrying torches enter at Act 1, Scene 7 to signify that night has fallen. And it gets yet darker. At the opening of Act 2, Banquo's son Fleance carries a torch when he enters with his father. It is after twelve and 'The moon is down' (2.1.2): it is pitch dark. With a brilliant touch, Shakespeare lets us hear how different characters make their own sense of the blackness. 'There's husbandry in heaven, / Their candles are all out' (2.1.4–5), says Banquo, fancifully – and unconsciously reminds us of the **obscuring** of Heaven and starlight for which Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have wished.

YOUR TASK: ACADEMIC READING

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Article written by John Mullan

5/7

Now, in this deep darkness, characters cannot see each other even by the light of torches. ‘Who’s there?’ asks Banquo as Macbeth enters with a torch-bearing servant (2.1.10). A little later, after Banquo has retired, Lady Macbeth enters and catches herself starting at the shriek of an owl, just before her husband comes to meet her. ‘Who’s there? What ho?’ (2.2.8) asks Macbeth, and at first she hardly seems to recognise him: ‘My husband!’ (2.2.13). Their dialogue creates a darkness in which sounds and apprehensions are **amplified**: ‘Didst thou not hear a noise?’ (2.2.14), ‘Did not you speak?’ (2.2.16). The terrible deed has been done and the darkness that made it possible concentrates their fears.

YOUR TASK: ACADEMIC READING

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6/7

When we return to *Macbeth* he has been crowned king but fears Banquo and ‘his royalty of nature’ (3.1.49). He must again call darkness to his aid. Banquo tells him that he is riding out and will probably be ‘a borrower of the night / For a dark hour or twain’ (3.1.26–27) before he returns for Macbeth’s feast. Night will, of course, **facilitate** the arrangement of his murder, and when Macbeth instructs the two Murderers on their mission, he echoes Banquo’s own phrasing. Fleance, he tells the hired killers, must ‘embrace the fate / Of that dark hour’ (3.1.136–37). As so often in this play, darkness is simultaneously metaphorical and literal. The ‘dark hour’ is the time of killing – but also the lightless time when a trap can be sprung. When the Murderers attack Banquo, it is darkness that allows them to surprise him – but also that allows Fleance to escape. ‘Who did strike out the light?’ asks the Third Murderer (3.3.19). Darkness is not the friend to Macbeth that he believes. Fate is not his to command.

YOUR TASK: ACADEMIC READING

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Article written by John Mullan

7/7

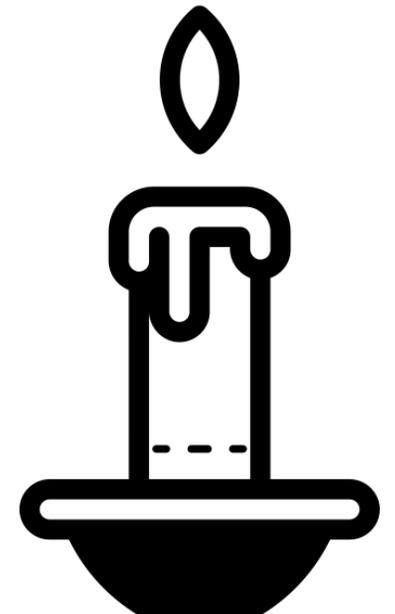
Darkness may seem to become Macbeth's element, but his wife, once the prime mover of their plots, comes to dread it. Watching her sleepwalking, her Gentlewoman tells the Doctor that 'she has light by her continually, 'tis her command' (5.1.22). '*Enter Lady with a Taper*' is the stage instruction in the First Folio, on which text all later editions are based. The taper, the smallest kind of candle, is Lady Macbeth's safeguard against the powers of darkness. These were once the powers that she **invoked**, but now they crowd in on her. Once she called 'Come, thick night, / And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell' (1.5.50–51); now she feels and fears 'Hell is murky' (5.1.36). In her final scene before her death, Shakespeare shows how the horror of her deeds has possessed her, and does so by dramatising the most elemental and childlike of fears: fear of the dark.

YOUR TASK: WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND?

1. Why do Macbeth and Lady Macbeth invite darkness into their lives?
2. Can you ever hide a deed from your own conscience?
3. Why do you think Lady Macbeth comes to dread darkness?
4. 'Macbeth experiences his downfall because he underestimates how powerful darkness can be.' To what extent do you agree?
5. What do you think Shakespeare is trying to teach his audiences about the darkness that resides within us all?

EXTRA CHALLENGE:

The article discusses the power of darkness. In your books, discuss the power of light in *Macbeth*.



REVISITING TODAY'S KEY QUESTION

What is the role of darkness in *Macbeth*?

Resources

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invocation	A request for help or call for forgiveness from a higher power
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