

Academic Reading: *Macbeth*
Lady Macbeth misunderstood

DO IT NOW TASK: MAKING INFERENCES



The title of the article we will be reading today is:

Why Lady Macbeth is literature's most misunderstood villain.

Looking at the pictures and subtitle, what big ideas do you think will be explored in the article? Consider the language used in the title to help back up your thoughts.



TODAY'S BIG QUESTION

Who is Lady Macbeth?



YOUR TASK: ACTIVATING PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Complete the questions below on Lady Macbeth's character:

1. What does Lady Macbeth mean when she says 'unsex me here'?
2. How does Lady Macbeth convince Macbeth to go through with the murder of Duncan?
3. What does the term 'duplicitous' mean?
4. Why does Lady Macbeth not kill Duncan herself?

- What does Lady Macbeth mean when she says 'a little water clears us of this deed'?
- 5.

6. Why does Lady Macbeth faint in Act 2, Scene 3?

In 3.2, Lady Macbeth says, 'Say to the king, I would attend his leisure For a few words.' What happens to her relationship with Macbeth as the play progresses?

- 7.
8. Why is it significant that Lady Macbeth has a candle by her in 5.1?

1. Lady Macbeth wishes to rid herself of her femininity in order to secure the strength needed to go through with her plans.
2. She implies he is a coward and thus attacks his masculinity.
3. 'Duplicitous' means deceitful.
4. Duncan reminds Lady Macbeth of her father through his appearance as he sleeps.
5. Lady Macbeth believes by removing the blood from her and her husband's hands, they will both be free of guilt and suspicion.
6. It is implied Lady Macbeth faints to either divert suspicion away from Macbeth OR because she would be expected to find news of Duncan's murder difficult to hear.
7. Lady Macbeth and Macbeth grow more distant as the play progresses. Here, Lady Macbeth has to request her husband's presence through a servant.
8. The candle emits light which is contrary to Lady Macbeth's constant calls for darkness throughout the play.

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5. What does Lady Macbeth mean when she says 'a little water clears us of this deed'?
6. Why does Lady Macbeth faint in Act 2, Scene 3?
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Summarise: With the answers to these questions in mind, what kind of character is Lady Macbeth?

Why do audiences react to her in the way they do? Do you think this representation is fair?

YOUR TASK: CLARIFYING VOCABULARY

Consider the following vocabulary:

Word	Definition
seductress	<p>Which words in this list have you heard of?</p> <p>Which words are new?</p> <p>Can you take a guess as to what any of these words mean based on how they sound or other similar terms?</p>
compounded	
caricature	
demonisation	
excavation	
misogyny	
progressive	
ascension	
aesthetic	
agency	
political androgyny	
ambiguous	

YOUR TASK: CLARIFYING VOCABULARY

Consider the following vocabulary:

Word	Definition
seductress	Someone who seduces someone into something
compounded	Make (something bad) worse
caricature	A drawing or written/spoken description of someone that usually makes them look silly by making part of their character more noticeable than it really is
demonisation	The portrayal of something as wicked or threatening
excavation	The act or process of digging
misogyny	Dislike of or ingrained prejudice against women
progressive	Relating to or showing advancement
ascension	The act of rising
aesthetic	Concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty
agency	Having control over your actions and their consequences
political androgyny	Political opinions and actions that are not clearly masculine or feminine
ambiguous	Open to more than one interpretation

1. Based on these words, what ideas do you think the article is going to explore?
2. Highlight **THREE** words that you could associate with Lady Macbeth and explain why as annotations around your copy of the grid.
3. Choose **THREE** words you would associate with other characters in the play and explain why as annotations.
4. Choose **THREE** words to transform into small images.

YOUR TASK: ACADEMIC READING

BBC
CULTURE

Why Lady Macbeth is literature's most misunderstood villain

Article written by Hanna Flint

1/6

Shakespeare's murderous queen has long been demonised as a wicked seductress. Yet Frances McDormand is the latest actor to show she deserves far more understanding, writes Hanna Flint.

Seductress. Manipulator. Madwoman. The Fourth Witch. These are just a few of the more hostile descriptors that Lady Macbeth has been saddled with ever since *The Tragedie of Macbeth* (the full title of the Scottish play) was first performed 416 years ago. As a schoolgirl studying William Shakespeare's timeless tale of ambition, morality, betrayal and murder, my first impression was that she was all of the above: a straightforward, out-and-out villain. A wife who, after learning of a witches' prophecy declaring her Scottish general husband would become king, persuades him to commit regicide, take power and subsequently ignites a bloody civil war? Lady Macbeth is certainly no angel.

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In act five, scene seven of the play, Macbeth's rival for the throne Malcolm declares her a "fiend-like queen," and that label has stuck. The fact that men played female roles in Shakespeare's day likely only **compounded** this unflattering **caricature**, but even after women were welcomed on stage, a narrow portrayal of the character has continued. "My experience of Lady Macbeth in the theatre, to begin with, was quite difficult," Erica Whyman, Deputy Artistic Director of The Royal Shakespeare Company tells BBC Culture. "She's cast in the popular imagination as the instrument of evil and that then latches onto stereotypes of women through the ages. It's a **caricature** of a woman who seeks power through her husband; when you combine that with the idea that she goes mad, you have this toxic combination."

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It's this two-dimensional representation that Oscar-nominated actor Ruth Negga is hoping to combat when she takes on the role opposite Daniel Craig in Sam Gold's Broadway production this spring. "I'm very interested in discussing what I think is the long-standing demonisation [of Lady Macbeth]," she tells BBC Culture. "[The play is] a complex excavation of this relationship and desire, fate and power but it feels like we've just plastered it with misogyny. The problem isn't the play, it's the interpretation."

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Contemporary feminist readings and criticism have similarly reappraised Lady Macbeth as a far more sympathetic figure than the one that has been traditionally depicted. She might not have been historically perceived as a tragic hero like her husband – and Shakespeare didn't give her as much stage time either – but the play's title speaks to more than just his devastating fall from grace. It speaks to hers too. With this in mind, films and theatre productions have increasingly offered a deeper engagement with her, and with Shakespeare's **progressive** ideas about gender, motherhood and the patriarchy that are as relevant today as they were back then. "He would not have recognised what we mean by women's rights or what we mean by equality but what he did was treat every human being in his plays as though they had something to say that we should listen to."

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5/6

King James I might have been the British sovereign when Macbeth was published but his predecessor, Elizabeth I, was an obvious influence on Shakespeare. Upon her **ascension** to the throne, the monarch challenged gender roles; she refused to submit to marriage – arguing she was "already bound unto a husband, which is the kingdom of England" – while clinging to her feminine identity in her **aesthetic** and various speeches, describing her subjects as her "children" for example. But she also displayed the royal traits (considered masculine because of the traditionally male hierarchy) of active **agency** and decision making, and was referred to using royal male descriptors, like "princely" and "Prince of Light", as well as being classified as "king" in Parliamentary statute for political purposes. However, where Elizabeth I embraced **political androgyny** and reigned for 45 years, Lady Macbeth unsexes herself and loses her way. "She thinks the only way to get success is to follow a set of rules that are patriarchal," says Whyman. "She's not a kind of power-hungry, man impersonator – she's wholly in her skin, but she does think the only way to have **agency** in the world is to do this terrible deed and she's quite wrong about that. If she held onto her morals, so her femininity in that sense, it wouldn't have happened."

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Shakespeare was miles ahead when it came to female representation and Lady Macbeth is a character that has too frequently been painted in a two-dimensional light. Had she been afforded more scenes in the play, her motivations might not have appeared so **ambiguous** to narrow-minded viewers. As it is, Lady Macbeth exits the play after her sleepwalking scene and in act five scene seven is reported as dead, evidently by suicide if Malcolm's comment that she "by self and violent hands took off her life" is to be believed.

Lady Macbeth is a timeless, tragic heroine who should be cherished not scorned. "It's unhelpful to portray her as wicked or to suggest that because she hasn't got a child she's, in some ways, hollow and barren and inevitably evil," says Whyman. "She's not a villain; she's complex, she's curious – we should admire her."

YOUR TASK: ANSWER THE QUESTIONS IN FULL SENTENCES

1. How does the article challenge our initial readings of Lady Macbeth? What does it say about her?

2. A trait often associated with Lady Macbeth is that of ambition, yet it is always considered in a negative sense. Is this fair?

3. The article says Lady Macbeth is 'complex' and 'curious' and that audiences should 'admire her'. Do you agree?

4. The article states: '[Shakespeare] would not have recognised what we mean by women's rights or what we mean by equality but what he did was treat every human being in his plays as though they had something to say that we should listen to.' With this in mind, what is Shakespeare saying to us through Lady Macbeth?

5. In conclusion, is Lady Macbeth misunderstood?

EXTRA CHALLENGE:

'[The play is] a complex excavation of this relationship and desire, fate and power but it feels like we've just plastered it with misogyny.'

To what extent do you agree?

REVISITING TODAY'S BIG QUESTION

Who is Lady Macbeth?



Resources

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