About the author

Although William Shakespeare is one of the world’s greatest writers, surprisingly little is known about his life, especially his early years in Stratford-upon-Avon. However, we do know that he was born on 23rd April 1564 and died on 23rd April 1616. His mother, Mary Arden, came from a higher social background than his father, who was a civil servant. He went to a good school but did not attend university. In 1582 he married Anne Hathaway and they had three children.

From 1590, his plays began to be performed on the London stage. Over a period of 23 years (1590–1613), he wrote 37 plays, sometimes writing three plays a year! He also wrote poetry, including a number of beautiful sonnets. His plays were performed before the king (James I) and enjoyed critical and popular success. By the time he died he was a wealthy man.

Shakespeare’s plays are famous throughout the world for their poetry and their insights into the nature of life and the human condition. A large number of them are set in the south of Europe, particularly Italy. However, he chose gloomy northern European landscapes for three of his darkest tragedies, Hamlet (1601), King Lear (1605) and Macbeth (1605). Some of his other plays are The Taming of the Shrew (1591), A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1594), Romeo and Juliet (1595), The Merchant of Venice (1596), Henry V (1599), Much Ado About Nothing (1599), Julius Caesar (1599), Othello (1604) and The Tempest (1611).

Summary

Macbeth is a brave, thoughtful soldier in eleventh-century Scotland. His desire to be king, however, leads both him and his strong and ambitious wife along a bloody road to power that ends in tragedy.

Act 1

On a wild and stormy night, Macbeth, the Thane (or lord) of Glamis, and his friend Banquo meet three witches on an open road. The witches predict that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland, and that Banquo’s children will be future kings. Macbeth jokes about it at first, but when he is rewarded by King Duncan for his heroism in battle by being made Thane of Cawdor, he begins to take the rest of the prophecy seriously. Duncan and his sons come to Macbeth’s castle to spend the night. Lady Macbeth learns of the witches’ prophecy and, although Macbeth is somewhat reluctant, she persuades him to kill the king.

Acts 2–3

Banquo and his son, Fleance, meet Macbeth in the hall of his castle, late that night. After they leave, Macbeth imagines he sees a bloody dagger inviting him to commit murder. Lady Macbeth has given Duncan’s guards wine mixed with drugs. As they sleep, Macbeth enters Duncan’s room and kills him. He is worried that Duncan’s sons, sleeping in the next room, have heard him. Lady Macbeth tells him to put blood on the drunken guards, so that they will appear to be the murderers. However, Macbeth is too frightened to do it, so his wife does it for him. The thane, Macduff, arrives at the castle and soon everyone knows that King Duncan has been murdered. Macbeth kills the two drunken guards, explaining that he did it out of love for the king. Malcolm and Donalbain, Duncan’s sons, leave for England and Ireland secretly, afraid that they too will be murdered. The sons are suspected of paying the guards to kill Duncan, and Macbeth is crowned king of
Scotland. The second part of the prophecy has come true. Macbeth, now king, invites his friend Banquo to a special dinner at his castle. By now, Banquo suspects that Macbeth is the real murderer. Macbeth worries about the witches’ prophecy concerning Banquo’s children becoming kings, so he arranges to have his friend and son murdered. Banquo is killed, but his son escapes, and Macbeth is haunted by Banquo’s ghost at the dinner. More people suspect Macbeth of the murders and begin calling him a tyrant.

Acts 4–5

Macbeth consults the witches again, and is reassured to hear that he will be killed by ‘no man born from a woman’, and will be safe from danger until the trees of Birnam Wood march against him. He has the wife and family of his arch-enemy, Macduff, murdered, and confidently awaits battle with his enemies. Just before the battle, Lady Macbeth kills herself. A messenger then tells Macbeth that a forest is moving towards the castle (in order to attack Macbeth’s castle, Macduff and the soldiers camouflage themselves with branches cut from trees in Birnam Wood). The battle is lost, but Macbeth refuses to surrender because he still believes that he cannot be killed. He fights Macduff and almost wins, but Macduff tells him that he was not born naturally – he was cut from his mother’s body. Macbeth knows all is lost but still doesn’t surrender. Macduff kills him, and King Duncan’s son, Malcolm, is hailed as the new king of Scotland.

Background and themes

Ambition and evil: Set in eleventh-century Scotland, Macbeth is a play that explores the nature of evil and ambition. Macbeth is more than just a straightforward villain. He has some good qualities: he is brave and heroic. We are drawn into Macbeth’s mind and we experience his torments and temptations. But he is also a proud, violent and fundamentally weak man. It is said that evil cannot exist without the will behind it, and Lady Macbeth is the force which allows Macbeth to act without will. Although we are appalled by his terrible actions, we are fascinated by his complexity. In this way, we learn something of the conflicting natures of people.

Men and women:

Another theme of the play is the relationship between men and women. Lady Macbeth is seen by many feminists as a heroic figure. She has a stronger character than her husband. She has manoeuvred herself into the highest circles through a combination of intelligence and cunning. She easily manipulates her husband into doing what she wants. She takes her husband’s good qualities (ambition, bravery) and turns them into instruments of wickedness.

The supernatural:

A third interesting aspect of the play is the role of the supernatural. Would Macbeth have been led to murder without the vision of a knife or the predictions of the three witches? Would his crimes have escaped detection had Banquo’s ghost not turned up at the feast? Are the witches and ghost real, or a product of Macbeth’s imagination? It is worth remembering that, when Shakespeare wrote Macbeth, witches and ghosts were taken very seriously. Even King James I believed that they were real!