

MACBETH

READING COMPREHENSION

ACT 1

YEAR 5 AND 6

The sky was dark, and growing darker still, as an icy wind blew across the plain. Thunder growled in the distance, and the storm-clouds rolled and boiled. From horizon to horizon there was not one living soul to be seen. Not. One. Then, as if the earth itself was holding its breath, the wind dropped and the clouds stood still.

Lighting flashed three times and there, in the middle of that desolate place, stood three women. Some might call them witches.

“When shall we three meet again, In thunder, lightning, or in rain?” asked one.

Her two sisters were silent for a moment, staring into the distance. Then, as the seconds passed, their eyes rolled slowly upwards, till only the whites were showing. They still saw, but it was not Now they saw, nor was it Then. No, they saw What Was to Come.

“When the hurlyburly’s done, When the battle’s lost and won.” came the reply. “That will be ere the set of sun.” added the third. And there would be a fourth at their meeting – though he didn’t know it.

“Macbeth.”

As they spoke his name they smiled three mirthless smiles. Then they were gone- mist blown on the wind.

Our story has barely started, yet these three have glimpsed its end.

Not us though! We know almost nothing! Where are we? What are we doing here? Who is Macbeth?

Scotland was at war with Norway. Villagers barely slept at night for fear that their houses would be burnt to the ground by the invader; their children snatched, their menfolk slaughtered, their crops destroyed. What would you then call the man who saved you from that, whose mighty sword and fearsome skills in battle made those Viking warriors blanch with terror, turn tail and run for their lives? That’s right – a hero. His name? That name: Macbeth.

The battle was at its height. The air stank of blood and fear and rang with the sound of steel on steel. King Duncan, leader of the Scottish army, together with his sons and his attendant lords, was scouring the battlefield, desperate for news. Suddenly he spied a heavily wounded officer, staggering towards them. “What bloody man is that?” asked the King. “He can report, as seemeth by his plight, of the revolt the newest state.”

“This is the captain!” replied his son, Malcolm. “Hail, brave friend! Say to the king the knowledge of the broil as thou didst leave it.”

What a tale the captain had to tell – one of bravery almost beyond belief. When it looked as if the Norwegian army were unbeatable, two Scottish warriors had swung their swords fearlessly, cutting down huge numbers of the enemy like wheat in a field. And, thanks to those two, Macbeth and his friend Banquo, Scotland had won the day.

As the news spread through the army, soldiers started to pound the hilts of their swords on their shields till a great triumphant roar spread across the battlefield - the enemy had been defeated! For Duncan, though, the good news was tinged with sadness. In the midst of the battle, one of his most trusted friends, the Thane of Cawdor, had betrayed him to the Norwegians and now he must be executed. It begged the question: who

would be the new Thane? Who deserved this noble title? The answer came to him instantly and he turned to his companions.

“No more that thane of Cawdor shall deceive Our bosom interest: go pronounce his present death, and with his former title greet Macbeth.”

It would have been more fitting, thought Macbeth, if the sun had come blazing out from behind the storm clouds to celebrate their victory. Instead here he was trudging through some of the worst rain he could remember (and he was Scottish) across a desolate heath, towards Duncan’s headquarters. His great and valiant friend Banquo was by his side and they found themselves almost laughing at how bad the weather was. An instant later, Macbeth saw the smile freeze on Banquo’s face.

There, blocking their path, stood three figures. Through the rain it was hard to make out whether they were men, women – or even human.

We know them, though. We have seen them before. “What are these” asked Banquo, “So wither’d and so wild in their attire? Macbeth was more interested in what they had to say, “Speak, if you can: what are you?” he demanded.

Three pairs of eyes turned and fixed him with a stare, each of the weird sisters taking it in turns to speak.

“All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Glamis!”

“All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!”

“All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!”

Banquo was astonished to see his friend, so fearless upon the battlefield, turn pale. If this was true, then, could there be better news? If not, then it was just the rambling of fools. But, he was curious; what might they say to him? Was there to be good news for him too? They turned to him and, as they did so, Banquo noticed a family resemblance between the three. Each pair of eyes was the same strange pale shade, almost yellow. Wolf-like he thought. But their words were most welcome:

“Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.” they said, “Not so happy, yet much happier.” And, best of all, “Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none!”.

Macbeth was desperate to find out more

“I know I am thane of Glamis; but how of Cawdor? the thane of Cawdor lives, and to be king stands not within the prospect of belief!”

But they were gone; all three, vanished into the mist. The two friends blinked and shook their heads in disbelief.

They had scarcely had time to draw breath when messengers from King Duncan arrived to bring the news that we already know: Macbeth was the new Thane of Cawdor!

The witches’ words were true, thought Macbeth! First Glamis, now Cawdor. So then... king? But for that to happen, King Duncan would have to die! Horrified at the way his thoughts were turning, Macbeth tried to thrust them aside, muttering to himself. “If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me, without my stir.”

So lost in thoughts of the future was he, that he had almost forgotten that there was a victory to celebrate and a new title to show off. Duncan hadn’t, and later that day at Forres castle the old King struggled to keep the tears from his eyes as he embraced Macbeth, proclaiming “Worthiest cousin! More is thy due than more than all can pay.”

Looking into Duncan's eyes and seeing the gratitude there, Macbeth almost believed he could read the King's mind – perhaps the witches' gifts had rubbed off! Yes, he thought, Duncan was going to make him, Macbeth - the hero of the battle, the leader of his army, loved and respected by all - his heir! The King was about to speak. This could be the moment!

The old king looked around him. Though his heart was full of pride and love he was also tired, so tired. He had been king for so long now, and that crown weighed ever heavier on his head. It was time to pass it on, and make sure that Scotland would be safe for the future.

“Sons, kinsmen, thanes, know
We will establish our estate upon
Our eldest, Malcolm, whom we name hereafter
The Prince of Cumberland; to Inverness!
Cawdor renew'd, we come to visit you!”

Macbeth turned swiftly away to hide his face. Duncan must not see his shock - his anger. Malcolm, King? That mewling, puking infant, King? Did he even draw his sword in this last battle? He carefully composed his face into a smile and turned back to Duncan.

“I'll make joyful the hearing of my wife with your approach; So humbly take my leave.”

Summoning his servant, Macbeth quickly scrawled a note and handed it to the messenger, who set off immediately.

The path from Duncan's castle was clear as Macbeth spurred his horse homewards. Still, there were other obstacles in his way. He muttered to himself, “The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step on which I must fall down, or else o'erleap, for in my way it lies.”

What to do? What to do? Lost in thought, he was surprised as his horse whinnied in pain. Macbeth saw that he had dug the spurs deep into the animal's side. Easing them away, he gently patted its neck and rode on.

As Lady Macbeth read the letter that the breathless messenger had carried from her husband, her own breath quickened, and her cheeks flushed with excitement. A prophesy! She imagined herself, a crown upon her head, seated upon a golden throne next to her husband. She would make it happen. But there were problems. Her husband for a start...

“I do fear thy nature; It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way.”

“The nearest way”. Three little words to hide behind. Let's swap them for another three: treachery, violence, murder. Could she make her husband see that the crown was worth all these? If she could, another problem remained: when could they create an opportunity to do the deed? At that moment, another messenger arrived:

“The king comes here to-night.”

The fates had spoken. It was meant to be. Almost as if she was weaving a spell, Lady Macbeth whispered to the air, “Come, you spirits and fill me from the crown to the toe

top-full of direst cruelty! Come, come, thick night, let my keen knife see not the wound it makes.”

She was clear, and when Macbeth arrived home, she laid it out before him. Duncan would arrive at their castle and never leave. They would hold a feast in his honour, and after that, in the depth of the night, he would die.

Macbeth was unsure. This was treason; Duncan was a good man, and had just rewarded him with a new title. Yet, though Macbeth was a match for any man with his sword or his fists, when it came to words, his wife was the master warrior. His protests were useless. However, though she could defeat his every argument, she could not quiet his conscience. Later that evening, with Duncan seated at the feast, smiling and laughing with joy, he could stand it no longer and fled. Lady Macbeth followed him swiftly.

“He has almost supp'd: why have you left the chamber?”

“Hath he ask'd for me?”

“Know you not he has?”

“We will proceed no further in this business!”

Just as she had feared. The crown was so close; she could almost reach out and touch it. And here was Macbeth, for the sake of that ‘milk of human kindness’ about to throw it away. Over her dead body. Well, not hers exactly... And she knew her husband, knew exactly what to say to spur him on.

“Art thou afeard

To be the same in thine own act and valour

As thou art in desire?”

She was almost afraid for a moment as his face darkened and she saw the blood pulse at his throat in anger at this slur on his courage. Macbeth lent in to her face, spitting his reply, “I prithee, peace: I dare do all that may become a man!” but he was so predictable it was all she could do not to laugh. A few more words and he would be just where she wanted him.

“When you durst do it, then you were a man; be so much more.”

He looked up at her, his eyes pleading.

“If we should fail?”

“We fail! But screw your courage to the sticking-place, and we'll not fail. When Duncan is asleep his two chamberlains I'll ply with wine. Then, what cannot you and I perform upon the unguarded Duncan?”

Macbeth's shoulders slumped and he said nothing for a moment. “I am settled.” He replied at last.

There are no screams yet, but make no mistake, they are coming.

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Part 1: Page 1

1. What is the weather like at the beginning of this story? Give two direct examples from the text

1. _____

2. _____

2. How many times does lightning flash?

1 2 3 4

3. 'There in the middle of that desolate place, stood three women. Some might call them witches'

Tick two synonyms for 'desolate'

lonely pleasant

crowded bleak

4. Who was at war with Norway?

5. Using direct quotes from the text, write down 3 things villagers were fearful of?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

6. Who was King of Scotland at the beginning of this story?

7. What are the names of the ‘two Scottish warriors [who] had swung their swords fearlessly, cutting down huge numbers of the enemy’

1. _____

2. _____

8. ‘the enemies had been defeated! For Duncan, though, the good news was tinged with sadness’

Why was the good news tinged with sadness for King Duncan? Use evidence from the text to justify your answer

Part 2: Page 2- Page 3

- 9. *'It would have been more fitting, thought Macbeth, if the sun had come blazing out from behind the storm clouds to celebrate their victory'.***

Explain why Macbeth thought this

- 10. Why was Macbeth shocked and angry when King Duncan announced that Malcolm would be the new King of Scotland? Use evidence from the text to justify your answer**

- 11. *'Lost in thought, he was surprised as his horse whinnied in pain. Macbeth saw that he had dug the spurs deep into the animal's side. Easing them away, he gently patted its neck and rode on'.***

What does this passage tell us about Macbeth's character? Use evidence from the text to explain your answer

12. 'As Lady Macbeth read the letter...her cheeks flushed with excitement'

Why was Lady Macbeth so excited?

PART 3: PAGE 4

13. Whose idea is it to kill King Duncan?

Macbeth's

Lady Macbeth's

Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's

Banquo's

14. 'Later that evening, with Duncan seated at the feast, smiling and laughing with joy, he could stand it no longer and fled'.

Why did Macbeth leave the table?

15. Read the paragraph, ‘She was almost afraid for a moment...’

Copy two phrases from the text that show Macbeth was angry

1. _____

2. _____

16. Do you think Macbeth or Lady Macbeth kill King Duncan? Explain your answer, using evidence from the text

ANSWERS
MACBETH
READING COMPREHENSION
ACT 1
YEAR 5 AND 6

Part 1: Page 1

1. What is the weather like at the beginning of this story? Give two direct examples from the text

Cold, "an icy wind"

Stormy "the sky was dark, thunder growled"

2. How many times does lightning flash?

1 2 3 4

3. 'There in the middle of that desolate place, stood three women. Some might call them witches'

Tick two synonyms for 'desolate'

lonely pleasant

crowded bleak

4. Who was at war with Norway?

Scotlans

5. Using direct quotes from the text, write down 3 things villagers were fearful of?

1 their houses would be burned down to the ground

2 their children snatched

4. their crops destroyed

6. Who was King of Scotland at the beginning of this story?

King Duncan

7. What are the names of the ‘two Scottish warriors [who] had swung their swords fearlessly, cutting down huge numbers of the enemy’

Banquo

Macbeth

8. ‘the enemies had been defeated! For Duncan, though, the good news was tinged with sadness’

Why was the good news tinged with sadness for King Duncan? Use evidence from the text to justify your answer

“one of his most trusted friends, the Thane of Cawdor, had betrayed him to the Norwegians and now he must be executed”

Part 2: Page 2- Page 3

9. ‘It would have been more fitting, thought Macbeth, if the sun had come blazing out from behind the storm clouds to celebrate their victory’.

Explain why Macbeth thought this

Because when there is good weather and sunny, everyone is happy and wants to celebrate. The bad weather symbolises gloomy things

10. Why was Macbeth shocked and angry when King Duncan announced that Malcolm would be the new King of Scotland? Use evidence from the text to justify your answer

Because he had been made Thane of Cawdor Macbeth probably thought that everything the witches had said would come true. He also felt that Malcolm was weak and hadn't even fought in the battle that they had just won

"That mewling, puking infant, King? Did he even draw his sword in this last battle"

11. 'Lost in thought, he was surprised as his horse whinnied in pain. Macbeth saw that he had dug the spurs deep into the animal's side. Easing them away, he gently patted its neck and rode on'.

What does this passage tell us about Macbeth's character? Use evidence from the text to explain your answer

It shows us his contradiction in character. He didn't realise how much he was hurting the horse and when he realise he "gently" patted the horse's neck, showing he has got a kind, caring side to him.

12. 'As Lady Macbeth read the letter...her cheeks flushed with excitement'

Why was Lady Macbeth so excited?

Because she thought she was going to become Queen and sit on a golden throne and get to wear a crown.

PART 3: PAGE 4

13. Whose idea is it to kill King Duncan?

Macbeth's

Lady Macbeth's

Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's

Banquo's

14. 'Later that evening, with Duncan seated at the feast, smiling and laughing with joy, he could stand it no longer and fled'.

Why did Macbeth leave the table?

Because he felt guilty and didn't want to kill King Duncan

15. Read the paragraph, 'She was almost afraid for a moment...'

Copy two phrases from the text that show Macbeth was angry

the blood pulse at his throat in anger

Macbeth lent in to her face, spitting his reply,

16. Do you think Macbeth or Lady Macbeth kill King Duncan? Explain your answer, using evidence from the text

The answer could be either, as long as children use evidence from the text to justify their answer