Understanding Macbeth
An exploration of the major topics and themes in the play

Summary of themes

Ambition
Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are ambitious, but Lady Macbeth is single-minded whereas Macbeth originally has scruples. These are overcome by the Witches and Lady Macbeth and he murders to achieve his ambition. It gives him no satisfaction; he cannot command loyalty, only fear, and he loses everything. We are encouraged to see that ambition should only be realized through ability or good fortune, otherwise it is doomed to eventual disaster.

Animals
Animals are part of the Elizabethan ‘natural order’ of the universe and are sometimes seen as parallels of the character and moods of the human race. The animal imagery in the play makes these connections. For example, we see how Lady Macbeth thinks of the croaking raven, Banquo the paternal martlet. Birds of prey and ill-omens abound in the animal imagery of the play: toads and snakes suit the Witches; Macbeth was a lion but eventually becomes a helpless bear.

Aspects of style
Shakespeare takes an old legend and creates a work of art. How he does this is a part of his genius which we can begin to comprehend by studying his power of characterization, imagery and, above all, his skill at interweaving characters and settings, of speeding or slowing down the pace and generally shaping a satisfactory whole. Wherever particularly interesting examples of these occur they will be mentioned in the commentary. For example, we can learn about a character by what he says and does, but a soliloquy, in which the character talks to himself and the audience overhears, is the means whereby we can understand his thoughts and motives. Untroubled characters have little need of soliloquy because they are what they seem—they have nothing to hide. A close study of all the soliloquies is essential to the clear understanding of the leading characters in the play.

Banquet
The theme of order is echoed in the imagery of the banquet. Macbeth’s good qualities are a banquet to Duncan; Macbeth sees sleep as part of nature’s banquet. But Macbeth’s royal banquet is disrupted by his own fear and guilt. At the end of the play he has ‘supped full with horrors’, and order has become chaos. Eating and food are seen as parallels to the idea of nourishment in general: sleep nourishes the weary, order and calm nourish civilized society, and so on.

Blood
From the beginning of the play, when Macbeth is described as bathing ‘in reeking wounds’, blood becomes a recurring image. Lady Macbeth asks the spirits to ‘Make thick my blood’; Macbeth’s fear is that ‘blood will have blood’. Other allusions impress upon us that this is what tyranny comes down to—bloodshed.

Chaos
An atmosphere of chaos introduces the play, with the Witches’ ‘Fair is foul, and foul is fair’, a confusing paradox. The Witches confuse Macbeth; they ‘cannot be ill, cannot be good’. Confusion reigns in nature before the murder, and Macbeth’s banquet is chaotic.
Summary of themes

Morality is turned upside down when

‘to do harm

Is often laudable, to do good sometime

Accounted dangerous folly’

(Lady Macduff)

Order only returns with Malcolm. The Elizabethans saw chaos as something which was kept at bay in the world only by the actions of men. It was seen as something actively trying to assert its influence all the time – like the powers of darkness and evil, but not the same as them.

Children

The imagery of the helplessness and innocence of children contrasts painfully with Macbeth's hatred of Banquo's children, his attempted murder of Fleance ('the worm') and his successful murder of Macduff’s children. Macbeth likens pity to ‘a naked new-born babe’, but he has no pity, and will kill the babe. Children are used in the apparitions to show both the innocence and the potential of human beings. This is why Macbeth fears children, because of what they may imply about an unknown future. This is also why Macbeth desires so strongly to know the future from the Witches.

Clothing

If you take over another actor’s part in a play, his costume probably won’t fit you and may hinder your performance. The robes of kingship hinder Macbeth; they eventually come to symbolize his unsuitability for the role he has assumed, since he has taken over a role which rightly belongs to another. The idea of ‘borrowed robes’ is constantly present, and Macbeth’s impatience to get back into his accustomed armour at the end of the play is his desperate attempt to return to his natural station. Similarly, we see many references to the uses of clothing, such as ‘cloaking’, ‘wrapt’ and so on.

The Crown

The Crown represents not only the Head of State but the head of the natural order. Since the King is the ‘Lord’s anointed’ and his successor must be descended in blood from him, the authority of the Crown involves the powers of both God and nature, so any assault on it is both blasphemous and unnatural. In Macbeth the Crown’s true heirs are virtuous, even saintly, whereas Macbeth is vicious and immoral.

Darkness

Macbeth says to the stars ‘hide your fires’. Lady Macbeth wants the night to be covered ‘by the dunest smoke of hell’. Evil is best performed at night and throughout the play images of darkness add to the atmosphere of evil and confusion. Darkness is seen as an active force in nature and in the minds of people, and often the natural world echoes the emotional or mental state of the key characters through the weather, the time of day or the actions of animals. Sometimes these devices are also used to prepare us for the coming of evil deeds.

Dreams

Macbeth is tormented by dreams and visions. Obsessed as he is, his grasp on reality is tenuous. Banquo dreams at night of the Witches, but his days are clear; Macbeth on the other hand has a waking vision of ‘a dagger of the mind’ and of ‘gory locks’. How ‘real’ are the Apparitions? Is Macbeth’s cry of ‘no more sights!’ an expression of the fear of a guilty man? Dreams are not necessarily seen as a natural part of sleep, which is why they are treated separately here. Sleep is seen as being concerned with the idea of nourishment (see ‘Banquet’ on p10) and dreams are depicted as disturbances in this process, as being unpleasant and often ominous.

Fate

Fate is seen by all the play’s characters, except Macbeth, as something unpredictable and uncontrollable, for example as a ‘rebel’s whore’ when allowing the apparent success of the faction against Duncan at the start of the play. Encouraged by the Witches, Macbeth thinks that fate is on his side, and later that he can actually control it. Macbeth asks fate to come ‘into the list’ on his side; but even the Witches cannot control fate, only prophesy it.
Fear
Those with a clear conscience do not feel fear, except when it is evoked by natural suspicions. Duncan has ‘absolute trust’ in the Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth, on the other hand, is afraid even of his own thoughts after he meets the Witches, and after Duncan’s death fear permeates the play, and reaches Ross, Lady Macduff, Malcolm and Macduff. Macbeth only loses his fear when he meets his soldier’s death. Notice that Macbeth is not afraid of physical danger.

Growth
The natural order is symbolized in images of growth. But weeds as well as useful plants can grow, and ideas can germinate too. Duncan ‘plants’ Macbeth when he honours him. The ‘seeds of time’ and the ‘seeds of Banquo’ fascinate Macbeth. Under Macbeth Scotland becomes ‘drowned with weeds’ but Malcolm will ‘plant newly’. Growth is linked with the theme and imagery of children in the play.

Haste
Haste is associated with Macbeth and the urgency of his ambition. Duncan’s ‘swiftest wing of recompense is slow to overtake thee’ must become literally true. Images of speed, like the spur and ‘vaulting ambition’, emphasize this. Macbeth causes others to rush to escape him; Macduff has to ‘fly the land’. Macbeth cannot bear waiting, uncertainty and inaction—for instance, look at how keen he is to don armour at the end of the play.

Light
Light imagery is associated with innocence and purity. To Duncan signs of nobleness are ‘like stars’, and Macbeth realizes that Duncan is ‘clear in his great office’. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth fear and avoid the light because it will show up their guilt, but Lady Macbeth, when mad with guilt, has a ‘light by her continually’. Light is associated with truth, openness and goodness.

Loyalty
The idea of loyalty in Macbeth is linked with the concepts of order, the Crown and the State, which all depend on the unswerving loyalty of the King’s subjects, which is a moral duty rather than a personal choice. Macduff and Malcolm remain loyal to the dead King and survive; Lennox and Ross switch loyalties just in time. Banquo unwisely places his personal loyalty to Macbeth above the higher loyalty, and is killed. Macbeth’s failure in the end shows that nobody can gain from disloyalty.

Noise
Everything about Macbeth is associated with noise. His first appearance is to the sound of a drum. He fears that Duncan’s virtues will be ‘trumpet-tongued’. Macbeth’s crimes, according to Macduff, make heaven resound. Howling and shrieking form the background to Macbeth’s actions. Order creates peace, disorder creates noise.

Order
Order is an important theme in the play, since it is the disruption of order which is Macbeth’s main crime. The idea of order embraces both the natural order and the order of the State; these are linked because the divinely-appointed king is at the head of the natural order of humanity where all people know their place. The moral and religious code of the time, then as now, supported the order of the State. Macbeth upsets every kind of order; political, social, domestic, family, and even ‘mental’ order and stability.

Portents
In Shakespeare’s as in Roman times portents were considered to be omens of amazing or ‘unnatural’ events, the actual events themselves being unpredictable. Portents of evil abound before and during Duncan’s murder, starting with the presence of the Witches. In Macbeth the audience often knows what mischief is afoot when some of the characters do not, so portents can be a form of dramatic irony. Note that unnatural happenings are in themselves portents of the upset of the natural order, which leads to chaos.
Prophecy

The Witches’ prophecies are an important part of the plot, but to understand their significance one needs to know that in Shakespeare’s time prophecy was considered to be an actual ‘gift’, either from God or from the Devil. Banquo regards the Witches as ‘instruments of darkness’; Macbeth’s fatal mistake was that he believed them—because he wanted to. By contrast the English King has ‘a heavenly gift of prophecy’.

Sickness

As chaos follows disturbance of the State, so sickness follows disturbance of the body or mind, and we are continually meeting these complementary images of physical and mental disorder. Macbeth’s brain is ‘heat-oppressed’; he wears his ‘health but sickly’ for fear of Banquo. Lady Macbeth says things are ‘without all remedy’ and Macduff looks forward to the ‘wholesome days’ in Scotland when tyranny is defeated. Lady Macbeth’s eventual illness is seen as a criticism of her spiritual and moral disorder.

Sleep

Sleep is natural and the ability to sleep is associated with being innocent. Macbeth’s actions go against nature itself. Horrified after Duncan’s death, he feels he has murdered sleep, nature’s own gift. Malcolm’s sleep is ‘downy’ but Macbeth is punished by sleeplessness, and Lady Macbeth relives the murder in her sleep.

The State

The Tudors had worked hard to establish in the minds of common folk the idea that loyalty was owed to the State and not to some local feudal lord. In Act One, the Thane of Cawdor’s crime was to fight against the State; Macbeth fought for it and was a hero. The Crown is the head of the State as well as of the natural order, so the murder of a king is an offence against the Crown, the State and nature.

Storm

Storms, representing chaos in nature, are an apt image for the chaos caused by Duncan’s murder. Storms are the Witches’ element. The night of Duncan’s murder is ‘unruly’. Banquo’s ‘It will rain tonight’ foreshadows the murder to come. The Apparitions are heralded by thunder and Ross says that fear causes Macbeth’s subjects to ‘float upon a wild and violent sea’.

Time

Time is stressed in the play’s imagery, because it is linked to character and attitude. The guilt-free characters see time as a friendly or neutral presence. Macbeth initially feels that time is on his side, then that he can control it; finally it seems like an enemy to him, creeping on with death. With the return of Malcolm we are told that ‘The time is free.’

Treachery

Treachery or treason are the opposite of loyalty, and signify the worst sin. The spirit of treachery pervades the play from the ‘disloyal traitor’ of the first Act, through Macbeth’s breaking of Duncan’s ‘double trust’, which Banquo calls ‘treasonous malice’. Macbeth fears Banquo because he will keep ‘allegiance clear’. In the end Macbeth suffers more from treachery than anybody else, since who can remain loyal to a traitor?

Water

Lady Macbeth sees water as all that is needed to cleanse them of murder. She is wrong, and Macbeth is right in his prophecy that even the ocean will not purify them. The healing powers of water and the pity of tears are not for the damned, and the recurrent water imagery underlines this.