Macbeth provides ample choices for essay topics. There are several psychologically complex and vivid characters, a variety of thematic concerns, and prominent marks of Shakespeare's engagement with Jacobean politics. Despite this abundance, the play is often noted for its economy: It is a very efficient piece of drama that does not waste a scene. As a result, you can find significance and meaning almost anywhere you look in Macbeth; nearly all points of the text are connected to every other point in narrative, symbolic, and thematic terms. Close reading is especially important here because so many speeches are dense with good material for essays but also because spotting patterns within the rapid and consequential action will help prevent your essay from becoming a hodgepodge of disjointed observations or from missing out on important parallels.

Lady Macbeth's soliloquy, spoken during Act 1, Scene 5 as she anticipates the arrival of Duncan, shows how character, theme, and tone can be so tightly compacted in Macbeth.

… Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th' effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry "Hold, hold!" (1.5.41–54)

The first three words of this passage make an important thematic statement, as well as forging a key connection between characters. In invoking these spirits, Lady Macbeth solidifies the already clear presence of the supernatural in this play, showing how the reach of the mysterious and occult is far from limited to the isolated heaths, and she symbolically but unmistakably connects herself with the witches. The role of the supernatural is discussed in the "Themes" section below, but consider how you might develop into an essay the second observation, that Lady Macbeth is linked to the witches through her incantation (an alternative approach to such an essay can be found in the "Compare and Contrast" section of this chapter). Having made this connection, you might begin the essay by establishing the characteristics of the witches and, more important, what they cause to happen in the play. This might be usefully followed with a similar section treating Lady Macbeth, followed by a third, longer portion discussing the overlap between Macbeth's wife and the witches. Look for similarities of function within the play. Both appear to drive Macbeth forward initially, molding his thoughts and deeds, though both eventually become superfluous to his multiplying acts of violence. However, there will be few moments that make the connection as directly as Lady Macbeth's speech quoted above, so you will need to establish the link through careful use of the play's thematic content.

For example, two such connections grow out of the second line of the quotation. In Lady Macbeth's demand that the spirits "unsex" her, there is a parallel to the witches' androgyne, but Lady Macbeth also desires to be unnatural and monstrous, a status that connects her with the cruelty of the witches and allies her with the darkest forces operating in the play—broadly, with the unnatural in opposition to what the play appears to deem natural. To oppose nature, whether the laws of the organic world or the divinely ordained (and thus natural) order of society, is to be evil in the world of Macbeth.
This power is nowhere seen more clearly than in the repeated allusions to child killing, hinted at here in Lady Macbeth's desired transformation of her breast milk into venomous gall. This is a fine example of how Shakespeare peppers the play with patterns for the reader to find and contemplate. Read carefully through the text for references to child killing or the Macbeths' childlessness, and you will find numerous appearances of this disturbing theme. However, this is just one element of a much bigger thematic movement, and you might try to identify as many strands of the unnatural in the play as you can find. Such a list will be of enormous help in writing about many aspects of the play, as it will encourage you to read the play as a web of interconnected motifs and ideas. However, when you write, avoid merely making a list that shows Shakespeare's concern with the tensions between the natural and the unnatural; instead, try to characterize that tension. For example, you might draw a connection between the murder of children in the play (actual and symbolic) with the disruption Macbeth temporarily causes in the natural order of royal descent.

See, too, how yet another theme emerges from the passage following these ghoulish demands of Lady Macbeth, striking a clearly different note. The references to her acts being hidden, from heaven and even from the knife she murders with, anticipate the enormous role to be played in Macbeth by the power of guilt. Try to make links between such seeds of emotion and fear planted in the first part of the play and their fruit grimly growing later in the text. Also note that the tone of this passage suggests that even with these nascent anxieties, Lady Macbeth is still very much in control here. You could use this confidence and surety as the starting point for an essay considering the relationship between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, exploring in particular the balance of power between the two and how that power is maintained. Obviously, moments in which this married couple is alone together will be the key. Ask yourself, moreover, at which point this relationship shifts and how the balance of power alters with it.

### Topics and Strategies

Every essay requires a focus; you cannot write about everything in the play at once. The section on how to write an essay shows you a number of ways to turn a focus into a thesis, observations into arguments. However, the starting point is nearly always finding an initial focus and making first observations. What follows is a discussion of Macbeth geared toward helping you make the most of the budding ideas you will have as you read the play. By no means should you feel limited to these topics, however.

#### Themes

Thematic approaches to Macbeth are as plentiful as they are rich. One soliloquy can open many doors as you seek a topic. This creates an even higher than usual need for self-control and the firm establishment of boundaries in your essay plan. For example, the theme of the natural versus the unnatural overlaps with many others in the play, such as gender roles or witchcraft, for example. Both gender roles and witchcraft could by themselves be the subjects of excellent essays, of course, so the problem might be in allotting these subthemes enough space to explore the main theme of the natural versus the unnatural thoroughly without your paper unintentionally becoming an essay about gender roles or witches (the witches in particular have a tendency to take over an essay). A key here is to acknowledge in your work any elements of Macbeth that you will only briefly touch on or will pass by entirely. If you are assigned or decide to write a short paper on gender in the play, you may feel that, given a limited page count and a desire for depth of analysis more than breadth, your essay should focus on the shifting gender roles of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. An acknowledgment that the witches are an important part of the play's discourse on gender but are beyond the scope of the current essay shows the reader that you are aware of the connection and have not missed something important. Instructors often mark with one eye on what the student has not written about, so it is always important to know the parameters of your essay and to make sure your reader is aware of them also. This is particularly helpful when you are writing about a dense but concise work like Macbeth.

#### Sample Topics

1. **Gender**: Gender concerns of many kinds seem ever present in Macbeth, but how exactly do these issues become integral to the tragedy?

   An essay such as this might start by establishing how gender functions at the beginning of the play and then tracing a series of subtle shifts that by the end of Macbeth have produced an entirely different gender dynamic. One subtle point to consider early on might be Macbeth's manliness before the play begins. All you have to do on here is the captain's report to Duncan in act 1, scene 2. What kind of man does the captain describe? Compare this to Lady Macbeth's anxieties about Macbeth, sometimes expressed in private or as taunts thrown directly to her husband. How is gender an important
component of Lady Macbeth's attempts to impel Macbeth to murder Duncan? Most important, perhaps, try to assess how each character compares to the commonplace ideal of man or woman. Look for moments when each character comments on the gender role of the other, such as Macbeth's remark that his wife can only bear male children because she has nothing of woman in her. Finally, from this first part of the play, you might try to describe how Lady Macbeth constructs her gender identity and what that identity is.

Consider carefully, then, how the gender roles change by the end of the play. How has Macbeth's gendering changed? What has happened to Lady Macbeth to change her role in the play? Describe the gender role that each of the pair assumes by the fifth act, but be sure to also account for these changes.

2. **The natural versus the unnatural:** What are some examples of unnatural behavior in the play? What does the text propose as a natural state of affairs? How might you describe the status of this conflict between natural ideals and unnatural powers at various moments in *Macbeth*?

Many critics have observed that Shakespeare begins his play with a world in chaos; the movement of the play's action from this starting point is the gradual and costly process of nature's return to preeminence. Although you are certainly not obliged to agree, accepting this basic shape gives good structure to an essay while still allowing you enormous intellectual and interpretive freedom. How is the world of the opening acts under the shadow of unnatural forces? How has natural order been restored at the close? You might think about the debate on many different levels: moral, social, political. Of course, the play's supernatural elements are also interwoven tightly by Shakespeare into this idea. In the play's vision, there is no distinction between a wife who controls her husband, an aristocrat who murders his king, and the baleful and bearded witches who conjure mischief. All of these acts are opposed to the natural order as many in Shakespeare's audience would have understood it, and you might draw parallels between the various elements as you write. Look for other manifestations of the unnatural as the plot unravels.

Ask yourself what solutions the play offers for each unnatural problem—these solutions are not kind or easily obtained. Think about the political order after Macbeth's death, for example, to explore one way in which natural order has been restored.

**Character**

The psychological terrain of this play is dominated by only two characters. Lady Macbeth and Macbeth offer complex reflection on future actions in the beginning of the play, and their emotional and intellectual responses to those actions once taken are profoundly harrowing. Even more advantageous to you as a writer, these complex characters also grow and change markedly during the play. This combination of psychological complexity and discernible transformation means that essays on the two main characters might benefit from the formulaic but reliable character study approach of identifying what a character is like at the beginning and then what they are like at the end, drawing to the reader's attention in detail the various factors that bring that change about.

There are, of course, other characters in the play worthy of consideration. (For a discussion of the witches in more detail, see the "History and Context" section below.) Malcom is a character who, given his important role at the end of the play, might merit an essay. However, selecting a relatively minor character for a detailed study presents challenges as well as the rewards of an original topic and a clear, tight focus. Malcom's scenes are few, but pay special attention to his curious and perhaps unsettling exchange with Macduff in act 4, scene 3. What do you make of the way Malcom tests Macduff, as well as his response to Macduff's sorrow at the loss of his family? Overall, try to assess Malcom's role as the natural curative to Macbeth's unnatural blight of Scotland. Look for troubling moments or words that might conceivably complicate the sense of hope accompanying Malcom's ascendancy.

**Sample Topics**

1. **Macbeth:** How does Macbeth's character change during the play? How does he respond to his crimes?

An essay such as this might explore Macbeth's reluctance to assassinate Duncan at the beginning of the play, as well as identifying what tactics Lady Macbeth employs to coax him toward the murder. It may appear an obvious difference, but Shakespeare seems to emphasize the relationship between Macbeth's bloody and uncompromising performance on the
battlefield and his reticence to kill his king. Exploring these differences a little may give you a better sense of Macbeth as well as his society. Look closely at his immediate response to the murder, and guide your reader through the shifting psychological decline that thus sets in. Consider the role of guilt but also the much more complicated feelings of hopelessness and fear that follow. Finally, how does this dangerous mix of emotions and thoughts further deform Macbeth into a serial killer? Consider the fatal tension in Macbeth's psyche between internal and external voices throughout the play; to what extent are his greed and then arrogance the products of his own innate character or the council and prophecies of others?

2. **Lady Macbeth:** If Lady Macbeth initially appears to be the stronger or more ambitious of the couple, how do you account for her decline into a state of debilitating emotional weakness by the end of the play?

   In many ways, this essay might share the same basic shape as an essay on Macbeth: an exploration of the character in the buildup to the key dramatic moment of Duncan's murder, and then a careful consideration of the spiraling psychological degeneration that follows. Assess what motivates Lady Macbeth in the early acts and what measures she takes to prepare herself for the event. Look carefully at her decisive and domineering behavior in the immediate wake of the murder, comparing this to her descent into a deep-rooted and destructive guilt in the following acts. It is notable that the immensely strong figure introduced at the start of the play is reduced to such a weak figure who simply vanishes offstage in a reported suicide. How do you account for this? What changes have occurred in Macbeth's character that essentially sideline Lady Macbeth? Think, too, about the role her death may have in the play's restoration of natural order.

3. **Macduff:** How do you understand the play's nominal hero? How does he fit into the complex thematic puzzle of the play?

   Such an essay might pay close attention to two key areas; first, think about the problem that gathers around Macduff's character when his family is murdered. He has essentially left them undefended and alone, vulnerable to an attack that he could have anticipated and perhaps prevented. Certainly, before she is killed, Lady Macduff expresses harsh words about her "traitor" husband. Compare this attack on Macduff's domestic honor to Ross's defense of Macduff's political honor and his flight to England. How do you think Shakespeare wants his audience to interpret this action? Second, reflect on the important connection between Macduff and Macbeth: the play appears to offer Macduff as the "anti-Macbeth," but how does he fulfill this role not just in narrative terms but symbolically too? Think, for example, about how Macduff might fit into the play's debates about the relationship between men and women as well as the natural and the unnatural. The death of his family and the infamous circumstances of his birth might be good places to begin making these thematic interpretations.

**History and Context**

The only version of *Macbeth* that has survived appears to have been written for a court performance in front of James I. Moreover, Shakespeare certainly did his homework in preparing a play that would appeal to (and flatter) the new king; the text is filled with references and themes that would have drawn the royal audience into the entertainment before them. As a result, in writing on *Macbeth* you can follow Shakespeare's lead, doing your own homework to uncover these plentiful and telling historical traces. Historically focused essays on *Macbeth* can take a number of directions, but keep in mind Shakespeare's intended audience as you research and write.

James was a controversial figure in a number of ways. When he came to the throne, many in England were relieved to see the uncertainties of the late Elizabethan era safely buried with the queen. Where Elizabeth was unmarried and childless, James, already king of Scotland, brought with him a wife and children. The honeymoon between king and country, however, if it existed at all, did not last long. The problems and concerns of James's reign palpably shape English drama of the early 17th century and are unmistakably discernible in *Macbeth*. Tensions between the Scottish king, along with his Scottish favorites who traveled south with him, and the existing English court are perhaps wished away in the alliance of England and Scotland forged at the end of *Macbeth*. Moreover, James saw himself as a scholar, writing tracts on subjects as varied as royal power and witchcraft; it is no coincidence that these kingly interests become important thematic concerns of the play. A good text to begin with when researching the connections between James's court and Shakespeare's work is Alvin Kernan's *Shakespeare, the King's Playwright: Theater in the Stuart Court, 1603–1613*.

**Sample Topics**

1. **Witchcraft:** What function does Shakespeare give the witches in *Macbeth*? How do they become pivotal elements of the tragedy rather than merely atmospheric and peripheral figures?
Such an essay might begin by describing Shakespeare’s use of witchcraft mythology, then proceeding to argue how this representation of the witches complements other thematic concerns in the play. There are two key sources for the student of witchcraft in Shakespeare’s world: the enormously influential medieval text *Malleus maleficarum* (“The Hammer of Witches”) and the early 17th-century writings of Reginald Scot. Both of these, along with a useful modern introduction to the history of witchcraft, can be conveniently found in *Witchcraft in Europe: 1100–1700*, edited by Alan Kors and Edward Peters. Scot’s writings embody the skeptical and enlightened view of witchcraft dawning in Shakespeare’s lifetime, but it is the stereotypical witch of the *Malleus* that Shakespeare explicitly and somewhat sensationally uses. Using your research and understanding of the play as drama, consider the various reasons why Shakespeare—an otherwise enlightened man who elsewhere treats his marginalized figures with at least some trace of sympathy—might employ stereotypes so blatantly in crafting his witches. You might identify a symbolic meaning for the sisters, discussing how they are more than a cheap, theatrical thrill. For example, you will not have to get too far into the text of the *Malleus* to recognize that it harbors a deep mistrust of women, theorizing in detail why women are weak and vulnerable to the temptations of the devil. Think about how this merging of demonology and anxiety over female power is also important in *Macbeth*. More generally, describe how these medieval witches contribute to Shakespeare’s broader vision of evil in *Macbeth*.

2. **The divine right of sovereigns:** What does *Macbeth* say about the politics of monarchy, a subject close to James’s heart in both theoretical and practical terms?

The thesis for this essay might be relatively straightforward, but the difficulty will lie in compiling and structuring your evidence. A popular reading of the play asserts that *Macbeth* endorses James’s writings on the divine authority of monarchs, identifying Macbeth’s murder of Duncan and challenge to the natural political order with other manifestations of frightening disorder in the play. As critics often point out, Shakespeare alters the historic record, erasing from his play Macbeth’s successful 10-year reign before his real-life tragedy unfolded. Why did Shakespeare make this change? What point does it help him make about royal power and challenges to it? Think, too, about the allusions to Banquo’s bloodline leading down the centuries to James I. While this has obvious sycophantic charm for the play’s intended audience, consider how it fits into the more serious discussion of kingship and destiny.

**Form and Genre**

Although Shakespeare took his source material for *Macbeth* from *Holinshed’s Chronicles*, a history of England, Scotland, and Ireland by Raphael Holinshed, the same place he finds the material for his English history plays, the text is not considered a history play. There is no mistaking this play as anything but a tragedy of the darkest kind. Indeed, Macbeth’s terrifying description of life as “a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing,” is perhaps the most concise and powerful articulation of the tragic world in Shakespeare’s works, or anywhere else in literature for that matter. The raw, brutal power of this line might lead you to consider the structural, generic makeup of the play that engenders such sentiments. As you read *Macbeth*, look for other phrases and speeches describing the spiritual or moral value of the world in which its characters live. The chief spokesperson for this tragic vision is, of course, Macbeth, so pay close attention to his ever-decreasing estimation of the world after Duncan’s death. Identify what forces are at work against the characters of the play, attempting to see both external and internal factors at play in the tragedies of each individual.

**Sample Topic**

1. **Tragedy:** How would you describe Shakespeare’s tragic vision in *Macbeth*? How does the play consider the function of fate in Macbeth’s life, and how does this debate form a core part of the tragedy?

This is a difficult paper to write because it potentially involves organizing a lot of dense and complex lines of discussion behind a single, clearly stated thesis. Such an essay might begin by asking what forces drive Macbeth toward his tragedy. One of the key functions of the witches, for example, is to raise the question of how much control Macbeth holds over his fate. Read the opening scenes of the play closely, trying to assess the extent to which Macbeth’s actions are governed by his own volition. Look carefully at the relationship between the predictions the witches make to Macbeth and his preexisting desires and ambition. At this point, you might also include a discussion of Lady Macbeth’s seductive promptings, her influence over him. This analysis might lead you to ask if the outcome of Macbeth’s life as the play presents it could have been different. Consider whether the overlap of supernatural and psychological elements creates an insurmountable enemy set against him. You might also return to the idea of the natural versus the unnatural so prominent in the play, asking whether...
the mere existence of a natural order relieves the overwhelming sense of darkness in the play and challenges Macbeth's fatalistic assertion that life "signif[ies] nothing." In other words, are there sources of hope and inspiration in the play, a sense that there actually is something behind the play's looming nothing? Think about the repetition of the word done, and the notion that Macbeth can never find peace of mind once his plot is begun. Nothing is ever done in this play, so consider what factors conspire to prevent Macbeth from resolving the events of his own life. Macbeth's uncontrollable and insidious plotting, the absence of a truly done deed, should act as a caution if you are looking for fixed meanings in this play.

However, by reaching for an understanding of why Macbeth commits murder, how he and his wife cope with the moral and emotional implications of their crimes, and how the world of the play craftily ensures his tragic fate, you will be well placed to suggest what Shakespeare is using tragedy in Macbeth to say about human behavior and human evil.

**Compare and Contrast Essays**

Puzzling through the many dualisms and parallels in Macbeth is a major part of the play's critical heritage. There are so many mirrorings within the play's narrative and symbolic structure, so many characters and actions with distorted equivalents elsewhere in Macbeth. These pairings can be unexpected or can have unexpected consequences. David Scott Kasten, for example, has written provocatively on how Macduff's killing of Macbeth mirrors Macbeth's murder of Duncan. This final murder, Kasten argues, might have been as troubling as Duncan's assassination for proponents of absolute royal power (including James, who argued that even a tyrant king should not be killed).

Another pairing for an essay might be Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff. Although the latter appears only briefly, a good deal is revealed about her views on the value of domestic versus political life. She seems to be the counterweight to the fiendish Lady Macbeth, a portrait of an idealized model of femininity that contrasts with the aberrant wife of Macbeth. Such an essay would gather evidence for this contrast but explore also the more complex problem of why the play kills both the natural and unnatural examples of womanhood in the play. The play also clearly establishes a relationship between Macbeth and Banquo. Assess what Banquo and Macbeth have in common before the former is killed, focusing perhaps on each man's reaction to the witches' prophecies. Then the essay might explore how the relationship changes after Banquo's death, as Banquo lingers on as a psychological or ghostly presence in Macbeth's conscience and banquet hall.

Macbeth is a play structured by change and progression toward a tragic resolution. While this is true of many plays, of course, transformation really is the key trait of this play's dramatic form. Therefore, many thematic and character essays on Macbeth can also be presented as compare and contrast essays: Macbeth at the start versus the end of the play, Lady Macbeth at the start versus the end of the play, the status of the natural order at the beginning of the play versus the end, and so forth.

**Sample Topics**

1. **Comparing Lady Macbeth with the witches:** What is the relationship between these female figures? How do they fulfill similar roles in the play?

   This approach, simply put, might argue that Lady Macbeth can reasonably be termed the fourth witch of the play. While her territory may be distinct from the heathbound witches, she is nonetheless tied surely to the trio. Note, however, that because this is such a commonplace of Macbeth criticism, reading against this idea may make for a distinctive essay. Such a paper might need to take as its starting point the observation of broad similarity but then proceed to argue for distinctions between Lady Macbeth and the witches. This could take the subtle form of finding differences of motivation and approach. How is the way Lady Macbeth works on Macbeth, the strategies she uses to beguile him into murder, different from those of the witches? A good hook here might be the identification of two types of seductive magic in the play, one supernatural and one earthly but unnatural.

2. **Contrasting the play to Roman Polanski's film adaptation Macbeth (1971):** What strategies does Polanski use in his adaptation of Shakespeare's text?

   Roman Polanski's version of Macbeth is probably the most commonly viewed film of the play in schools and colleges. As in any essay treating an adaptation of Shakespeare's text, look for visible and interesting directorial choices, intriguing casting decisions, and prominent omissions from and additions to the text of drama. The important move is to characterize the sum of these changes in a thesis before exploring them in detail throughout the body of the essay. Your thesis might follow a simple formula: "Roman Polanski's adaptation produces a Macbeth that argues..." In other words, try to imagine
that the director has a thesis about the play just as you do as a reader. In Polanski’s film, think about his casting of young and attractive actors in the roles of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. What aspect of their relationship is made more prominent by emphasizing the beauty of Lady Macbeth in particular? You might also consider the look of the film, gloomy and violent. Think, too, about the representation of the witches, as well as the possible gender implications of a coven of witches in one scene rather than a mere three weird sisters. Finally, reflect on the ominous (and historically accurate) ending of the film.

Further Information


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