

# MACBETH (1948)

Orson Welles

## OVERVIEW

**Auteur** Orson Welles is one of the most important and influential filmmakers in American film history. After making a name for himself in theatre and radio, Welles signed with RKO Pictures to write and direct two motion pictures, a deal that was unprecedented at the time in terms of the creative control Welles enjoyed. His directorial debut, *Citizen Kane*, would go on to become arguably the greatest film ever made thanks to its innovative techniques and unconventional narrative style. He quickly became a household name releasing a total of twelve movies that include critically-acclaimed films like *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), *Touch of Evil* (1958), and *Chimes at Midnight* (1965). He won the Academy Award, with Herman J. Mankiewicz, for Best Original Screenplay for *Citizen Kane*, and *Othello* (1951) won the prestigious Palme d'Or at the 1952 Cannes Film Festival. Orson Welles died in 1985.

**Film** Orson Welles' first Shakespearean adaptation, *Macbeth* was filmed in twenty-three days on a very limited budget. The movie received lukewarm response when it was first released because of the liberties Welles took in interpreting and adapting the source text; however, in time, *Macbeth* was lauded for its unique portrayal of its titular character's psychological downfall. Aside from cutting, editing and moving dialogues around, Welles also introduced several major departures from the play, the Holy Man character being the most important one. "The main point of that production is the struggle between the old and new religions," explained Welles. "I saw the witches as representatives of a Druidical pagan religion suppressed by Christianity – itself a new arrival." Critic Katherine Ormsby highlighted the film's use of artificial sets and B-picture aesthetics in creating a horror movie atmosphere out of Shakespeare.

**Background** The movie wasn't Orson Welles' first attempt at bringing this supernatural tragedy to life. In 1936, he staged the so-called *Voodoo Macbeth* in New York City with an all-black cast, one of the most progressive events at the time to support Black theatre. The play employed "classical Shakespearean verse spoken against a background of traditional African dance and drums," according to one report. The voodoo doll, one of Welles' additions to the original material, owes its appearance in the movie to this early stage adaptation. Even though Welles expressed his doubts about being able to adapt this play for the screen due to its complexity (it would have to be "a perfect cross between *Wuthering Heights* and *Bride of Frankenstein*," according to him), he accomplished to capture all the dark and contemplative nuances of the protagonist as well as the play's decidedly supernatural texture.

## MAIN CHARACTERS

<b>Macbeth</b>	The protagonist of the movie, Macbeth is foretold to be the king by the witches.
<b>Lady Macbeth</b>	Macbeth's wife ensures that her husband fulfils his destiny.
<b>Duncan</b>	The King of Scotland is murdered by Macbeth.
<b>Banquo</b>	According to another prophecy by the witches, Banquo's sons will become kings.
<b>Macduff</b>	After witnessing the king's murder, he starts scheming to depose Macbeth.
<b>Malcolm</b>	Duncan's elder son, he joins forces with Macduff to get back his rightful throne.
<b>The Witches</b>	They appear as faceless women to deliver prophecies throughout the story.

## SYNOPSIS

On their way back to Scotland after the war, Banquo and Macbeth meet three witches who prophesize that Macbeth will become the Thane of Cawdor and then the king, and Banquo will father a line of kings. A group of horseman arrives to welcome Macbeth as the new Thane of Cawdor. Now that one prophecy has come true, Macbeth believes that he will indeed become the king. After King Duncan executes the old Thane of Cawdor for treachery, Macbeth with the help and encouragement of his wife, Lady Macbeth, murders the king and pins the blame on the guards. Suspicious of Macbeth's story, Macduff and Malcolm ride off on their horses.

After his coronation, Macbeth hires two assassins to kill Banquo and his sons so that he will be safe from the other prophecy regarding Banquo's sons. The assassins murder Banquo, but his son escapes. During a feast, Macbeth becomes unhinged and sees Banquo's ghost at the dinner table. The witches arrive to deliver another set of prophecies: Macbeth needs to beware of Macduff; nobody born of a woman will be able to harm Macbeth; and he will be safe until the Great Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill. Macbeth, in line with the new prophecy, kills Macduff's son and his wife to ensure his safety. Lady Macbeth becomes bedridden and experiences bouts of sleepwalking. In the meantime, Macduff and Malcolm gather an army of 10,000 soldiers. Macduff learns about his family's demise and moves to attack Macbeth. When the army arrives at Great Birnam Wood, Macduff orders his men to cut down trees and hold their branches for camouflage. Lady Macbeth, unable to come to terms with her guilt, commits suicide.

After learning about his wife's death, Macbeth is told that the Great Birnam Wood is moving toward the castle. He thinks his death will also come soon. The English army charges through the castle gates and destroys Macbeth's defences. Macduff and Macbeth fight a duel, during which Macduff reveals that he wasn't born of a woman because they ripped him out of his mother's womb. Macbeth still refuses to bend the knee. Macduff wins the duel and beheads Macbeth. Malcolm is crowned king.

## PLOT

*Prophecy* Three witches create a voodoo doll out of mud that looks like Macbeth. Macbeth and Banquo run into these witches who deliver prophecies about both men: Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor and then King; Banquo will father a line of kings without becoming a king himself. A group of king's men duly arrives to announce that Macbeth has become the Thane of Cawdor.



*Macbeth's ambition* Macbeth writes a letter to his wife, Lady Macbeth, depicting the encounter with the witches and their prophecies while admitting, to himself, that he is harbouring dark thoughts about killing the king. Lady Macbeth, after reading the letter, is resolved to act quickly and cruelly to ensure that the prophecy is fulfilled.



*Lady Macbeth's ambition* Duncan the King executes the old Thane of Cawdor for his treachery and hails Macbeth as the new Thane. After being honoured by the king, Macbeth is reluctant to go along with the plan, but Lady Macbeth eventually convinces him. She drags the guards so that Macbeth sneaks into the king's bedroom and kills him with a dagger. Before the murder, Macbeth sees an apparition of a bloody dagger.



*Macbeth becomes the new king* The Thane of Fife, Macduff discovers the king's body and wakes up the castle. During the kerfuffle, Macbeth climbs up to the room and kills the guards to later pin the murder on them. Suspicious of Macbeth's motives and fearing for their lives, Macduff and Malcolm, the late king's son, leave the castle. When Banquo agrees to keep quiet and support Macbeth, nobody is left to challenge Macbeth. He is crowned King, fulfilling the second prophecy.



*Assassination of Banquo* While Banquo is planning to leave the castle with his son, Macbeth admits that he is afraid of Banquo. He hires two assassins to ride after Banquo and to kill him as well as his son. The murderers ambush Banquo and stab him to death, but his son escapes. Macbeth is relieved that Banquo is now dead, but he becomes delirious during the feast when he sees Banquo's ghost at the banquet table.



*More Prophecies* Unhinged and maniacal, Macbeth is visited by the three witches who deliver new prophecies about his future. Macbeth should beware of Macduff, who now presents the biggest danger. The witches comfort Macbeth that no man born out of a woman will be able to harm him and he will be safe until the Great Birnam Wood arrives at Dunsinane Hill, where Macbeth resides.



*More murders* Macduff is being branded as traitor. Macbeth and his king's guard visit Lady Macduff and his son in their private chamber to question them about the whereabouts of Macduff. Lady Macduff tells them that her husband is dead. Macbeth orders his soldiers to kill her and her son on the spot. Lady Macbeth admits that they have achieved their dreams, but there is no content or joy left.



*Rebellion* With the help of the English, Malcolm has managed to gather an army of 10,000. When Macduff hears about the murders of his wife and children, he swears revenge on Macbeth. The army marches towards Dunsinane Hill. When they arrive at the Great Birnam Wood, Macduff orders his soldiers to use branches as camouflage. Macbeth dismisses the army and the danger it poses. Unable to bear the guilt, Lady Macbeth commits suicide.



*Prophecy Fulfilled and Macbeth dies* Macbeth is told that Birnam Wood is moving towards the castle. He orders his soldiers to prepare for the war but finally accepts that his end is near. The army crushes through the gates and overwhelms Macbeth's forces. In a single combat, Macduff and Macbeth duel. Macduff reveals that he was not born, but untimely ripped out from his mother's womb. The witches materialize and echo Macduff's words. When Macbeth still refuses to yield, Macduff cuts off his head.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Macbeth** Macbeth is not only the titular protagonist (=antagonist) of the play, but also the quintessential tragic figure of the Shakespearean world. He's ambitious to a fault, insecure about his own faculties and overly aggressive in pursuing his desires, all of which ultimately bring about his tragic end. Whereas Othello and Falstaff are shaped by the world around them, Macbeth's undoing is a product of his own, something he's also ironically aware of. A self-fulfilling prophecy has never been more terrifying than in Macbeth's bloody hands.

**Ambitious** When the first prophecy comes true within a minute of learning about it, Macbeth seals his own fate. Validation begets confidence. Confidence leads to ambition. And ambition forces Macbeth to focus on the promised future at the expense of his present. "If good, why do I yield to that suggestion whose horrid image doth unfix my hair, and make my seated heart knock at my ribs against the use of nature?" he asks because even he is terrified of what he is capable of. Macbeth knows murder isn't the answer because violence begets more violence. He even resists his wife's coercion and manipulation but proceeds to kill Duncan anyway because the crown is too strong an image to withstand. Macbeth was always a resourceful man. It's the promised future and the allure thereof that transformed it into toxic ambition.

**Insecure** Whatever he does to secure his future only works to diminish it—that's the heavy irony that fuels Macbeth's tragedy. His insecurity stems from the fact that his fate now relies on the witches and their prophecy, which renders him a child-like figure. The resulting vulnerability feeds his aggression. He tells Lady Macbeth that he's afraid of Banquo more than anyone not because Banquo is dangerous, but because the prophecy about Banquo is a threat to his well-being and power. Similarly, the order to kill Lady Macduff and her son points to his insecurity, which seems to have been amplified by the new prophecies. The locus of his sense of safety and security is outside him. It's something he cannot control. The more he acts on his vulnerability, the less safe he becomes until the vicious circle leads to his death.

**Contemplative** Despite his many fouls and faults, Macbeth emerges as a philosopher-king capable of deep contemplation of his self and his place in the world. His soul is wounded by the atrocious murder he has committed. And yet, it's also this split self that offers deep contemplation in the face of evil. Immediately after killing the king, Macbeth confesses that his life as he knew it has now ended "for, from this instant, there's nothing serious in mortality: All is but toys: renown and grace is dead; the

wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees is left this vault to brag of." His tragedy is that he cannot stop because he's imprisoned in the promised future, having sacrificed his honourable past and present. In one of the most memorable passages in all Shakespeare, Macbeth puts forth the meaningless of his life: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

**Lady Macbeth** Macbeth's wife is also his biggest enabler. It is Lady Macbeth who emasculates her husband into killing the king. It is Lady Macbeth who manipulates him into executing the plan even though Macbeth wants to back out. It is Lady Macbeth's cruelty and malice that ultimately sets off the events that lead to their deaths. She is Iago to Macbeth's Othello.

**Manipulative** She wants to be the wife of a king more than Macbeth wants to be king, but she considers her sex as an obstacle. In turn, she uses it to her advantage to deceive and manipulate Macbeth. When he wants to back out, she accuses him of being a beast, less than a man, who has dismissed the chance of being "more than a man." She devises the murder plan on behalf of him and tells him what he should do: "When Duncan is asleep, whereto the rather shall his day's hard journey soundly invite him, I'll drug his servants' wine." He then *surely* could kill an old and unguarded Duncan, couldn't he? After the deed is done, "What not put upon his spongy officers, who shall bear the guilt of our great quell," which is exactly what Macbeth does. She has even engineered the aftermath: "As we shall make our griefs and clamour roar upon his death." She won't even let Macbeth suffer from remorse as that could give them away. She tries to placate him by saying: "What is done is done. Sleep—to bed, to bed."

**Cruel** Lady Macbeth's evil is not so much natural as chaotic. She has no respect for rule of law when it comes to her desires. Her bone-chilling cruelty is not a side effect of her ambition, but an unavoidable ingredient. If need be, she could even kill her baby: "I would, while it was smiling in my face, have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums, and dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you have done to this." Her malice is her own device as she begs the spirits to help her become more cruel: "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!" She wants to feel less like a woman and more like a man who could do the deeds her heart desires. She is determined to become impervious against the impact of her own savagery: "That no compunctious visitings of nature Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between the effect and it!"

**Remorseful** This being a Shakespearean tragedy, Lady Macbeth cannot escape her own sorrowful end. She is intricately connected to Macbeth's destiny in that him falling into despair triggers more murders, which in turn pushed Lady Macbeth into depression. After the slaying of Lady Macduff and her little son, she realizes that they are too deep "in blood." They have gone too far. Witnessing her husband's descent into insanity, she tells him: "Naught's had, all's spent, where our desire is got without content. 'Tis safer to be that which we destroy. Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy." They are worse than corpses. During her sleepwalking, she keeps rubbing her hands to wash the blood off her skin to no avail. The murder has marked Lady Macbeth, and she knows: "What, will these hands ne'er be clean?" The gentlewoman's judgement of her summarizes the rupture in Lady Macbeth's soul: "I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body." Her suicide completes her ironic circle with its recall of her early statement: "What's done cannot be undone.—To bed, to bed, to bed!"

**Banquo** As Macbeth's prophesies come true, Banquo believes his promised future will also come to pass. He doesn't oust Macbeth though he knows he's killed the king. He agrees to be his accomplice by staying pragmatic, but he's also careful as he knows Macbeth will soon move against him. His opportunism is somewhere in between cunning and cruelty. The fact that he is a passive player who is murdered unceremoniously renders him more tragic than cruel.

**Pragmatist** While Macduff and Malcolm leave the castle for fear of retribution, Banquo stays with Macbeth because him becoming the king is a good omen for himself. "Why, by the verities on thee made good, May they not be my oracles as well, And set me up in hope," he tells Macbeth as they shake hands, metaphorically, over the king's death. "If you stick with me, when the time comes, there will be something in it for you," Macbeth tells Banquo in order to buy his silence. The latter nods in acquiescence. "I'll do whatever you say." It is in Banquo's interest to be on the good side of Macbeth, having just seen what he's capable of. It's also safer to be in cahoots with the evil man until he may

find a better solution. His pragmatism is an interesting addition to the adaptation because Welles chooses to cut this line "...as long as I can do it with a clear conscience..." from the source to emphasize Banquo's opportunism.

**Cunning** Banquo's strategy is different than Macduff and Malcolm in that he isn't publicly or privately hostile against Macbeth. He knows Macbeth now holds the country and thus all the power. During Macbeth's coronation, Banquo is labelled as "chief guest" as part of Macbeth's ploy to lure him into a false sense of security. But Banquo is smart. He has already made up his mind to leave because he knows what is coming. "Let your highness Command upon me," he tells Macbeth with a bow, but one can read his trepidation. His uneasiness isn't uncalled for because Macbeth has learned that Banquo is about to ride off. Macbeth asks him where he is going and if he is going to make it to the feast, where he is the chief guest. "Unless my horse goes faster than expected, I will be back an hour or two after sunset," he tells Macbeth, though both men know that he is not returning.

**Macduff** The Thane of Fife is a royalist. He knows, like everyone else, that Macbeth has murdered the king and is now going to get rid of all the loyalists including himself and the king's son, Malcolm. He acts immediately and decisively, leaving his wife and his son behind. He has a strong strategic mind in preparing his army for the assault, and eventually prevails by getting revenge on Macbeth. He represents valour, honour, and conscience in the story.

**Revengeful** Macduff is resolved to kill Macbeth because he wants to establish the true heir as the king, but his individual **quest** is built upon his revenge. It's not a chaotic or uncontrolled grief, but a sharp and debilitating one that provides him with motivation and strength. "But I must also feel it as a man," he tells Malcolm, who urges him to weaponize his grief. Macduff will do that, for sure, but not before he incorporates the sorrowful memory of his family into his revenge. It becomes potent through love and remembrance. There is intention, resolve and power behind his quest for revenge. As he prepares to duel with Macbeth, he lets the tyrant know what fuels him: "My wife and children's ghosts will haunt me still ... I have no words. My voice is in my sword." His family is his revenge.

**Strategic** Once the army reaches Great Birnam Wood, Macduff orders his soldiers to bring down trees and wear the branches to conceal the presence of their army. "Macbeth's spies will give him inaccurate reports," he says to explain his strategic decision. The military camouflage, albeit a smart move, doesn't pan out the way Macduff envisioned within the irony of Macbeth's story. The scouts do indeed spot the English army and report the correct number; however, Macduff's soldiers carrying tree branches appear as if the Great Birnam Wood is moving towards Dunsinane Hill. Macduff's strategy, then, becomes another sign for Macbeth that the prophecy about his future is about to come to pass in the shape of his death.

## THEMES

**1. Power** *Macbeth* offers a two-pronged discussion over the question of power. On one side, people are subjected to law and order as regulated by monarchy, military and religion, which together determines the course of their lives. All these modes of power are manifestations of the God's own grace on earth. Shakespeare, however, creates a dichotomy by pitting the natural order against the destructive power of the supernatural by creating the faceless witches. They are, by and large, a derivative of the Satan figure who spreads fear and evil by diverting people from the good. "Fiend" is what Macduff calls Macbeth, evoking the image of the devil. In the final battle between the representations of the good (Macduff) and the evil (Macbeth), the witches also make a final appearance to remind the audience of their relentless power. The good may have prevailed over the evil, for now, but the source of the evil is still among us, powerful and alluring.

**2. Supernatural/Prophecies** The supernaturalness of the witches is established very early on in the story. "What are these that look not like the inhabitants o' the earth, and yet are on't?" asks Banquo, referring to their abnormal existence. Welles chooses not to give them a face to heighten the sense of foreboding. These women are not innocent palm-readers who have the gift of clairvoyance. Emerging out of the fog and speaking in hush tones, they are indeed an extension of some ill and evil that exists out of time and space. They can appear at anywhere and at any time without being bound to physical laws. One can also assume that apparitions and ghosts Macbeth sees are of their making. Their supernatural power is reflected on the unnatural state of the world. When Lady Macduff points to the dark sky even though it's morning, the Holy Man answers her, "'Tis unnatural, Even like the deed

that's done." Murder merges the supernatural with the unnatural.

3. **Gender** Lady Macbeth and Malcolm manipulate Macbeth and Macduff, respectively, by appealing to their manhood to shame them into doing the thing they want them to do. When Macbeth has second thoughts about the plan to murder the king, Lady Macbeth insinuates that Macbeth has lost his manliness. "If you weren't a man, then what kind of animal were you when you first told me you wanted to do this? When you dared to do it, that's when you were a man." She further provokes him by saying that she, as a woman who has "given suck and know How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me," would have murdered the baby before dismissing the chance of becoming "something more than a man". Malcolm, too, asks Macduff to "Dispute it like a man" rather than wallow in sadness after learning about the death of his family. And gender also works on Macduff. "Oh, I could play the woman with mine eyes and braggart with my tongue! But, gentle heavens, cut short all intermission," says Macduff, finally deciding to "act like a man" as he prepares for the attack. Malcolm gladly accepts it: "This tune goes manly." Gender stereotypes play a role in Lady Macbeth's fall from grace as well. Her "Unsex me" prayer plays on the assumed characteristics of men and women, in which women must shed their femininity and become more like men to act heinously. The punishment of this "unnatural" conversion is death by suicide.

4. **Remorse** Macbeth is a tragic character, but not a remorseful figure by the end of the story. He accepts that he is going to die and fights till the bitter end, but he does not accept to bend the knee for Malcolm. The apparitions, his wife's suicide and his disgraceful reign make him contemplative and a thinker, but do not transform him into a man with regret. There is no chance for redemption. It is Lady Macbeth who has to carry the burden of their crimes and sins. After the murders of Lady Macduff and her children, she admits they have gone beyond the point of no return. "'Tis safer to be that which we destroy than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy," she tells Macbeth. Her immediate illness, sleepwalking, and her eventual suicide are how repentance looks in the play. At least, remorsefulness allows Lady Macbeth the chance to take her own life compared to Macbeth, whose head is cut off by the most honourable character in the story.

5. **Revenge** It is not only Macduff who embarks on a journey of revenge. The king's son Malcolm and the Holy Man also seek to bring justice back to the world. Macduff's story is that of the hero who must leave home to slay the dragon (fiend). Revenge is a motivation for him. For Malcolm and the Holy Man, revenge is dressed up as duty rather than personal quest. As the true heir, Malcolm is mandated to establish the old and reliable power structures within monarchical succession. That's his fight of revenge—for the law of the land. The Holy Man's motive is more divine than earthly in that he has to fight against the demonic power of the unnatural to establish the old and reliable power structures within God's world. That's his fight for revenge—for the law of the Lord. His revenge is steeped in God's fury.

6. **Ambition** Characters in *Macbeth* are rarely passive agents during the course of the story. All of them act on their ambitions either to do good or evil. Macbeth, consumed by his desire for power, murders anyone who stands in this way. Lady Macbeth manipulates her husband into acting on his desire so that she can share the power with him. Banquo, perhaps the most passive amongst them, is still ambitious about the fortunes he was foretold regarding his future and that of his sons. It is no coincidence that all these characters meet their death by the end of the story, which enables us to compare them with the equally ambitious characters of Macduff and Malcolm. These two characters, as the carriers of justice, lean on their ambition in order to bring back the status quo of law and order. Their ambition is in the service not of their own kingdom, but of the kingdom on earth and in heaven.

7. **Crime** In *Macbeth*, crime pays, but only to an extent and for a more ethical project. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth claim power through their criminal enterprise, but the pleasure of success happens to be very short-lived. In fact, there is no joy to be found in the fulfilment of their desires through murder and deceit. Both these characters suffer from their crimes. Sleepless Macbeth is tormented by the ghosts of his victims as he slowly loses his touch with reality, while Lady Macbeth's only way for a total cleansing of her soul is to embrace death. Crime, in its manifestation as disruption of earthly and heavenly authority, inflicts both bodily and spiritual damage to the perpetrators. Individual becomes corrupted with no chance of a redemption except by death.

#### CINEMATIC NARRATION

In his 1950 *New York Times* review, Bosley Crowther describes his displeasure of the movie with



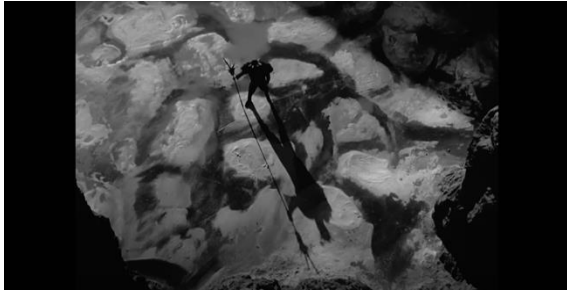
these words: "...this final rendering may not possess the searching insight and the dramatic clarity ... but it has a great deal in its favor in the way of *feudal spectacle and nightmare mood*." (emphasis added). The feudal spectacle served in a nightmarish atmosphere was exactly what Welles aimed to create with *Macbeth*. Instead of attempting to mitigate the artificialness of soundstages, the film chose to call attention to its very superficiality in a bid to mirror the supernatural elements, thus generating a gothic-horror feel Fritz Lang would be proud of. Distorted camera angles, high contrast photography and deep-focus framing are present in true Wellesian fashion, but this time to alienate, and not to soothe the viewer. "The film's frequent use of fog and oversized sets ... divorce the film from reality," writes Ormsby. "Though *Macbeth* has many flaws it suggests the power of *mise-en-scène* to reveal the psychological underpinnings of the play."



Images 1-2-3-4: Deep-focus photography



Images 5-6-7-8: Shadow, light play, and high contrast lighting



*Images 9-10: Use of perspective in service of the film's gothic-horror underpinnings*