

Structure

- The play is in five acts. This would fit with Freytag's tragic dramatic structure. He was a nineteenth-century writer who identified different stages in a play:
- **Act 1: Exposition** - The setting, events, and characters are introduced. We meet Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Banquo, King Duncan and the witches. We are told that Macbeth is a brave warrior, we are shown that he trusts his wife and tells her everything. We are shown that he has a close friendship with Banquo, and that he is loyal to his king.
- **Inciting Incidence:** We also meet the witches and hear them make predictions which will alter the future of all of our characters.
- **Act 2: Rising action** - Events that lead up to the main part of the play, which links together and cause more and more dramatic tension. We are shown how Macbeth seems to be unable to make firm decisions and how controlling and manipulative Lady Macbeth is. We are shown that Macbeth is also manipulated by the witches and their promise of his future power. King Duncan is murdered – this changes Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and also starts a chain of events which lead up to Macbeth's own death.
- **Act 3: Climax** - This is the turning point in the play, where the main character's life changes for the worst and things start to go wrong. Macbeth becomes King of Scotland but is plagued with uncertainty and worries about losing his crown to other people. Macbeth murders Banquo and tries to murder Fleance (Banquo's son). Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost and starts arguing with it, showing everyone that he has become mentally unstable. People start to see Macbeth as a tyrant and doubt his abilities. Macduff goes to England to find Malcolm.
- **Act 4: Main conflict/falling action** - The main conflict between the two main characters is determined and the setting for the final stage is set. Macbeth goes back to the witches and asks them to tell him the rest of his fate. He learns that he must beware of Macduff but that 'none of woman born shall harm Macbeth'. Macbeth murders Macduff's family. Macduff hears of his family's murder and now wants revenge against Macbeth – Macbeth has essentially sealed his fate by murdering Macduff's family. With Macduff's help, Malcolm plans to invade Scotland and defeat Macbeth.
- **Act 5: Downfall** - The main character is defeated and life returns to normal. Lady Macbeth dies - it's assumed she commits suicide. Malcolm and Macduff invade Scotland and attack Macbeth. Macduff (who was not 'born' but was removed by caesarean) kills Macbeth. Malcolm ascends the throne, continuing the royal line from his father, King Duncan.
- Interestingly, the structure of the play is almost **cyclical** (a circle): it begins with Macbeth killing a traitor and ends with him being killed for being a traitor – Macbeth becomes the very enemy he was previously working to defeat.

Meter

- Shakespeare writes most of the play in iambic pentameter. This is a five-beat rhythm. This is a poetic structure.
- **Iambic pentameter** is a line which contains ten syllables in pairs - an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, with the pattern repeated five times in a line.
- **Prose** is when people speak normally, without rhyme or meter.
- **Trochaic tetrameter** is a line which contains four sets of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable ('**double, double toil and trouble**').
- Sometimes, Shakespeare breaks this pattern by having a character only speak half a line, or by moving away from poetry altogether and speaking in prose. For example, when Lady Macbeth sleepwalks she speaks in prose, which might signify her control breaking down.
- The witches sometimes speak in trochaic tetrameter. Shakespeare usually writes in iambic pentameter, so this shows the witches as odd.
- These lines show that the witches' speeches are full of double-meanings – they are not what they appear and cannot be trusted. This structure shows that the witches speak in a different way to everyone else, and that they are doing something incredibly important.

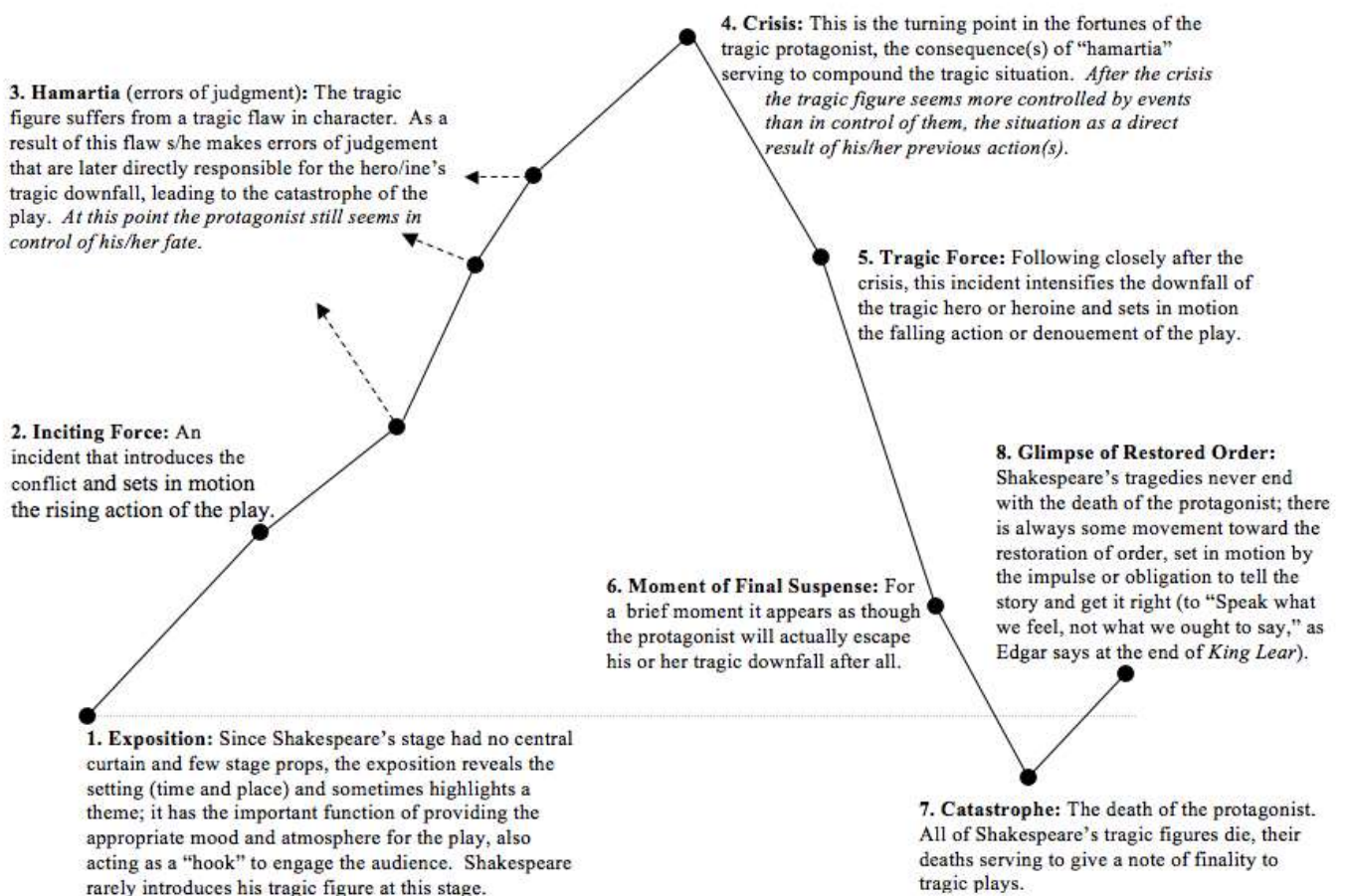
Dramatic Irony

- Dramatic irony is when the audience knows something that the characters on stage don't. We learn some of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth's plans throughout their asides and soliloquies.
- Any time a character speaks a soliloquy or talks 'aside', it really means they are talking to the audience and telling them what they are thinking.
- This lets the audience understand what is motivating them (making them behave as they are).
- It also means they will know the intentions of a character before the other characters do, which is dramatic irony.
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Pathetic Fallacy and Symbolism

- Shakespeare uses pathetic fallacy (using the weather to reflect the mood) throughout the play to show the supernatural atmosphere.
- The play begins with ‘**thunder and lightning**’ as the witches arrive on stage. When they appear again in Act 1, Scene 3, there is also thunder. This continues throughout to show the audience that the witches will soon be on stage and strange things are about to happen. Thunder and lightning symbolise disruption and chaos.
- As the play builds up to the murder of King Duncan, the stars disappear. Banquo notices: ‘**There’s husbandry in heaven, / Their candles are out**’ (2,1). This darkness becomes symbolic of the evil to come and builds an ominous atmosphere. The atmosphere throughout the play is tense. The actions of the play create this as a plot to kill a king is shocking. After this, suspense continues because of Macbeth’s unpredictable actions and the other murders. The witches’ presence adds to this atmosphere. The audience wants to see where they will lead Macbeth and what will happen as a result of him listening to them.
- When Macbeth meets with King Duncan in Act 1, Scene 4, he is still thinking about getting the crown. In an ‘aside’, he says: ‘**Stars, hide your fires, / Let not light see my black and deep desires**’. Light symbolises purity and truth; darkness is where evil things can happen.
- Lady Macbeth asks night to come and hide her actions. She asks for night to be so thick that Heaven can’t see what she is doing and try to stop it: ‘**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). Lady Macbeth wants to use nighttime and darkness to try and conceal her actions from the daggers they use, and from God himself. She knows what she is doing is a sin and calls on Hell to help her – this shows her evil nature before they even commit the murders.
- After King Duncan’s murder, it stays dark even though it is daytime: ‘**By th’ clock ‘tis day / And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp**’ (2,4). The darkness symbolises the evil on earth. Night is seen as a time for evil: ‘**How now, you secret, black and midnight hags!**’ Macbeth’s words here clearly connect the witches to the night (4,1).
- Banquo’s murder happens as day turns to night. Macbeth invites night in to hide the horror of what is about to happen: ‘**Good things of day begin to droop and drowse, / Whiles night’s black agents to their preys do move**’ (3,2).
- When Lady Macbeth dies, Macbeth says, ‘**Out, out, brief candle**’. This is a metaphor for a life has been ended too quickly. He also compares life to a ‘**shadow**’. This suggests that it is difficult to ever achieve anything lasting. ‘**We live, die and are quickly forgotten**’ (5,5).

THE STRUCTURE OF A SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY



QUOTATIONS: Top quotations from each chapter (quote, context, literary device)

Act 1:

| Quotation/happening | Connotation or effect |
|--|---|
| 'Fair is foul and foul is fair' Three witches (scene 1) | The thunder and lightning immediately show that conflict is coming and sets the frightening negative tone of the play. Shakespeare begins with the witches to show the audience that the play has supernatural themes from the start. The witches talk about the changes happening in nature: 'Fair is foul and foul is fair'. This shows that turmoil (disruption) has already started in the natural world. The theme of evil-doing and deception recurs in the story. This is the first indication that things may not always be as they appear. Macbeth appears to be a good friend and a heroic character. But when he is tempted by power, he becomes a villainous, selfish character who murders numerous people, including his own friends. This is an oxymoron and suggests to the audience that things are not always as they appear. |
| Witch plans to torture a man. (scene 3) | The first witch tells a story about how a sailor's wife refused to give her chestnuts. She plans to torture her husband. This shows the powers that the witches have and how wicked they are. |
| Macbeth orders the witches to explain, but they vanish. (scene 3) | This shows the audience that Macbeth cannot control them. This shows that Macbeth has no power or control over his own fate – it is all supernatural. |
| 'Oftentimes, to win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths'. Banquo (scene 3) | Macbeth speaks to Banquo and asks him whether he now hopes that his children might become kings. Banquo seems to be cautious. The metaphor here suggests that he thinks the witches might be evil, and that they might be using their ability to see the future to hurt Macbeth and Banquo. He is less willing to believe their prophecies, viewing them as evil creatures with dark intentions. |
| 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen' Macbeth (scene three) | This foreshadows the conflict that will soon happen. This could also show how Macbeth's personality and feelings are mixed, and that the play will show his true nature. |
| 'What, can the devil speak true?' Banquo (scene 3) | This revelation (that one of their prophecies was true) opens possibilities to Macbeth – he starts to consider their claim that he actually could be the king one day. Is this moment the start of his downfall? |
| 'It is too full o'th'milk of human kindness.' 'Pour my spirits in thine ear' 'Unsex me here' Lady Macbeth (scene 5) | Lady Macbeth is worried that Macbeth is too good and soft-hearted to take action to get the crown. Shakespeare uses this metaphor to suggest that Macbeth is a good man. But milk, a substance that mothers make to feed to their young, might also suggest that Lady Macbeth sees his kindness as weakness. In this way, as is the case with many Shakespearean plays, the male character seems to have more stereotypically feminine traits. She wants her husband to be more powerful so that she, in turn, shares the power. Lady Macbeth asks the spirits to make her less womanly. Women were supposed to be kind and nurture life and friendships, but she wants to be more masculine ('unsex me here'). She wants to adopt the more traditionally male traits of anger and ferocity. |
| 'Look like th'innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't'. Lady Macbeth (scene 5) | Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth that he must hide his true feelings – he needs to come across as innocent, even though he has violent intentions. |
| 'We will speak further—' Macbeth (scene 5) | Macbeth doesn't speak much in this scene. Lady Macbeth seems to have power over him. The dash shows that she interrupts him. She is immediately shown to be a manipulative character, almost overpowering her husband. |
| 'honour'd hostess'; 'fair and noble hostess'; 'by your leave, hostess'. Duncan (scene 6) | This creates dramatic irony for the audience because they know that Lady Macbeth is pretending and that she plans for him to die in her home. This is also important in the context of the time. If someone was a guest in your home, it was your duty to protect them. By calling her 'hostess' three times in this short scene, Shakespeare reminds the audience that she's being doubly evil. Not only is she plotting to kill the king, but she's also breaking the trust put in her as a hostess. |
| 'I have no spur / to prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition' Macbeth (scene 7) | Macbeth is struggling to take action. He realises the only thing making him want to kill King Duncan is ambition. He says ambition makes people do stupid things and leads to disaster. |
| 'We will proceed no further in this business'. Macbeth (scene 7) | Lady Macbeth comes onto the stage and Macbeth tells her that they will not go further with their plans. He is enjoying the honour that King Duncan has given him. He doesn't want to cast it aside. He has not been corrupted by his ambition just yet. |
| 'Live a coward in thine own esteem, / Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would''. Lady Macbeth (scene 7) | This scene shows Lady Macbeth really manipulating Macbeth into murdering King Duncan. She hints that he is a coward for not going after what he wants. She asks him if he wants to live his life never daring to take anything he wants. |
| 'Bring forth men-children only'. Macbeth (scene 7) | Macbeth praises Lady Macbeth's strength. This means that she should only give birth to male children because she is so strong and fierce. Men were seen to be much stronger than women. Male children were preferred because they could carry on the family name, and could also provide well for their family. |
| 'False face must hide what the false heart doth know.' | He tells Lady Macbeth that they should go back to the celebrations, but hide their true intentions. |

Act 2:

| Quotation | Connotation or effect |
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| 'Is this a dagger which I see before me, / The handle toward my hand?' Macbeth (scene 1) | At this moment, Macbeth imagines he can see a dagger floating in front of him. This is the dagger he will use to kill King Duncan. He imagines that he can see Duncan's blood on the dagger. This represents the guilt that Macbeth feels. This dagger will also pierce his mind and his character. Once he commits the murder, his actions cannot be undone and he will live with the image for the rest of his life. This first hallucination could signal the final moment of Macbeth as the loyal friend, and the first moment of him as a ruthless murderer. |
| 'Sleep no more: / Macbeth does murder sleep'. Macbeth hears this voice (scene 2) | Sleep is a symbol of peace. Macbeth says that he will never feel peaceful again. Lady Macbeth suggests that it is weakness to talk like this - that it is 'brain-sickly'. |
| 'unruly' Lennox (scene 3) | Lennox talks about the conditions of the previous night. He says they were very 'unruly' with storms. Pathetic fallacy is used to show Macbeth's anxiety and uncertainty when he killed King Duncan. The wild weather reflects Macbeth's unhappiness and guilt. |

Act 3:

| Quotation | Connotation or effect |
|--|---|
| 'For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind; / For them, the gracious Duncan have I murdered, / Put rancours in the vessel of my peace / Only for them, and mine eternal jewel / Given to the common enemy of man' (3,1). | This speech shows that Macbeth is struggling mentally after the murder and cannot find peace. Shakespeare hints at his lack of sleep many times throughout the play. This might be to explain why he acts in violent ways. The metaphor, 'eternal jewel' refers to his immortal soul. He has given his soul to the 'common enemy of man'. This means that he believes Satan will now possess his soul after death and he is damned (condemned) to being tortured in Hell. |

Act 4:

| Quotation | Connotation or effect |
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Act 5:

| Quotation | Connotation or effect |
|--|---|
| 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'. Macbeth (scene 5) | Macbeth is shocked and talks about how life is 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'. Macbeth realises that he has lost everything now, including the wife he had loved so much. This shows how the loss of his wife, and his increased power, have completely changed Macbeth. He feels there is no point to life anymore. But this attitude about life having no meaning could also suggest he is trying to justify his crimes – is he suggesting that the murders he has committed are less horrible because life, and death, are meaningless? |
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THE AUTHOR

THE PLAY

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THE SETTING

- James I was also James VI of Scotland (for much of his reign, he ruled both England and Scotland at the same time) – Macbeth was set in Scotland, written about a Scottish king. King James became King of England 1603.
- Set in the 11th century

THE CONTEXT

Tragedy: Tragedies are stories about the downfall of the characters. This means that these characters begin the play in happy situations and end up in terrible ones. Macbeth is viewed as the hero at the start, receiving praise from his comrades because he brutally killed their enemies. He is a hero for killing the enemies of the king. Later on, he begins to kill people for his own selfish needs, benefiting no one but himself and causing tragedy for other people and their families.

Causes of tragedy

- In this play, fate and prophecy cause a lot of the tragedy. It is because Macbeth's fate is revealed to him that he becomes obsessed with achieving it.
- Sometimes it is villains who cause tragedy. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are the villains. After the witches reveal their prophecies, Macbeth can see a way to seize power and decides to act on it, no matter the consequences.
- Often, tragic characters bring about their own downfall. They have a flaw in the character, such as ambition or immorality, which makes them make mistakes of judgement. The guilt from these murders then leads Lady Macbeth to die - it's assumed she commits suicide. Macbeth's murder of Macduff's family (in an attempt to secure his powerful role) leads to his own death.

The supernatural: In the 17th century, people were very fearful of witchcraft and the supernatural, especially the king himself, James I. Witchcraft was seen as responsible for everything bad that happened in life (e.g. if crops didn't grow or if there was an outbreak of disease). The belief was that people who gained these supernatural powers had made a pact with the Devil. James I himself was especially superstitious and fearful of witches – he was known as a witch hunter and saw hundreds of people burnt at the stake for witchcraft whilst he was King of Scotland. When he took the throne of England, James I insisted on hanging witches – even people who were just accused of the crime or just had a strange mark on their body.

Gender: This means women were supposed to obey their husbands. If the women argued, they could be beaten. Parents raised women to believe that men were more important than they were. It was definitely not expected that a man would treat his wife as an equal. Shakespeare made a lot of his leading women strong characters – this may have been a reflection of having Elizabeth I on the throne just before James I. In Macbeth, Lady Macbeth seems to be a very powerful character – she encourages her husband to murder King Duncan, and pressures him by implying that he is a worthless coward if he does not. Ultimately, though, he develops a hunger for power which overtakes his care for his wife. Men with status in society were expected to behave in an honourable way and show qualities like loyalty and bravery. Macbeth begins the play by being brave and honourable, risking his life to fight for his king and country. However, he soon dishonours himself by being disloyal to King Duncan and his other comrades.

Politics, Monarchy and The Great Chain of Being: James was the son of Mary Queen of Scots, who was Catholic. Elizabeth I (and James himself) was Protestant. Many Protestants did not trust him because of his Catholic heritage, and many Catholics thought that he would support them. When they realised that James did not support them, some Catholics began to develop conspiracy theories, such as the Gunpowder Plot: The Gunpowder Plot was a failed attempt to assassinate James I by blowing up the House of Lords with gunpowder. The plotters of the Gunpowder Plot were caught and tortured. The plot against the king had failed. Macbeth is, to some degree, a tale of caution – it acted as a warning about what could happen to people who committed treason (a crime against the king).

People believed that kings were appointed by, and only answerable to, God. They answered to a higher power and could not be governed by anyone on Earth. Therefore, any attempt to remove monarchs from the throne was **sacrilegious** (a crime against God and Christianity).

In Macbeth, King Duncan is chosen by God as the King of Scotland. However, after the witches tell Macbeth that he is fated to be King, he plots with Lady Macbeth to plan Duncan's murder. Macbeth murders King Duncan and takes the throne, going against the will of God and the Divine Right of Kings. Macbeth was not chosen by God to be king, and therefore disrupts the natural order and suffers horribly for it – he feels a strong sense of guilt, hallucinates, loses his wife, and then loses his own life and the throne. Therefore, an early modern audience would see Macbeth as committing a deadly sin, which he would pay dearly for. After losing his life, he would likely go to Hell, a horrific consequence for a contemporary reader.

In Macbeth, Shakespeare appeals to James I with the resolution (ending) of the play. He shows that, despite the evil witchcraft which has caused pain and suffering, the royal line ultimately takes control again (when King Duncan's son, Malcolm, takes the throne). Shakespeare shows that the monarchy wins, despite the Devil (in the form of the witches) attempting to disrupt the natural order.