

## The Witches'

### **The Witches' Character Traits:**

#### **Evil:**

There is no doubt that the Witches possess an evil nature. The Witches are described as being ugly and having beards, thus indicating that they're unnatural and evil, Shakespeare uses this appearance of the Witches to emphasise their wickedness. Throughout the play the Witches make prophecies about what will happen by looking into the future and ultimately everything they say comes true. The most evil part of the Witches is that their prophecies are made in malice and they gain nothing from their actions, in summary they are trouble makers.

Arguably if the Witches never made their prophecy to Macbeth and Banquo, Macbeth may never have murdered Duncan and his ambition will have remained redundant. But the Witches' prophecy provided a stimulus for it to come to light and lead Macbeth to enter a murderous and evil state.

#### **Mythical:**

The Witches evidently aren't a human force, the prophecies they make illustrate that they have the supernatural ability to predict the future. Shakespeare emphasises the mythical nature of the Witches by usually accompanying their entrance into a scene with "thunder and lightning" creating a morbid atmosphere. This distinct entrance separates the Witches from the rest of the characters in the play indicating that they're different in their nature and have a mythical element to their character.

Shakespeare uses different language technique's to assert the mythical nature of the Witches, these include the short rhyming lines which is contrasting to the other characters. Some of these lines include "wool of bat, and tongue of dog", these rhymes sound grisly and wicked as Shakespeare highlights the supernatural nature of the Witches. Furthermore, Shakespeare very cleverly names the Witches "the weird sisters", the word "weird" originates from the old English word "wyrð" meaning fate. This indicates that the Witches are mythical characters since they are able to see the fates of the characters in the play and thus able to provide prophecy's about what the future holds for them.

#### **Misleading:**

Despite the Witches providing accurate prophecies of the future, they confuse the characters that hear them to no end. The first prophecy that the Witches give to Macbeth and Banquo is very subjective. Banquo is suspicious about the nature of the

Witches as he is unsure whether their appearance is reality or imaginary, this ultimately results in Banquo disregarding the Witches. Macbeth on the other hand, takes the prophecy to heart and begins to act upon his ambition caused by the prophecy. Indicating that the prophecy of the Witches is both subjective and misleading for each of the characters that hear them.

Furthermore, the final prophecy that Macbeth hears leads him to enter a false sense of security. The Witches predict that Macbeth can only be killed of a man not born of a woman and that he will only be defeated if Birnam Wood moves to fight him at Dunsinane Hill. Both of these events seem practically impossible, but Macduff who murders Macbeth wasn't born of his mother but was cut out of her and Malcom instructs his army to cut down the branches of Birnam Wood to disguise themselves. As a result of this, Macbeth is manipulated by the Witches who deceive him into believing that he is untouchable and this ultimately results in his death.

### **Violent:**

The violence of the Witches is shown when we encounter them in Act 1, Scene 3, where they meet and talk about what they've been doing. The second Witch says she has been killing pigs and the first Witch is tormenting the husband of a woman who wronged her. Despite not being actively violent to the characters in the play, it is clear to see that the Witches have a violent element to their character which Shakespeare is clearly trying to convey.

In addition to this, the Witches can be seen as violent characters throughout the play because their prophecies is what cause the murderous actions of Macbeth which results in continuous violence and evil to occur. Consequently, the Witches cannot be left without blame since their malicious nature is what has caused the extreme bloodshed in the play, thus indicating that their prophecies directly caused the murderous and violent actions of Macbeth.

## The Witches' Key Quotes:

"Fair is foul, and foul is fair; Hover through the fog and filthy air." **Act 1, Scene 1**

### Explanation:

This quote takes place in the opening scene of the play as the Witches anticipate their meeting with Macbeth and Banquo. The quote indicates that not is all that it seems. When the Witches say "fair is foul, and foul is fair", they mean that what seems good is in fact wrong and what is bad is in fact good. This idea illustrates that good and evil occurrences can easily be mistaken for one another, a theme that is inherent throughout the play.

In addition to this, the terms "foul" and "fair" could be a reference to the witches. The Witches being supernatural, may be perceived as "foul" but they are in fact "fair" since their prophecies materialised with Macbeth becoming King. The fog and "filthy air" suggests that the senses of the characters will be influenced and that they will be able unable to tell what is good and evil.

"By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes." **Act 4, Scene 1**

### Explanation:

As the Witches are gathered together preparing a mixture in a cauldron, they're giving enchantments. The second Witch gives this quote, announcing that she feels that evil is on the way. This quote confirms the supernatural nature of the Witches since the second Witch is able to tell that something evil is going to occur in the near future just by her senses.

Furthermore, the Witches are never the active agent in the evil deeds that take place but are merely observers that comment on proceedings, thus acting as a narrator for the characters in the play. Therefore, while many of the characters see the Witches as supernatural and evil characters, they do not interfere and force Macbeth to do anything evil but just watch as fate unfolds. The comment from the second Witch illustrates that the "wicked" or evil thing that will take place will be attributed to Macbeth and that while their prophecy regarding Macbeth was correct, it wasn't the prophecy that caused him to carry out such evil deeds but rather his own wickedness.

"Macbeth shall never vanquished be until Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him." **Act 4, Scene 1**

**Explanation:**

The supernatural ability of the Witches is once again shown here, whereby they predict that Macbeth won't be defeated unless Birnam Wood moves to fight him at Dunsinane Hill. This seems like an entirely impossible event, yet in Act 5, Scene 4 Malcom instructs his army to remove the branches from the trees at Birnam Wood and march with them. Malcom is unaware of the prophecy and is merely doing this to disguise his army and give Macbeth's spies inaccurate reports.

Macbeth is so arrogant that he believes that he is untouchable upon hearing the Witches' prophecy, due to the unlikelihood of his downfall, and he does little to challenge any event that takes place because it is simply the fulfilment of the Witches' prophecy. Consequently, Macbeth's reliance on the Witches' prophecy shows that as a character he is unable to act autonomously and is heavily influenced by others around him, meaning that he is unable to carve his own destiny.

## **The Witches' Key Themes:**

### **Supernatural:**

Supernatural themes are evident within the character of the Witches, the speech of the Witches clearly outlines the supernatural theme of their character. Looking at Act 4, Scene 1, the Witches dance around the cauldron as they throw in vile ingredients such as "a wolf's tooth" and "a goat's bile" whilst citing incantations. This setting creates a dark and morbid mood which has strong connotations with the supernatural.

Furthermore, the prophecy the Witches make in Act 1, Scene 3 to Macbeth and Banquo, is the driving force of the whole play. The prophecy causes Macbeth to be driven mad by his own ambition, however in Shakespearean times this would've been seen as Macbeth being possessed. This idea is supported throughout the play where Macbeth has visions. This indicates that the prophecy made by the Witches at the start of the play has had dire consequences for Macbeth. This resulted in him becoming possessed, according to the original audience's interpretation.

### **Reality Vs. Fiction:**

The nature of the Witches' character isn't presented as overly clear by Shakespeare. An obvious example is that some of the characters struggle to distinguish whether the Witches are real or fiction. Banquo shows this most clearly when he first encounters the Witches alongside Macbeth, "That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' Earth, and yet are on 't?—Live you?". Here Banquo is unable to tell whether they are earthly creatures. Banquo protests that they do not look earthly, yet he can see them clearly. The ambiguous nature of the Witches' appearance illustrates that they aren't simply human creatures, but have an supernatural element to both their appearance and their character.

### **Morality:**

Although the Witches are evil and supernatural beings, they do provide a concept of morality during the play. In the opening scene all three Witches chant "Fair is foul, and foul is fair hover through the fog and filthy air." This chant indicates that in a way the Witches are exhibiting a form of inverse morality because they are saying that what is wrong is actually right and what is right is actually wrong. This concept is shown throughout the play where good and evil incidents are easily mistaken for one another. Despite not being moral creatures themselves, the Witches can provide a neutral morality that oversees the entirety of the play.

### **Fate:**

As supernatural beings, the Witches are able to make prophecies by seeing the fate of each of the characters. The Witches can be seen as the messengers who tell Macbeth and Banquo their fate when they encounter them in Act 1, scene 3. Upon hearing the Witches' prophecy, Macbeth seems happy to let fate run its course, this eventually leads to him murdering Duncan. We can see from this that the Witches have manipulated Macbeth by telling him his fate causing him to act out of character by following his ambition rather than his morality.

Overall Macbeth was in complete control of his own actions since he was able to weigh up the pros and cons prior to Duncan's murder. Therefore, the prophecy of the Witches seems to have deceived Macbeth into believing that he is being told his fate, when in actual fact he is in complete control of his own actions.

Similarly, Lady Macbeth believes that it is her husband's fate to become King upon hearing the Witches' prophecy. However, she recognises that for Macbeth's fate to be realised that he must act upon it. This is most clearly shown in the quote "metaphysical aid doth seem thee crowned withal". In short, Lady Macbeth is saying that both fate and witchcraft seem to want Macbeth to become king. The prophecy of the Witches has manipulated Lady Macbeth into believing that her husband will become King, however it remained in his control as to whether he acted upon the Witches prophecy.

## **The Witches' Exam Question Practice:**

Answer the following questions in your notes to secure your knowledge of The Witches.

1. Explore the supernatural themes shown by the Witches.
2. Analyse whether Shakespeare presents the Witches as misleading.
3. How does Shakespeare present the Witches as controlling fate?
4. Explore how Shakespeare presents the character of the Witches.
5. Assess whether Shakespeare shows the Witches as evil.
6. Analyse the Witches' relationship with morality.