

MACBETH STUDY GUIDE

ACT TWO

Macbeth Act II, Scene i Summary

- Banquo and his son, Fleance, are at Macbeth's inner court at Glamis.
- Fleance notes it is after midnight, and his father gives him his sword and dagger. He says he cannot sleep because of some "cursed thoughts" have entered his mind.
- This doesn't bode well.
- Macbeth then enters with a servant, and Banquo notes that the new Thane of Cawdor (Macbeth) should be resting peacefully considering the good news he got today.
- Banquo says he dreamed last night of the witches, and Macbeth claims he hasn't been thinking about them (as perhaps he was too occupied with planning the murder of the King. But he doesn't say that part). Again, they promise to talk about it later.
- Banquo leaves, as does the servant.
- Macbeth, left alone, has a vision of a dagger that points him toward the room where Duncan sleeps. The dagger turns bloody and Macbeth says the bloody image is a natural result of his bloody thoughts. He notes that nature seems dead in the world (a fitting setting for his unnatural act).
- A bell rings, which is a signal from Lady Macbeth that it's time to rock and roll.

Macbeth Act II, Scene ii Summary

- Lady Macbeth is more determined than ever for the murder plan to proceed.
- She has drugged the King's guards and, hearing Macbeth, worries he may not have been able to go through with the act. She says she would've killed Duncan herself, if he hadn't looked so much like her father in his sleep. (Apparently, now she's all family values.)
- Macbeth enters with bloody hands.
- Macbeth says two people woke up while he was in the act. One cried, "Murder!" but they both went back to sleep after saying their prayers. Macbeth is disturbed that he couldn't say "Amen" when they said, "God bless us," as he could have used the blessing, given how he recently damned his soul by killing the King.

- Lady Macbeth employs the "If you don't think about, it will go away" theorem, but Macbeth is still clearly disturbed at having killed a sleeping old man for his own selfish gain. He also worried because he thinks he heard voices saying things like "Macbeth does murder sleep!"
- Lady Macbeth tries to get her husband to focus on the matter at hand, which is framing the King's attendants. He won't do it himself, so she takes the daggers from him, smears the attendants with Duncan's blood, and plants the weapons.
- As Macbeth philosophizes about his guilty hands, Lady Macbeth comes back, having done her part.
- She hears a knock at the door, and hurries Macbeth to bed so that 1) they don't look suspicious, and 2) they can do a little washing up before all the "Oh no! The king is dead" morning hullabaloo.
- Macbeth regrets killing Duncan – he says he wishes that all the knocking at the door would "wake Duncan" from his eternal sleep.

Macbeth Act II, Scene iii Summary

- Now that Shakespeare's given us a murder and a lot of spooky crazy talk from Macbeth, it's now time for a brief, comedic interlude. There's a ton of knocking and the Porter (the guy who's supposed to answer the door) does a lot of joking around about what it would be like to be a porter of "hellgate." Apparently, a porter in hell would be a busy guy since there are so many evil and corrupt people in the world.
- The Porter says maybe there's an "equivocator" at the door.
- Note: An "equivocator" is a person who speaks ambiguously or doesn't tell the whole truth. This is likely an allusion to the treatise written by the Jesuit Henry Garnet, who encouraged Catholics to speak ambiguously or, "equivocate" when they were being questioned by Protestant inquisitors (so they wouldn't be persecuted for their religious beliefs). It's also significant that Henry Garnet was tried and executed for his role in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, when a group of Catholics planned to blow up the King and Parliament (they stored kegs of gunpowder in a nearby building). The plot failed but it was a deeply disturbing and shocking event that resonates in this play, especially where we've just witnessed Macbeth returning from the room where he has murdered the sleeping king.

- Then the Porter says, no wait, this castle's way too cold to be hell but, gee, who could possibly be at the door at this hour.
- It's Macduff and Lennox at the door – the two noblemen have come to fetch the king.
- The Porter makes a bunch of jokes about how drinking an excessive amount of alcohol, (which he's been doing all night), makes a man frisky but it also detracts from his "performance" in the sack. It also turns his nose red, makes him have to urinate.
- Enter Macbeth, the picture of sleepy innocence while he makes small talk with Lennox and sends Macduff to wake Duncan.
- Lennox notes that some spooky things have been happening all night – he heard a bunch of screams, there was a little earthquake, and the fire in his chimney blew out.
- Macbeth says yeah, it's been a pretty "rough night."
- Macduff reenters, disheveled at finding the King murdered. He raises a fuss as he sends in Lennox and Macbeth to go look at the dead King.
- Lady Macbeth and then Banquo hear the news after waking up to the commotion. Macbeth, Lennox, and Ross come back after looking at the King's body.
- Macbeth takes the time to begin a way-too-eager eulogy about the King's great virtues.
- Malcolm and Donalbain, the King's sons, are the last to wake up and hear the news that their father has been murdered, to which Malcolm replies, "O, by whom?"
- Lennox says the drunken guards covered in the King's blood and holding their daggers are a good bet.
- Macbeth casually announces that he killed both of the guards in a fit of pious rage, out of his love for the King. No one thinks it's weird that the guards went to sleep with the bloody daggers in hand.
- Lady Macbeth, upon hearing that Macbeth has done this, needs to be escorted out (this was not part of her plan).
- Donalbain and Malcolm privately decide that they probably shouldn't stay in the house where their dad was killed. Good thinking. Malcolm will go to England and Donalbain to Ireland, making it more difficult to murder them both.
- The dead king's sons slip out, unnoticed.
- Meanwhile, everyone else agrees to get dressed and then talk about how they're going to respond to the King's death.

Macbeth Act II, Scene iv Summary

- Ross chats with a conveniently placed wise old man, who is disturbed by the night's strange events – both the King's murder and the weird things going on in nature.
- Ross says the heavens are clearly troubled by the unnatural act (a king's murder) that took place on earth. "Nature" has gone haywire as a result: Ross notes that even though it's the middle of the day, it's completely dark outside. The old man watched an owl murder a hawk and Ross notes that Duncan's horses broke free in a rage, to which the old man adds that the horses ate each other. Yep, says Ross, I saw the whole thing happen.
- Macduff, yet another Scottish nobleman, shows up. He says the dead guards "were bribed" to murder the king and that Malcolm and Donalbain look pretty suspicious, having left town so quickly and all.
- Macduff notes that Macbeth is on his way to Scone to be crowned King, and Duncan is being put in a freshly dug grave.
- Everyone goes their separate ways.