



Character Explorer:

The Witches, or Weird Sisters

from *Macbeth*

Who are the Witches, or Weird Sisters?

Although they're most commonly called 'Witches', these characters refer to themselves as 'Weird Sisters'. For us, the word 'weird' means strange, mysterious, or unearthly. But the word 'weird' was originally spelled 'wyrd' or 'weyard' and referred to someone who had the power to control human fate or destiny. This seems fitting for these unusual characters who seem to predict Macbeth and Banquo's future. While the characters are called 'Witches' in the stage directions, the only time anyone speaks the word is when one of the weird sisters tells of a time when someone used the word to insult them.

What happens with the Weird Sisters

The play begins with three unusual characters making plans to meet after a battle to encounter Macbeth. They share a brief chant before leaving, declaring, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair."

When we next see these Weird Sisters, they share news of their recent activities. They hear a drum and know that Macbeth is coming. The Weird Sisters then join hands and perform a magic ritual. When the generals Macbeth and Banquo enter, they struggle to make sense of the appearance of the Weird Sisters. Each Weird Sister greets Macbeth by name and adds a title that reflects social position. The first hails Macbeth as Thane of Glamis (pronounced glahms). Similar to an earl, this is Macbeth's current title. The second hails Macbeth as Thane of Cawdor. This is a more important and prestigious position than Macbeth currently has. The third hails Macbeth as one that will be King in the future. The Weird Sisters then offer Banquo ambiguous prophecies. The upshot is that Banquo's descendants will be kings. Although Macbeth wants to hear an explanation for these prophecies, the Weird Sisters vanish 'into the air'.

News immediately arrives that Macbeth has been named Thane of Cawdor. This sets in motion the main events of the play: Macbeth murders the current King, framing others for the regicide. Macbeth is named King, and Banquo become suspicious. Macbeth hires murderers to kill Banquo, whose ghost then torments Macbeth. (For a full description of the events in the play, see our Discovery Zone resource, What Happens in Macbeth.) In the wake of this unraveling, Macbeth decides to visit the Weird Sisters again.

When we next see the Weird Sisters, they are being scolded by Hecate, a goddess of dark places who is often associated in folk lore with ghosts and witchcraft. Many scholars believe that this scene was not written by Shakespeare but was added after he left the theatre company. It is often cut from performances. In this scene, Hecate expresses anger at being left out of the initial encounter with Macbeth and instructs the Weird Sisters on how they can use their magic to conjure apparitions that will confound and thwart Macbeth.

But wait, there's more! →

This resource is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International license.

What happens with the Weird Sisters (continued)

The Weird Sisters gather around a cauldron into which they throw an assortment of unusual ingredients, including animal parts. They go farther, including human body parts, using racist and misogynistic language that is often cut or adapted today. When Macbeth arrives three apparitions offer advice. The first tells Macbeth to beware Macduff, the Thane of Fife. The second seems to contradict this advice, claiming 'none of woman born shall harm Macbeth'. The third offers a puzzling prophecy, that Macbeth will not be defeated until the forest known as Birnham Wood comes up the hill to Dunsinane Castle (where Macbeth now lives). Macbeth then asks if Banquo's descendants will ever reign in Scotland. The Weird Sisters conjure a vision of Banquo with a line of kings, the last of whom holds a mirror. (This is significant because Shakespeare wrote the play shortly after the Scottish King, James the Sixth became King James the First of England. James believed he was descended from Banquo, so this was a bit of royal flattery slipped into the play.)

The Weird Sisters then vanish, leaving Macbeth to both commit and face more violence. They don't officially appear again in the play, although some productions bring them back as silent witnesses to the destruction.

Some words used to describe the Weird Sisters

The ways the Weird Sisters are talked about by others can illuminate aspects of their character.

sister	witch	kind	wayward	wild	hags
imperfect	vanished	prophet-like	withered	secret	beldams
saucy	overbold	juggling	fantastical	filthy	fiends

Some things the Weird Sisters say throughout the play

Lines that a character speaks can reveal details about their personality and relationships with other characters. The lines below are listed in the order that they appear in the play.

- | | | | |
|----------|---|-----------|---|
| 1 | Fair is foul and foul is fair | 6 | All hail, Macbeth! That shalt be King hereafter. |
| 2 | And, like a rat without a tail,
I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do. | 7 | He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear
His hopes 'bove wisdom, grace and fear. |
| 3 | Though his bark cannot be lost
Yet it shall be tempest-tossed. | 8 | You all know security
Is mortal's chiefest enemy. |
| 4 | A drum, a drum!
Macbeth doth come. | 9 | By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes. |
| 5 | Peace! The charm's wound up. | 10 | Seek to know no more. |

Challenging assumptions about the Witches, or Weird Sisters

Over the years, certain traditions have prevailed about how we imagine or portray these characters. More recently, however, theatre artists have taken a more expansive, more inclusive approach. We celebrate that, and encourage you to do the same by thinking about these unusual characters from your perspective. As you think about who the Weird Sisters are, and how they respond to the circumstances of the play, what qualities or character traits stand out to you as essential? Do you or do people you know share those same qualities? How do you understand their unconventional behaviour from the context of the stories and traditions you know?

Your interpretation of the Weird Sisters

Now it's your turn! Read through the information about the Weird Sisters on the previous pages. Then choose activities from the list below to explore your own interpretation of these unusual characters. Remember, with three Weird Sisters, you can create three different characters.

MOVE

How would your Weird Sisters move? How would you express the thoughts with your body? How could you use your voice and/or body to create these characters? Based on what you now know of the Weird Sisters, create your own movement-based interpretation of the text.

Create a sculpture or statue using your body to express what the Weird Sisters' lines mean to you. Create a gesture or sculpture for each line. You could also speak the line as you hold each pose. Try it many different ways and notice how each version feels to you.

LISTEN

What would your Weird Sisters soundtrack be? What types of instruments, ambient sounds, or music would accompany your Weird Sisters? Create a playlist, or perhaps a soundscape: if you like, you could include recordings of the descriptive words and/or the Weird Sisters' lines.

WRITE

Create a poem, story, or monologue inspired by the list of words that describe the Weird Sisters. Then, create another piece using the lines the Weird Sisters speak. How are the two different?

MAKE

Create a costume design. What would your Weird Sisters wear? Where do they live? What's the climate like? How do they spend their time? How do they move? What do they want others to think about them? What do they enjoy wearing?

Gather objects that your Weird Sisters might use or care about. (Just remember to ask before borrowing anything!) Use these props in your other explorations, or create a still life of the objects by drawing or photographing them.

Create an art project inspired by the words used to describe the Weird Sisters and by the lines they speak.

Reflect

- What discoveries did you make as you explored the text?
- Why did you make the creative choices that you made?
- What did you learn about the Weird Sisters? About the play? About yourself?