



Character Explorer:

Lady Macbeth from *Macbeth*

Who is Lady Macbeth?

Lady Macbeth is married to Macbeth, the title character in their play. They are one of the few married couples in all of Shakespeare's plays who seem to have a strong, supportive marriage. However, they support one another in committing regicide, that is, the killing of a king. While Macbeth was a real figure in history, there's no evidence that he became king in the manner Shakespeare's character did. Shakespeare combined the few facts about the historical Macbeth's reign with a different story of a host murdering a guest in his house. The historical Macbeth likely defeated King Duncan in battle. We have little information about the character of this historical Macbeth's wife, who was named Gruoch.

What happens with Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*

We first see Lady Macbeth reading a letter from Macbeth. The letter describes Macbeth's encounter with the three Weird Sisters, who predicted that Macbeth would become king. After finishing reading the letter, Lady Macbeth calls on spirits to "stop up the access and passage to remorse," in other words, make it easier to be cruel and violent. When Macbeth arrives home, Lady Macbeth introduces the idea of killing Duncan. Later, when Macbeth hesitates, Lady Macbeth insists they proceed with the plan: they will drug Duncan's guards, then frame them for the murder.

That night, Macbeth kills Duncan but is gripped with remorse and has trouble fulfilling the plan. Lady Macbeth chastises Macbeth and takes care of smearing the sleeping guards with blood and planting the daggers on them. Hands covered in blood, Lady Macbeth leads Macbeth to wash up, just as a visitor knocks at the castle entrance.

When the murder is discovered a short time later, all the guests assemble to try to figure out what's happened. Macbeth then impulsively kills Duncan's guards, and just when the others start to question this rash act, Lady Macbeth appears to faint, distracting everyone.

Although Macbeth becomes king, it doesn't appear to make Lady Macbeth happy. There is an unmistakable rift in the couple's relationship, and Macbeth begins to exhibit troubling behaviour. At the first banquet hosted by the newly crowned couple, Macbeth is so disruptive that Lady Macbeth blames illness and sends everyone away.

However, Lady Macbeth struggles as well, sleepwalking, complaining of having bloody hands despite vigorous washing, and seeming to relive the murder of Duncan. As Macbeth prepares to face an invading army, word arrives of Lady Macbeth's death. It's later rumoured that it was the result of suicide.

Some words used to describe Lady Macbeth

The ways that Lady Macbeth is talked about can illuminate aspects of the character.

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|----------|---------------|---------------|------------------------|
| bold | dearest love | undaunted | honoured hostess |
| gentle | most kind | afraid | fair and noble hostess |
| love | dear | dearest chuck | sweet remembrancer |
| troubled | young in deed | fiend-like | dead |

Some things Lady Macbeth says 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 Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear.

2 Was the hope drunk wherein you dressed yourself?

3 I have given suck and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.

4 Had he not resembled my father as he slept,
I had done't.

5 Infirm of purpose! Give me the daggers!

6 My hands are of your colour, but I shame
To wear a heart so white.

7 Naught's had, all's spent
When our desire is got without content.

8 You have displaced the mirth, broke the good
meeting,
With most admired disorder.

9 You lack the season of all natures, sleep.

10 Hell is murky.

Challenging assumptions about Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth is often blamed for the violence that Macbeth unleashes in the play. People sometimes suggest that Macbeth would not have made these choices without Lady Macbeth's urging. What do you think? Do Lady Macbeth's actions and words clear Macbeth of responsibility?

It's also common for people to describe Lady Macbeth as ambitious, and to claim that Lady Macbeth's ambition is to become Queen. However, the character never expresses that desire in the play. What do you think? Is wanting your spouse to become King the same as wanting to be Queen yourself?

As you explore the play and the character of Lady Macbeth, look closely at the language. What do you think this character wants? Why do you think Lady Macbeth chooses to speak and act in these ways? What role might societal expectations play in these choices? What do you think about the consequences of Lady Macbeth's words and actions?

Your interpretation of Lady Macbeth

Now it's your turn! Read through the information about Lady Macbeth on the previous pages. Then, using these words, lines, and the story, choose activities from the list below to explore your own interpretation.

MOVE

How would your Lady Macbeth move?

How would you express the thoughts with your body? How could you use your voice and/or body to create this character? Based on what you now know of Lady Macbeth, create your own movement-based interpretation of the text.

Create a sculpture or statue using your body to express what Lady Macbeth's 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 Lady Macbeth soundtrack be? What types of instruments, ambient sounds, or music would accompany your Lady Macbeth? Make a Lady Macbeth playlist, or create a soundscape: if you like, you could include recordings of the descriptive words and/or Lady Macbeth's lines.

WRITE

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

MAKE

Create a costume design. What would your Lady Macbeth wear? Where does this character 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 Lady Macbeth 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 Lady Macbeth and by the lines that Lady Macbeth speaks.

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 Lady Macbeth? About the play? About yourself?