Macbeth by William Shakespeare

This teaching sequence contains 20 sessions to immerse your children in the world of Macbeth. Use them all or pick a few – it’s up to you. If you enjoy using this resource, subscribe to the Power of Reading website where you’ll find nearly 200 teaching sequences for use from EYFS to KS2 for less than £2 each. Shakespeare’s shortest tragedy holds attention through its rapid action, sinister atmosphere and convincing psychology. It is peopled with spirits, ghosts and witches and much of the action takes place in dark and shadowy places. The central characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are strongly drawn and their tragic tale of seduction and destruction through the lust for power grippingly told and familiar in its concerns. This is one of the most accessible of Shakespeare’s plays and its plot can be easily translated into modern terms. It raises moral dilemmas and issues that provoke discussion. It is full of strong visual imagery and memorable language and is an excellent introduction to Shakespeare’s writing.

Overall aims of this teaching sequence.
- To explore the themes of a Shakespeare tragedy.
- To explore complex relationships within story
- To begin to understand the language of Shakespeare.

This teaching sequence is designed for a Year 5/6 class.

Overview of this teaching sequence

This teaching sequence is approximately four weeks long if spread out over 20 sessions. The book supports teachers to explore with children complex relationships in a play and investigate in depth, characterisation, as well as narrative features of the work of William Shakespeare. To ensure the text is accessible to the children, it would be helpful to intersperse readings from the original play with text from Leon Garfield’s Shakespeare Stories (Puffin Books).

For this teaching sequence we suggest that you focus on the following scenes:

**Act I, Scene 3**: Macbeth and Banquo meet the witches

**Act I, Scene 5**: Lady Macbeth reads Macbeth’s letter and dedicates herself to the murder of Duncan; Macbeth returns to the castle

**Act II, Scene 2**: The murder scene: Lady Macbeth tries to calm Macbeth’s fears about what he has done.

**Act III, Scene 4**: The banquet scene: following the murder of Banquo, Macbeth and his wife hold a banquet which is interrupted by the appearance of Banquo’s ghost

**Act IV, Scene 1**: Macbeth consults the witches again. They call up apparitions, one of which says that he is safe until Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane castle.

**Act V, Scene 1**: The sleepwalking scene; Lady Macbeth’s guilt haunts her sleep

**Act IV, Scene 5**: Birnam wood begins to move; Macbeth and his army defend Dunsinane castle from Duncan’s sons’ army; Lady Macbeth’s death is reported; a messenger brings news of the wood moving towards the castle.

These scenes are some of the most important and dramatic in the play.

National Curriculum objectives covered by this sequence

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### Reading: (Word reading / Comprehension)

- Reading books that are structured in different ways and reading for a range of purposes;
- reading aloud to children should include whole books so that they meet books and authors that they might not choose to read themselves;
- Identifying and discussing themes and conventions in and across a wide range of writing;
- making comparisons within and across books;
- checking the book makes sense to them, discussing their understanding and exploring the meaning of words in context;
- ask questions to improve their understanding;
- draw inferences such as inferring characters’ feelings, thoughts and motives from their actions, and justifying inferences with evidence;
- predicting what might happen from details stated and implied;
- summarising the main ideas drawn from more than one paragraph, identifying key details that support the main ideas;
- identifying how language, structure and presentation contribute to meaning;
- discuss and evaluate how authors use language, including figurative language, considering the impact on the reader;
- participate in discussions about books that are read to them and those they can read for themselves, building on their own and others’ ideas and challenging views courteously;

### Writing: (Transcription / Composition)

- Identifying the audience for and purpose of the writing, selecting the appropriate form and using other similar writing as models for their own;
- noting and developing initial ideas, drawing on reading and research where necessary;
- in writing narratives, considering how authors have developed characters and settings in what they have read, listened to or seen performed;
- in narratives, describing settings, characters and atmosphere and integrating dialogue to convey character and advance the action;
- assessing the effectiveness of their own and others’ writing;
- perform their own compositions, using appropriate intonation, volume, and movement so that meaning is clear.
### Speaking and Listening:
- Ask relevant questions to extend their understanding and build vocabulary and knowledge;
- articulate and justify answers, arguments and opinions;
- give well-structured descriptions and explanations;
- maintain attention and participate actively in collaborative conversations, staying on topic and initiating and responding to comments;
- use spoken language to develop understanding through speculating, hypothesising, imagining and exploring ideas;
- speak audibly and fluently with an increasing command of Standard English;
- participate in discussions, presentations, performances and debates;
- gain, maintain and monitor the interest of the listener(s);
- consider and evaluate different viewpoints, attending to and build on the contributions of others.

### Cross Curricular Links:
- Children could use this as a starting point to finding out more about William Shakespeare.
- They could research what it was like to live in Elizabethan times.
- Children could take a trip to the Globe theatre and compare to modern day theatres.

### Teaching Approaches
- ‘Tell me’ – booktalk
- Debate and argument
- Shared writing
- Character description
- Drama and role-play
- Readers’ theatre
- Reading aloud
- Writing in role
- Visual approaches
- Drawing, mapping, annotating

### Writing Outcomes
- Letter writing
- Writing and performing poetry
- Note writing for report
- Advertising posters
- Recounts
- Tickets
- Play scripts
- Invitations
- Prophecies
- Reviews
Links to other texts:

There is a wealth of texts that support children’s understanding of the story of Macbeth before they tackle the language of Shakespeare. These books include:

- Shakespeare’s Stories – Leon Garfield ISBN 0-575-04340-7
- Mr. William Shakespeare’s Plays – Marcia Williams ISBN 978-1-4063-2334-4
- There are also versions from Leon Garfield – Animated Tales (although these no longer seem to be in print).
- The animated tales can also be viewed as a film version here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfnUq2_OFOY&t=9s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfnUq2_OFOY&t=9s)

Weblinks

Globe theatre
[http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/?gclid=CJHrpczp1b0CFUoOwwod7V0APw](http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/?gclid=CJHrpczp1b0CFUoOwwod7V0APw)

Information on Shakespeare
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/)

Resources

Some local and regional museums, schools libraries services and schools loans services offer packages of artefacts from Elizabethan times, which you could use to bring the historical aspect of the play to life.

Teaching Sessions

**Session 1: Understanding characters and relationships**

- Show the children the stage photograph of Macbeth with the floating dagger. Where has the photo come from? Has anyone been to the theatre? What is it like? What performances have been seen?
- Use the Tell Me approach to garner initial opinions about the character: Who is he? What is he thinking? What is happening? What might happen? Does it remind you of anything? What questions do you have?
- Prepare cut out versions of the characters from the cast illustrations from Macbeth The Graphic Novel from Classical Comics Ltd. (2008) (see Power of Reading website). Which character do you think we saw in the photograph? Look at the character descriptions. Talk about what the words mean. Talk about how they could be categorised to show hierarchy and relationships.
In small groups, children decide on their own groupings for the characters, explaining why they have categorised in the way they have.

Read the prologue from Macbeth The Graphic Novel from Classical Comics Ltd. (2008) to give further detail about the context of the story. (see Power of Reading website).

Session 2: Story mapping: Walking through the story

- Introduce the play by watching the BBC Shakespeare’s Animated Tale of Macbeth.
- Ask the children which was their most memorable scene and why? Do they remember any of the language used in their scene? Did they understand it?
- Support the children in summarizing key events. Ask each group to chose a key scene and draw this, they can also add text to tell that part of the story. Use these illustrations to create a class story map that could then be displayed for the children to remember key events.
- Make speech bubbles to record memorable words and phrases from the animation. Discuss the language, how it sounds and what it means.
- Add still images from stage productions to exemplify some of the key scenes and show how they look on stage.

Session 3&4: Artwork and Drama: Exploring key events

- Macbeth and Banquo meet the witches
- Read Leon Garfield’s Shakespeare Stories P271-274.
- Analyse the mood and atmosphere on the heath. What words and phrases are particularly effective in conveying this?
- Children create artwork to depict the mood and atmosphere of the scene on the heath using chalk/charcoal/pastels.
- With the class build up a collection of words from the witches’ scenes that conveys the atmosphere of the heath and the mystery and magic of the witches.
- What is so good about Shakespeare’s choice of language in these scenes?
- The class goes on to write short atmospheric poems about the witches on the heath, drawing on the language generated in this way.

- In the next session, re-read the scene, focus on and discuss the witches’ prophecies; these will affect the whole play. Compare the prophecies they make for Macbeth and those they make for Banquo. What do they think these mean? What events come after this and how do the prophecies relate to this?
- Discuss with the class how the scene should be played. What kinds of men are Macbeth and Banquo and how should they be presented? How should the witches speak and gesture?
- Concentrate on the ‘big shapes’ of the scene, the emotions and reactions of the characters to each other and to new developments e.g. Macbeth’s reaction to the news that he has
been made Thane of Cawdor. Use tambours to further evoke atmosphere. What do the drumbeats represent?

- After the performance talk with the children about what they have learnt from seeing the scene acted out. What do they think the witches add to the story?
- Freeze frame the scene – what is your character thinking inside? Record on a thought bubble.

### Session 5: Drama

- Recap what the children did in the previous session.
- Read Leon Garfield from ‘it was then, as the two men stood, staring at one another...to... Why Chance may crown me without my stir’. Discuss Macbeth’s and Banquo’s reaction to the news that the Witches had revealed and the fact that the king’s messengers had confirmed the first part of the prophecy had come true.
- In pairs ask the children to play the part of either Banquo or Macbeth – In role discuss what they have seen and share their reactions to the news that Macbeth is to be king.
- Read to ... the lady of the castle had a letter in her hand.
- Ask the children to write the letter in role as Macbeth to inform his wife of what has happened.

### Session 6: Role-play and writing in role; word collections

**Lady Macbeth anticipates the murder**  
(Act 1 Scene 5)

- Using the letters that the children wrote in the previous session ask them to think about:
- How would Lady Macbeth read the letter? What do you think her reaction will be?
- Read Garfield P274-5. Was her reaction as you thought it would be? Why is she so surprised by the messenger’s message?
- When she calls on the evil spirits, how would she move and speak? What language in the texts such as verbs / adverbs help to convey her mood?
- What differences are there between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s responses to the situation, and how should they be conveyed?
- Try out two readings of the scene with different children reading the parts. Which is most convincing and why?
- Write a diary entry in role as Lady Macbeth to convey her feelings after reading the letter? What words and phrases will you choose and use to accurately portray her reaction?

### Session 7: Exploring key events and actions: Role on the wall

- Read Garfield P275-8. Talk about what has happened in the scene and relate back to the first photograph that we saw.
- Create a role on the wall. What are Macbeth’s external pressures and what are his internal struggles, before, during and after the murder?
Session 8: Drama: alternative versions of the King’s murder scene

(Act II scene 2)
- Again, cast the scene to be performed, explain the meaning of the longer speeches and discuss how the scene should be played.
- Suggest to the class that they try alternative interpretations of this scene.

Lady Macbeth could be:
- apparently bold but actually terrified
- cruelty personified, relishing the deed
- bossy, managerial, repressing her feelings

Macbeth could be:
- confounded by what he has done, dazed
- losing control, jumpy and hysterical
- appalled by what he has done

- Spend some time looking at the text for evidence to support different interpretations.
- Choose two interpretations to try out. Discuss which they feel is the more convincing interpretation.

Session 9&10:

- Read up to P279 ‘The old women’s prophecy was fulfilled.’ Revisit the prophecies for Macbeth and Banquo – have both men’s prophecies been fulfilled? What could Banquo’s prophecy mean?
- Read to P281 ‘Banquo was dead’
- Create a playscript of the scene using modern day language to portray the events.

Session 11: Mime and debate: the banquet scene

(Act III scene 4) This session would work best in a large space, possibly the school hall, to allow the children space to act out the scene
- This complex scene begins with a gracious ceremony as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth greet their dinner guests. But Banquo’s ghost interrupts the scene twice and breaks up the feast.
- In groups act the scene out silently so that mime and movement emphasize its dramatic action.
- You might consider using blank white masks to heighten this.
- Take photographs of each group. Once printed out you could ask the children to add thought / speech bubbles to the character they played in the group and to write a caption to entitle their piece to capture the action.

### Session 12: Role-play and drama: Macbeth returns to the witches

(Act IV scene 1)
- Discuss why Macbeth returns to the witches. What does he hope to gain?
- Discuss why the witches appear again at this point in the play and what they add to the build up of atmosphere?
- Cast the scene to be performed, explain the meaning of the longer speeches, and decide how the scene should be played.
- How should the apparitions speak?
- After the scene is played revisit each apparition’s speech and re-read what it says to Macbeth.
- What do the apparitions seem to be prophesying? Is Macbeth right to be reassured?
- Ask the children to write these prophecies. You may wish to use tea stained paper for effect, these could then be displayed.

### Sessions 13 and 14: Drama: Lady Macbeth in the psychiatrist’s chair

(Act V scene 1)
- As before, cast the scene to be performed, explain the meaning of the longer speeches, and decide how the scene should be played.
- After the scene has been performed, set up a consultation between Lady Macbeth and a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist should put Lady Macbeth ‘in the psychiatrist’s chair’ and go back over her experiences with her to find the root of her mental disorder.
- Children could make notes as the psychiatrist to write a report on Lady Macbeth.

### Sessions 15 and 16: Readers Theatre and Text marking: Birnam Wood begins to move

(Act V scene 5)
- Read the scene, paying particular attention to Macbeth’s speeches and what they tell us about him.
- Prepare and perform the Macbeth speech at the end of this scene as a piece of Readers Theatre. Use text marking to show how key parts will be performed by the group.
- After the performance ask the class to describe Macbeth’s state of mind and to say how they know using evidence from the text.

### Sessions 17-18 : Drama: Planning a performance
- Watch a scene or a part from a stage performance of Macbeth.
- Talk with the class about how the set, costumes, design, lighting and sound effects can make a difference to the interpretation of a play, and then divide the class into role-related teams.
- These teams will plan how a scene of their choice from Acts I to V should be designed and presented.
- Give teams the option of taking a more traditional approach to the Scottish play (discuss why it is often called this) or taking a modern approach and setting the play in any appropriate modern context.
- The teams meet to plan how to present their key scene. They could illustrate their presentation with set designs or costume sketches.
- Each group then presents their ideas to the others for consideration. The strengths of different interpretations are discussed and the most convincing presentation is chosen.

- The team whose scene is chosen directs a performance of their scene.
- Children should be given time to produce props, scenery and stage directions. This could be a performance to the whole school or parents. Children could then produce posters to promote the play along with tickets for admission and invitations.

**Session 19: Reader Response**

- Use the Tell Me approach to evaluate children’s responses to the play. What did they like/dislike? What puzzles and connections did they make? Record these in a class journal which can also be used to collate work done throughout this unit.
- Following the performance, and upon finishing reading Garfield, ask the class to list the strengths of Macbeth as a play, under the following headings:
  - Plot/action
  - Character/motivation
  - Setting/atmosphere
  - Language/dialogue
- They will need to provide evidence for what they have to say. Children could then go onto produce a review for the school newsletter/website.

**Session 20: Writing poems: reflecting on the play**

- In this session, children are asked to sum up their responses to the play in poetry.
- The poems should try to capture the ‘feeling’ of Macbeth, and use some of its language.
- Each page could begin with a line from the play, or incorporate language from the play.
- When they are finished children should perform them to the rest of the class before binding them together in a book and placing them in the book corner.