Development

Macbeth seeks certainty from ambiguous prophecies, then tries to manufacture safety through cruelty. The murder of a family shows how far his rule now reaches beyond his original ambition.

Journey through the act or stave

4.1: He demands answers from the witches and interprets their warnings selectively.

4.1: Confidence about his safety coexists with plans to kill Macduff.

4.1–2: He orders violence against Macduff's household; Lady Macduff and her son are attacked.

4.3: Macduff's grief and the alliance with Malcolm develop resistance to Macbeth.

1. "I conjure you"

Macbeth, 4.1

Method: Commanding address

He tries to compel knowledge from the witches. The urgency exposes dependence beneath the language of command.

2. "Then live, Macduff: what need I fear of thee?"

Macbeth, 4.1

Method: Rhetorical question

He initially treats the prophecy as reassurance. The confidence is unstable: almost immediately he seeks extra protection through murder.

3. “make assurance double sure”

Macbeth, 4.1

Method: Repetition of certainty

The attempt to make safety absolute reveals the fear behind his apparent confidence. Prophetic reassurance cannot end his need for control.

4. “The firstlings of my hand”

Macbeth, 4.1

Method: Heart/hand parallel; compressed decision

He vows that first impulses will become actions. Deliberation shrinks, contrasting with the extended moral debate before Duncan’s murder.

5. “His wife, his babes”

Macbeth about Macduff’s family, 4.1

Method: Listing; vulnerable victims

The brief list makes the targets defenceless. Murder is no longer directed only at rivals: his attempt at security destroys an innocent household.

Connections to other characters

The apparitions speak equivocally; Macbeth turns limited assurances into the certainty he wants.

Lady Macduff and her son give tyranny a domestic human cost, rather than leaving suffering as political abstraction.

Macduff’s grief challenges emotional suppression: resistance to Macbeth grows from love as well as duty.

Develop your interpretation

Basic: Macbeth becomes a tyrant who kills innocents.

Further: his language tries to replace uncertainty with absolute control.

Advanced: supernatural temptation matters, but the decision to attack the family is his own response; the prophecies do not order it.

Pair the evidence

“double trust” (1.7) ↔ “double sure” (4.1): acknowledged obligations give way to obsessive self-protection.

Context

Tyranny is shown through its effects on households and on Scotland. The contrast with legitimate kingship becomes increasingly important as Malcolm and Macduff prepare to return.

Recall questions

Why is “double sure” revealing after a reassuring prophecy?

What has changed between Act 1’s debate and Act 4’s heart/hand promise?

Writing task

How does Shakespeare present Macbeth’s development into a tyrant in Act 4?