# Workshop № 02:

**Critical Analysis of William Shakespeare’s Macbeth from Aristotle’s Perspective**

### Summary of the Play

**Act 1**

Macbeth begins in an indistinct ‘‘open place,’’ where three witches are speaking in chants and planning to meet again to speak to Macbeth. The eerie scene is brief, and the witches depart. Scotland is at war, and in the next scene, Scotland’s King Duncan receives news from the battlefield. Duncan has had Scottish rebels to fight, along with an army of Norwegians. Duncan learns that Macdonwald, a traitor, and his army have been defeated, thanks in part to the violent heroics of Banquo and Macbeth. In fact, Macbeth himself killed Macdonwald. Duncan also learns that the Thane of Cawdor, another traitor, has been captured and the Norwegian army has been driven back. Duncan sentences the traitor to death and names Macbeth as the new Thane of Cawdor.

In the third scene, Macbeth and Banquo are journeying to the king’s castle when they are surprised by the appearance of three witches. The hags predict that Macbeth, who holds the title of Thane of Glamis, will also become Thane of Cawdor and then King of Scotland. They also predict that, although Banquo will never rule, his descendants will be monarchs. After the witches vanish, Ross and Angus (Scottish noblemen) appear with word from King Duncan. Macbeth learns that Duncan has condemned the Thane of Cawdor for treason and that the king will bestow the title on Macbeth.

Macbeth and Banquo arrive at Duncan’s castle, where the king thanks them for their valor. Duncan also announces that his son, Malcolm, will be heir to the throne. Privately, Macbeth notes thatMalcolmnow stands between himand the fulfillment of his prophecy to become king. Because Duncan is going to have dinner at Macbeth’s castle (Inverness), Macbeth leaves to talk to Lady Macbeth. Having read a letter from her husband about the prophecies, Lady Macbeth receives the news of Duncan’s arrival with a sense of opportunity. She determines that Macbeth will seize this chance to kill the king, thus moving him closer to the throne. Seeing her husband as weak, she pushes him to do it. When the king arrives, Lady Macbeth is the picture of hospitality. Meanwhile, Macbeth has talked himself out of murdering the king, realizing that there is no unselfish reason to do so. After all, Duncan is not an evil man or a bad king. Killing him would be purely an act of ambition. Lady Macbeth chides Macbeth and shares her plan with him on how to carry out the murder. Impressed by her guile, Macbeth agrees to go through with it that very night.

**Act 2**

Banquo and his son, Fleance, are staying at Inverness. Banquo is having difficulty sleeping and is surprised to find Macbeth also awake. Banquo tells Macbeth that his sleep has been restless, and that he has been thinking about the witches’ prophecies. Banquo is anxious to talk to Macbeth about the matter, but they decide to discuss it later. Alone again, Macbeth sees a floating dagger that does not seem to be real. It seems to be pointing the way to Duncan, with the handle pointing toward Macbeth. Despite the eerie talk of the witches and the hallucination, Macbeth shores up his courage to murder Duncan. Once Lady Macbeth indicates that the attendants are asleep (she has made them drunk with wine), Macbeth proceeds to Duncan’s room.

Waiting for her husband, Lady Macbeth reflects on what is happening. She amazes even herself, and says that she would have killed Duncan herself if he had not reminded her of her father. Macbeth enters, covered in Duncan’s blood. He becomes so unnerved by the deed, however, that he forgets to leave the daggers in Duncan’s chamber, and Lady Macbeth must finish the task. She returns to the murder scene, smears the attendants with blood and places their knives with them to make it appear that they are guilty.

Just then, there is a knock at the door of the castle. The porter is hung over and has fun pretending he is the porter to hell, as he wonders which sinners he will let pass through the door. The visitors are Lennox and Macduff, who are supposed to meet Duncan early. When Macbeth takes him to Duncan, Macduff makes the grisly discovery. In the ensuing chaos, Duncan’s sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, arrive. They are given the news of their father, followed by Macbeth’s announcement that he has killed the apparent killers, the attendants. He explains that Duncan’s death caused him to lose his temper, so he flew into a rage and killed the murderous attendants. Lady Macbeth faints, and the others attend to her. Malcolm and Donalbain do not feel safe, and decide it is best if they escape to Ireland and England.

Scene 4 takes place outside Inverness where Ross and another man discuss the strange things that have been happening lately. Macduff comes out and tells them that since Malcolm and Donalbain both fled, Macbeth has been crowned King of Scotland. Macduff adds that although the attendants appear to be the guilty parties, there is suspicion that someone may have paid them to kill Duncan. Because Malcolm and Donalbain left so quickly, many think they are involved.

**Act 3**

Although Macbeth has fulfilled the witches’ prophecy that he will become king, he still feels threatened by the prediction that Banquo’s heirs will one day rule Scotland. Banquo sees that the two prophecies given to Macbeth have come true, so he also wonders about the one concerning his lineage. Macbeth enters in king’s robes and invites Banquo to a feast. Macbeth delivers a soliloquy in which he confesses that he fears his friend Banquo. Based on the prophecies, Macbeth’s reign would lead nowhere. Now that he is king, he fears that he will be targeted by Banquo’s family. A servant returns with two men Macbeth has enlisted to kill Banquo. He provokes their sense of manliness by asking if they have what it takes to carry out the murder. When they assure him that they can do it, he adds that they must also kill Banquo’s son, Fleance. Before the feast, Macbeth meets with LadyMacbeth, and they briefly discuss the anxiety about their actions. Although Lady Macbeth intends to calm her husband, she is plagued by many of the same feelings. When Macbeth tells her he has arranged for the murders of Banquo and Fleance, she is surprised.

**Act 4**

The two murderers, joined by a third man, succeed in killing Banquo as he returns to his castle for the feast, but Fleance escapes. At the banquet, Macbeth expresses his regret at the absence of his friend; but as he approaches his seat at the table, he is horrified to find Banquo’s ghost sitting in his chair. Macbeth’s fearful cries startle the other guests, who cannot see the spirit. Lady Macbeth tries to explain away his behavior to the guests by telling them that he has had such visions before, and there is no need for alarm. Once the ghost vanishes,Macbeth recovers until the ghost reappears. Macbeth becomes hysterical, and Lady Macbeth sends the guests away. Once Macbeth calms down, he decides to seek out the witches to receive their assurance about his future as King of Scotland. The paranoia that dominates his thought patterns leads him to believe he will find the comfort he desperately needs by learning more about the prophecies.

The witches meet with Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft. She is irate that the witches have involved themselves in Macbeth’s life, and tells them that when he comes to talk to them, they are to conjure up apparitions and visions to confuse him further. Elsewhere, Lennox and another lord discuss Banquo’s murder and reveal that, although they suspect the tyrannous Macbeth, others blame Fleance because he fled. Macduff has gone to join Malcolm in England, where they will ask for help from King Edward in overthrowing Macbeth. Having caught wind of these schemes, Macbeth is preparing for a war that many hope he loses.

The witches meet with Macbeth and conjure up three apparitions. The first is a severed head that warns him to beware Macduff; the next is a bloody child that assures him that no man born of woman can harm him; and last is a crowned child telling him that he will not be conquered until Birnam Wood comes to his castle at Dunsinane. Macbeth is disturbed, however, when he asks about the prophecy concerning Banquo and is shown an apparition of a succession of eight kings led by Banquo’s ghost—an indication that Banquo’s heirs will indeed rule Scotland. Later, when Macbeth learns that Macduff has fled Scotland to join forces with Malcolm, he sends assassins to murder Lady Macduff and her children. Meanwhile in England, Malcolm tests Macduff’s loyalty by pretending to be a lascivious and immoral man incapable of ruling a kingdom. When Macduff expresses his indignation at Malcolm’s supposed exploits, the prince is satisfied that Macduff is truly loyal to Scotland. Fully trusting Macduff, Malcolm invites him to join his army. While talking with Malcolm, Macduff receives word that Macbeth has slaughtered his family and he vows to avenge their deaths.

**Act 5**

Driven insane by fear and guilt over Duncan’s murder, Lady Macbeth walks in her sleep and tries to rub out imaginary bloodstains on her hands. Outside, several lords talk about the approaching English army led by Malcolm. A Scottish army will meet them at Birnam Wood to join their effort to bring down Macbeth. Meanwhile, Macbeth confidently clings to the witches’ assurances that he is invulnerable as he prepares to engage Malcolm’s army at Dunsinane castle. He receives word that the army is approaching the castle, and he prepares to don his battle armor. When a doctor tells him that Lady Macbeth is suffering greatly from delusions, Macbeth merely tells the doctor to cure her. He experiences increasing fear and nervousness as a result of his past actions, but when he learns that his wife has committed suicide, his reaction is impassive. Macbeth is initially disconcerted when he hears reports that his enemies approach Dunsinane camouflaged by tree branches from Birnam Wood, but reassures himself that no man born of woman can harm him. He feels invincible as he places all of his trust in the apparent message from the witches. Still, he cannot help but recall the strange prophecy about the woods, and he begins to resign himself to what may be his doom.

Outside, Malcolm commands his troops to drop their boughs and prepare to fight. Macbeth fights vigorously, certain that no one can kill him. Macduff seeks Macbeth out personally, as Malcolm enters the castle. When Macbeth encounters Macduff on the battlefield, he learns that his opponent was ‘‘untimely ripp’d’’ from his mother’s womb (meaning he was born by Caesarean section). Realizing that his fate is sealed, Macbeth nevertheless battles on until he is killed byMacduff. Upon defeating his enemy, Macduff triumphantly holds Macbeth’s severed head aloft to Malcolm, who is proclaimed King of Scotland.

**Discussion Question**

Discussion Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* with reference to Aristotle’s comments on tragedy:

1. Tragic character & flaw
2. Complex plot: Peripeteia and anagnorisis
3. Catharsis: pity and fear
4. Unities: action, place, and time