

 **AQA GCSE English Literature**

## Macbeth

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Your notes

## Macbeth: Overview

The Macbeth question is part of Paper 1, Section A of your GCSE. You must write one response to one set question. This page offers some helpful information and links to other sections with more in-depth revision notes, allowing you to aim for the highest grade. This page includes:

- **A summary of Macbeth**
- **A brief overview of what is required in the exam**
- **Macbeth characters**
- **Macbeth context**
- **Macbeth themes**
- **Macbeth quotes**
- **Top tips for the highest grade**

### Macbeth summary

Macbeth is a play written by English playwright William Shakespeare in approximately 1606. It is a classic Shakespearean tragedy, which typically depicts a tragic character and a fatal flaw which ultimately results in conflict and a final restoration of the status quo. Macbeth is renowned for being Shakespeare's only tragedy in which the villain is also the hero. For more on the conventions of tragedy, see our [Macbeth: Writer's Methods and Techniques](#) page.

Macbeth takes place in medieval Scotland and tells the story of Macbeth, a valiant warrior who is told by three witches that he will become King of Scotland. Spurred on by his wife, Lady Macbeth, Macbeth's ambition becomes overpowering and he assassinates King Duncan and ascends to the throne. As a result of his treacherous acts, Macbeth and his wife become increasingly paranoid, resulting in further murders and Lady Macbeth's suicide. Eventually, civil conflict breaks out, and Macbeth is overthrown. For a more detailed summary of the play, please see the [Macbeth: Plot Summary](#) page.

### How is Macbeth assessed in the exam?

- Your GCSE Paper 1 requires you to answer two questions in 1hr 45min. That means you have approximately 52 minutes to plan, write and check your Macbeth essay
- Paper 1 is worth 64 marks and accounts for 40% of your overall GCSE grade
- The Macbeth essay is worth 34 marks in total, because it also includes 4 marks for spelling, punctuation and grammar



Your notes

- Section A of Paper 1 contains the Macbeth question and you are required to answer the one available question on the play
- Your question will also include a printed extract of about 25 lines from the play
- It is a closed-book exam, which means you will not have access to a copy of the text (other than the printed extract) in your exam
- You will be asked a question that asks you to analyse and write in detail about an aspect of Macbeth
- Your answer will need to address both the extract from the play that you will be given, and the play as a whole

For a much more detailed guide on answering the Macbeth question, please see our revision notes on [How to Answer the Shakespeare Essay Question](#).

### Macbeth characters

Although Shakespeare plays often have a huge number of characters, the characters you should focus on when revising Macbeth are:

- Macbeth
- Lady Macbeth
- Banquo
- Macduff

There are also other minor characters in Macbeth who play a significant role in the play, such as the Three Witches and Malcolm.

When studying a Shakespeare play or any other text, it is crucial to understand that characters are deliberate inventions made by the writer for a specific purpose. These characters frequently represent concepts or ideas, and writers such as Shakespeare use them to explore these ideas and beliefs. For more details on how Shakespeare uses his characters in Macbeth, please see the [Macbeth: Characters](#) revision notes page.

### Macbeth context

Understanding what context is can sometimes be difficult at GCSE. Examiners define context as the ideas and perspectives addressed by a writer through their text, not as historical information or biographical facts about the writer. Therefore, the Macbeth context you should explore in your essay response is not information about medieval Scotland, or facts about William Shakespeare, but ideas about:

- James I
- Witchcraft
- Gender Roles



- God and the Great Chain of Being

Some of these ideas and perspectives are universal, so your own opinions of them are valid, and will be rewarded in an exam. For a detailed breakdown of the contextual topics listed above, see the [Macbeth: Context](#) page.

### Macbeth themes

Understanding the themes that Shakespeare explores in Macbeth is one of the best approaches any student can take when revising the play. This is because to get the highest mark on your exam, you need to take what examiners call a “conceptualised approach”: a detailed and perceptive exploration of Shakespeare’s ideas and intentions. The main themes explored by Shakespeare in Macbeth are:

- Ambition and Power
- The Supernatural
- Appearance versus Reality
- Corruption of Nature

There are many more themes and ideas explored by Shakespeare in Macbeth than those listed above, and you are encouraged to investigate these as well. However, the list above is a good place to start and detailed breakdowns of each of these themes can be found on our [Macbeth: Themes](#) page.

### Macbeth quotes

Although you are given credit for including quotations from Macbeth in your answer, it is not a requirement of the exam. In fact, examiners say that “references” to the rest of the play are just as valid as direct quotations: this is when students pinpoint individual moments in the play, rather than quoting what the characters say. In order to select references really successfully, it is extremely important that you know the play itself very well, including the order of the events that take place in the play. This [detailed act-by-act breakdown](#) of the plot will help you to revise the chronology of Macbeth.

However, it can also be beneficial to go over a few – carefully chosen – lines from the play that can be used on various themes and characters. For a comprehensive analysis of each of these quotations, see our [Macbeth: Key Quotations](#) page.

### Top tips for the highest grade

Please see our revision pages on the Shakespeare exam for guides on:

- [Structuring the Macbeth essay](#)
- [Macbeth methods and techniques](#)
- [How to include context in a Macbeth essay](#)
- [Understanding the Macbeth mark scheme](#)
- [A Macbeth model answer](#)

## Macbeth: Plot Summary



Your notes

### Plot Summary

Examiners always praise students who clearly know the plot of the texts they are studying, as having this base of knowledge leads to the best exam responses. Below you will find:

- a storyboard of the plot
- a general overview of the whole play
- detailed summaries by act

### Plot Storyboard



Your notes



Macbeth and Banquo meet three witches. Banquo does not believe their prophecies, but Macbeth does

## MACBETH PLOT STORYBOARD



Lady Macbeth persuades an undecided Macbeth to murder King Duncan



Macbeth murders King Duncan and becomes king himself



After Macbeth orders Banquo's death, Banquo appears to Macbeth as a ghost



Macbeth becomes increasingly paranoid and orders the death of Macduff's family



Macduff avenges his family and beheads Macbeth. Order is restored and Malcolm becomes king

## Overview of Macbeth

Macbeth is a five-act **tragedy**, written by William Shakespeare in 1606. Set in medieval Scotland, it mainly takes place in and around Macbeth's castle, Dunsinane.



Your notes

Its **protagonist**, Macbeth, is at first presented as a noble warrior and **thane** who is loyal to his king. However, a combination of his ambition, the prophecies of three malevolent witches and the encouragement of his equally ambitious wife, Lady Macbeth, sees him assassinate his king, Duncan, and ascend the throne himself.

While King of Scotland, Macbeth becomes increasingly paranoid that his act of **regicide** will be discovered, and that he himself will be murdered, and so Macbeth attempts to murder any person he sees as a threat (first his friend and comrade Banquo; later a thane called Macduff).

However, overwhelming guilt consumes both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth: Macbeth sees hallucinations – including of his murdered friend Banquo – and seeks the dangerous advice of the witches for a second time, while Lady Macbeth loses her mind completely and commits suicide.

The play concludes with Macduff (who managed to escape Macbeth's assassination attempt) killing Macbeth in a duel, thus avenging both his family, whom Macbeth cruelly murdered, and his former king. Order is thus restored in the Kingdom of Scotland, with Duncan's son, and rightful heir to the throne, Malcolm, becoming king.

## Act-By-Act Plot Summary

### Act I

- In the very first scene of the play, we are introduced to three mischievous witches
- Macbeth is reported as being a brave and noble warrior; he has just killed a traitor in battle, showing his loyalty to King Duncan
- Macbeth and Banquo hear three prophecies from the three witches:
  - that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor
  - that Macbeth will become King
  - that Banquo's descendants will become kings
- The Thane of Cawdor is executed for **treason**. Macbeth becomes the new Thane of Cawdor
- Macbeth sends a letter to Lady Macbeth outlining the witches' prophecies
- King Duncan comes to visit the Macbeths at their castle, Dunsinane
- Macbeth deliberates on murdering Duncan; Macbeth finally accepts Lady Macbeth's arguments and decides to go ahead with the assassination

### Act II



Your notes

- Macbeth sees his first hallucination – a bloody dagger – after seeing Banquo and Fleance in the castle courtyard
- A shaken and mentally unstable Macbeth returns to Lady Macbeth with the murder weapons: two daggers covered in blood (the murder of Duncan takes place off-stage)
- A furious Lady Macbeth calls Macbeth a coward and returns the daggers to Duncan's chambers to frame the dead king's guards for the **regicide**
- Macduff discovers that Duncan has been murdered
- Macbeth claims that he killed Duncan's guards in an act of revenge
- In fear for their own lives, Duncan's sons flee Scotland: Malcolm to England; Donalbain to Ireland
- Macbeth is crowned King of Scotland

### Act III

- Banquo begins to suspect Macbeth of the murder of Duncan
- Macbeth hires assassins to kill Banquo and his son, Fleance
- The murderers kill Banquo, but Fleance manages to escape. The assassins return to Dunsinane to tell Macbeth
- The Macbeths host a banquet at their castle, but Macbeth hallucinates a vision of the murdered Banquo sitting at his place at the table
- As an increasingly deranged Macbeth starts shouting at Banquo's ghost, Lady Macbeth asks all the guests to leave
- We learn that Macduff has gone to England to plot against Macbeth with Malcolm

### Act IV

- In desperation, and increasingly mentally unstable, Macbeth returns to the witches for reassurance
- They offer him three new prophecies: to "beware Macduff"; that "no man of woman born" can kill him; and that he won't be defeated unless Birnam Wood starts marching on his castle
- Macbeth is told that Macduff has fled for England; seeing this as reason enough to be suspicious, Macbeth orders the murder of Macduff and his whole family
- Lady Macduff is advised to flee her castle with her children but refuses, saying that she has done nothing wrong
- Murderers come to Macduff's castle and brutally murder his wife and children
- In England, Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty and is satisfied with Macduff's responses. Macduff is told about the murder of his family and vows revenge

## Act V

- An overwhelming sense of guilt leads Lady Macbeth to lose her mind, and hallucinate in her sleep. She kills herself (off-stage)
- Malcolm, Macduff and an army of Scottish thanes advance to Birnam Wood and use its branches for camouflage
- Macbeth is told of the death of his wife, and that Birnam Wood is advancing on Dunsinane. He contemplates the pointlessness of life but remains convinced he is invincible because of the witches' second prophecy
- Macbeth is challenged by and kills young Siward, son of the English commander
- Macduff enters the castle and challenges Macbeth to a duel before admitting that he was born by Caesarean section, and is thus not "of woman born"
- Macduff kills Macbeth before Malcolm is crowned the new King of Scotland



Your notes



Your notes

## Macbeth: Themes

Your exam question could be on any topic. However, having a really good grasp of the following themes, and crucially, why Shakespeare is exploring these themes, will enable you to produce a “conceptualised response” in your exam:

- Ambition and Power
- The Supernatural
- Appearance versus Reality
- Corruption of Nature

Producing a conceptualised essay answer will give you access to the very highest marks on the mark scheme.

## Ambition and Power

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Principally, Macbeth is a play about **ambition and its consequences**. It can also be seen as a warning against those who seek to undermine or overthrow the rule of a rightful king.

### Macbeth as a tragedy

#### Knowledge and evidence:

- The play is in the form of **tragedy**, which means it must have a **tragic hero** as its **protagonist**
- This tragic hero must have a tragic flaw, or **hamartia**



Your notes

- The **hamartia** of tragic heroes of Ancient Greek tragedies was often **hubris**: having overconfidence in your own ambitions
- The character of Macbeth is the play's tragic hero, and his **hamartia** is also ambition
- In Ancient Greek tragedies, the tragic hero will be punished by the gods for their actions resulting from their **hamartia**. This very often led to the **protagonist**'s death
- Shakespeare also decides to punish Macbeth for his ambition, but in a Christian context
- In the play, Macbeth ultimately abandons his morals - at first, he is presented as a noble and loyal general - in his pursuit of, and attempt to cling on to, power
- The character of Macbeth is corrupted by his ambition, which leads him to commit **regicide** (the murder of a king), the murder of his best friend and the murder of women and children. For this, he is condemned both to death at the hands of Macduff, but also - for all eternity - to Hell
- Shakespeare also presents Lady Macbeth as ambitious, and her punishment is equally severe but far less noble: she commits suicide

#### What is Shakespeare's intention?

- In essence, Shakespeare is presenting a morality play to his **Jacobean** audience: allow yourself to be morally corrupted and act against **societal norms** and you will suffer the consequences

### Kingship and the Divine Right of Kings

#### Knowledge and evidence:

- A Jacobean audience would have believed in the **Divine Right of Kings**: that kings derived their authority from God, and therefore could not be challenged
- Macbeth committing the treasonous act of **regicide** was therefore an act against God
- A Christian audience would have understood **regicide** as a mortal sin. This meant dying without the grace of God and being condemned to Hell, a terrifying prospect for a Jacobean
- In the play, Duncan is always referred to as a "king", but Macbeth once he ascends the throne is frequently called a **tyrant**
- Kings were seen to bring harmony to their kingdom - in line with God's plan - but tyrants bring only chaos and disorder
- The play ends with a legitimate ruler - Duncan's son and true heir, Malcolm - becoming king

#### What is Shakespeare's intention?

- Shakespeare can be seen to be upholding these contemporary views about kingship
- Shakespeare may also be suggesting that those unaccustomed and undeserving of power will be destroyed by it



Your notes

- Shakespeare is suggesting that kings are legitimate rulers, but tyrants are not

For more on the key theme of Ambition in Macbeth, including an exemplar question paper and model paragraph, click [here](#).

## The Supernatural

The vast majority of people in Jacobean England were Christian and believed in the literal word of the Bible. Supernatural events or characters, therefore, would have been seen as the work of the devil, and evil.

### Knowledge and evidence:

- In Jacobean England, there was still a widespread belief in witches and witchcraft
- They were seen as agents of Satan, and many women were executed on suspicion of being witches
- Jacobean audiences – and King James I himself – were fascinated by the presentation of witches on stage, but would know to distrust them
- The witches in Macbeth, therefore, should be seen as untrustworthy and **malevolent**
- The first scene of the play involves an **ominous** setting and three witches, **foreshadowing** future evil acts
- The witches are also shown to be capable of affecting the weather, creating spells and committing evil acts against ordinary people
- Macbeth should know better, but his ambition means he trusts the witches
- Banquo – who represents **societal norms** – rightly does not trust the witches
- The witches are seen as disruptive characters throughout: they are a negative influence on Macbeth and mislead him with their prophecies
- The supernatural also acts as an aid to characters wishing to gain, or retain, power:
  - Lady Macbeth calls on evil spirits to help her achieve her ambitions (Act I, Scene V)
  - In desperation, Macbeth returns to the witches a second time (Act IV, Scene I)

### What is Shakespeare's intention?

- Shakespeare could be suggesting that the witches are just a symbol of the temptations all humans have to wrestle with
- Alternatively, they can be seen as agents of fate: they just encourage Macbeth to act upon his true nature

## Appearance versus Reality



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Your notes

Shakespeare plays with the concept of perception throughout Macbeth: are we seeing what's really there? And are characters who they seem to be?

### Hallucinations

#### Knowledge and evidence:

- Throughout the play, Macbeth sees visions or hears things. These include:
  - A bloody dagger
  - Knocking
  - A voice telling him he's murdered sleep
  - Banquo's ghost
- Lady Macbeth also has visions of blood on her hands in Act V, Scene I
- These hallucinations are all representations of guilt
- Macbeth feels conflicted even before he murders Duncan, and so sees the bloody dagger floating in front of him just before he commits regicide by murdering King Duncan
- The repeated knocking and voice telling Macbeth he's murdered sleep represent the lack of peace the character will experience from now on
- Even Lady Macbeth – who was so resolved to kill Duncan – eventually sees visions of blood on her hands: a metaphor for her responsibility for his murder, and her guilt

#### What is Shakespeare's intention?

- It is not clear if Shakespeare intended for these visions to be real or not, but they certainly represent psychological realities for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth
- Shakespeare presents guilt as inescapable; there is no escape from the consequences of evil acts

## Duplicious characters



Your notes

### Knowledge and evidence:

- **Duplicious** means two-faced, or deceitful
- Deception is a repeated **motif** throughout the play
- The witches constantly mislead Macbeth: even though their prophecies all do come true, they are deliberately worded to deceive Macbeth
- Traitors and treason are mentioned throughout the play:
  - Macbeth kills a traitor in battle
  - The former Thane of Cawdor was plotting against King Duncan
  - Macduff is wrongly accused of being a traitor
- These are all ironic references from Shakespeare since the principal traitor is Macbeth, a character who:
  - Was loyal enough once to kill traitors
  - Will become another treasonous Thane of Cawdor
  - Will ultimately be killed by the loyal Macduff
- Lady Macbeth encourages Macbeth to present himself as innocent to Duncan while plotting his murder
- Macbeth lies to Banquo, his best friend:
  - that he hasn't been thinking about the witches; and
  - to find out where to send the assassins to murder him
- Eventually, Macbeth keeps truths from Lady Macbeth (Act III, Scene II), showing the breakdown of their once-close relationship

## What is Shakespeare's intention?

- Shakespeare could be suggesting that those who deceive and lie do not – and should not – prosper
- He could also be suggesting that once a character starts lying – or using violence – to protect themselves, it only ends up in a cycle of more deceit or violence.

## Swapping gender roles

### Knowledge and evidence:

- In Act I, Scene V, Lady Macbeth calls on evil spirits to give her 'masculine' characteristics; she wants to be "cruel"

- She also wants to remove those traits that are stereotypically feminine:
  - being motherly or nurturing
  - having remorse for evil acts
- In the same scene, Shakespeare has Lady Macbeth describe Macbeth in feminine terms: "too full o'th'milk of human kindness"
- Later, she questions Macbeth's masculinity when he is having doubts about killing Duncan



#### What is Shakespeare's intention?

- Shakespeare is presenting an atypical relationship, where Lady Macbeth wields more power than Macbeth
- Jacobean audiences would have found this power dynamic disturbing and unnatural
- Shakespeare could be suggesting that this type of unnatural relationship is bound to end in tragedy

## Corruption of Nature



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Jacobean audiences believed in a set structure in the world: the world according to God's plan. Any disruption to the world was, therefore, disruption to God's ordained order.

#### Knowledge and evidence:

- Jacobean audiences believed in the **Great Chain of Being**: a **hierarchy** of all things that asserted God's authority at the top of the chain
- It also served as a social **hierarchy** with, for example, kings above lords, and lords above peasants
- Men were above women in this social order
- The witches are a corrupting influence and seek to undermine the **Great Chain of Being**

- It was believed that any disruption to this **Great Chain of Being** would cause chaos
- In the play, the **Great Chain of Being** is disrupted by:
  - the **regicide** of King Duncan
  - Macbeth becoming king (when he was not chosen by God)
  - Lady Macbeth – a woman – dominating Macbeth
- The consequences of this disruption are seen in many unnatural occurrences:
  - Storms the night of Duncan's murder
  - An earthquake (described in Act II, Scene III)
  - An owl killing a falcon
  - Duncan's horses eating each other
  - The day being as dark as night (all described in Act II, Scene IV)
- More generally, this disruption is seen in the instability of the Kingdom of Scotland under Macbeth's rule
- Other examples of the effects of this disruption (all 'unnatural' acts):
  - Macbeth's murder of innocent people
  - His and his wife's descent into madness
  - The battle at Macbeth's castle

#### What is Shakespeare's intention?

- Shakespeare is suggesting that the consequences of disrupting the **Great Chain of Being** are extremely serious, not just for those who disrupt it, but for the whole world
- Shakespeare ends the play with the restoration of order: Malcolm – who is the rightful king – becomes monarch. The suggestion is that the chaos is now over



## Macbeth Key Theme: Ambition



### Ambition in Macbeth



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At its heart, Macbeth as a play is an exploration of ambition and its consequences. Find out how Shakespeare explores this central theme in Macbeth, along with tips on how to answer an exam question on the theme of ambition.

### How does Shakespeare present ambition in Macbeth?

Ambition in Macbeth is not about the characters' determination to succeed towards a goal. Ambition in the play as a negative character trait: not just a desire to achieve something, but an unnatural desire to achieve something at any cost.

Shakespeare has Macbeth speak the lines "vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself" in Act I, Scene VII. By choosing the verb "Vaulting" (jumping over), he suggests that to fulfil his ambition to become king, Macbeth must overcome any obstacle that stands in his way. This obstacle is King Duncan, and the only way to remove this obstacle is to murder him.

To murder a king was a shocking, unnatural act in Jacobean England but Macbeth is prepared to commit **regicide** to realise his ambition. Ultimately, the cost he will pay for his ambition is his own life.

### What are the elements of ambition in Macbeth?

- Ambition is Macbeth's fatal character flaw, his **hamartia**:
  - In **tragedy**, a **tragic hero** must have a tragic flaw
  - In Macbeth, as in most tragedy, the tragic hero's **hamartia** is the cause of their own downfall:



Your notes

- Macbeth's ambition to gain, and retain, the throne leads to him committing more and more evil acts
- Other characters seek revenge for these acts of murder
- Macbeth's own conscience also begins to terrorise him
- His death is a result of own mental disintegration and avenging heroes: he is killed by Macduff
- Shakespeare is also presenting a morality play to the audience:
  - The play is a warning against those who seek to undermine — or overthrow— the rule of a rightful king
  - Shakespeare may also be suggesting that those unaccustomed to or undeserving of power will be destroyed by it
  - Shakespeare suggest that kings are legitimate rulers, but ambitious **tyrants** are not:
    - If you are consumed by ambition, or **hubris**, you must prepare to suffer terrible consequences

## Answering an exam question on ambition in Macbeth

To get top marks for your essay, it is very important that you know the format and requirements of the exam paper, and the nature of the exam question. It is also vital that you know how to plan an answer in the Shakespeare exam, and are aware of what you need to include to get the highest grade.

It is always worthwhile spending a good deal of time planning an answer at GCSE, with examiners repeatedly reporting that the highest marks are awarded to those students who have clearly set aside time to plan their essays.

### Exam question

'Macbeth's ambition proves to be his downfall'

Starting with this moment in the play, explore how far you agree with this view.

Write about:

- How Shakespeare presents Macbeth's ambition in this extract
- How far Shakespeare presents Macbeth's ambition as the reason for his downfall in the play as a whole

### Extract:

#### Act I, Scene VII

Macbeth is contemplating whether or not to go through with the plan to murder King Duncan

#### MACBETH

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well



Your notes

It were done quickly: if the assassination  
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch  
With his surcease success; that but this blow  
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,  
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,  
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases  
We still have judgment here; that we but teach  
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return  
To plague the inventor: this even-handed justice  
Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice  
To our own lips. He's here in double trust;  
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,  
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,  
Who should against his murderer shut the door,  
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan  
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been  
So clear in his great office, that his virtues  
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against  
The deep damnation of his taking-off;  
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,  
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed  
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,  
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,  
That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself  
And falls on the other.



Your notes

## Essay plan on the theme of ambition in Macbeth

**Thesis statement:** While it could be argued that external factors play a part in the downfall of Macbeth – the witches' trickery, Lady Macbeth's manipulation – ultimately, it is Macbeth's own character flaws, and particularly his ambition, that causes his downfall. Shakespeare could be suggesting that a person's own characteristics determine their fate, and Macbeth's death is, therefore, a direct consequence of his own evil actions.

Topic sentence	Evidence from extract/text	Evidence from elsewhere in play
Although he is ambitious, Lady Macbeth's evil influence is the reason he commits regicide	"I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent"	Act II, Scene I where Lady Macbeth attacks Macbeth's masculinity and persuades him to kill Duncan
Macbeth knows the religious consequences of regicide, but his ambition drives him to commit the murder anyway	Semantic field of Heaven and Hell: "damnation", "angels" etc.	"That summons thee to Heaven, or to Hell"
As the play progresses, Macbeth's ambition to remain king sees him commit more and more <b>heinous</b> crimes, which lead to his downfall and death	His kindness – and sympathy for Duncan and his comrades – evaporates	Assassinations of Banquo and Macduff's family; lack of remorse; wilful trusting of the witches
<b>Shakespeare's methods:</b> Conventions of tragedy; characterisation		
<b>Contextual factors:</b> The Great Chain of Being; regicide and Christianity		

## Ambition in Macbeth: Grade 9 model paragraph

Despite the fact that Macbeth is clearly aware of the religious consequences of regicide, his ambition drives him to commit the murder of King Duncan, overriding all other sensibilities. In this scene, Shakespeare uses the semantic fields of religion throughout Macbeth's soliloquy: he refers to "Heaven", "cherubin" and "angels", as well as "damnation". This language is being used because Macbeth is discussing King Duncan's prospective life after death. However, it could also be argued that this language betrays Macbeth's own acknowledgement that committing the planned act of regicide (a mortal sin in the Jacobean era) will instead send him to eternal "damnation". Indeed, later on in the play, Shakespeare has Macbeth speak the lines: "That summons thee to Heaven, or to Hell", again, on the face of it referring to Duncan's passage to the afterlife, but in reality speaking about his own fate. Indeed, both Macbeth and

Lady Macbeth use the language of Heaven and Hell throughout Act I and the beginning of Act II, suggesting that they are both – on a subconscious level at least – mortally concerned for their future should they commit the sacrilegious act of murdering a sitting monarch. It can be argued that the regicide of King Duncan is the catalyst for Macbeth's ultimate downfall. In terms of tragedy, this is the inciting incident, after which a tragic hero's fate is sealed. Therefore, the language that Shakespeare has Macbeth use prior to the murder is very revealing. Before the murder, Macbeth admits in this soliloquy that – despite the acknowledgement of his own eternal punishment – that it is "only vaulting ambition" which is tempting him to overthrow the king. This is indeed Macbeth himself identifying that his ambition is the "only" reason that he himself identifies to commit the murder. It is his ambition that sets the wheels in motion for his ultimate demise.



Your notes

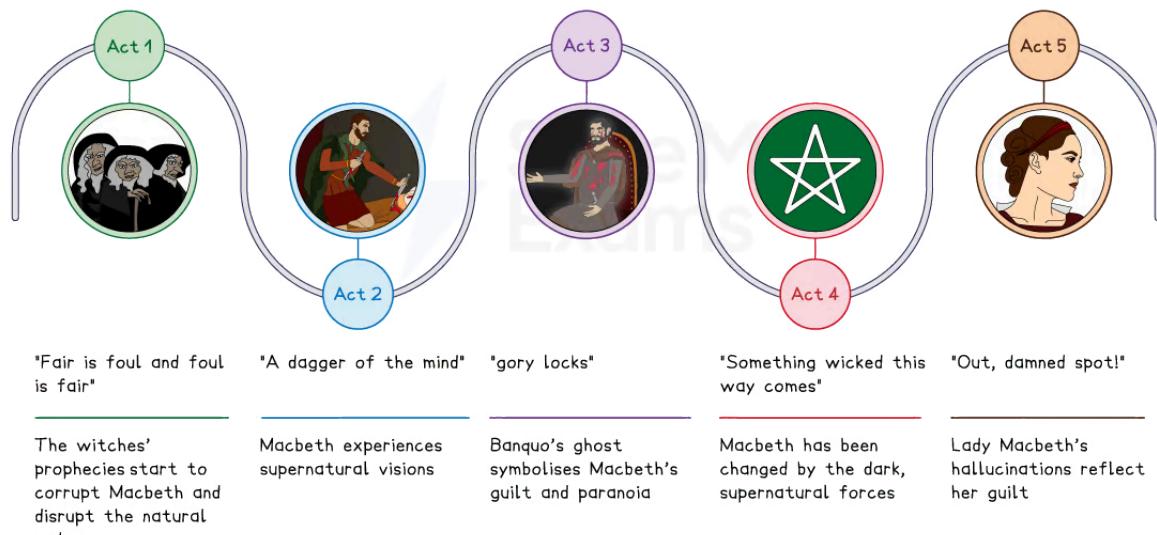


Your notes

## Macbeth Key Theme: The Supernatural

### Supernatural timeline

The key supernatural elements in each act of Macbeth:



## What are the supernatural elements in Macbeth?

The supernatural elements in the play include:

- **The three witches:** Shakespeare creates a supernatural atmosphere through their rituals and prophecies
- **Unnatural or supernatural events:** Shakespeare refers to storms, day darkening to night and animals behaving strangely (such as horses eating each other)
- **Apparitions:** The witches summon a severed head, a bloody child and a crowned child in Act 4, Scene 1
- **Visions and hallucinations:** Shakespeare uses a dagger, Banquo's ghost and imaginary bloodstains to sustain the supernatural atmosphere and add to the horror throughout the play

## The impact of the supernatural on characters

Through his use of **ghostly visions** and **hallucinations**, Shakespeare shows his audience the lasting, transformative effect of the supernatural elements on his central protagonists, Macbeth and Lady

Macbeth.

These elements contribute to the dramatic tension and the atmosphere of evil and uncertainty in the play, but also symbolise the characters' guilt, fear and paranoid by representing the psychological effect of their murderous actions.



Your notes

### The supernatural

Macbeth: his visions and hallucinations reflect his inner conflict, growing reliance on the supernatural and mental deterioration



Lady Macbeth: her hallucinations reveal, her fragile mental state and overwhelming guilt, showing the corrupting power of the supernatural

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#### *The supernatural in Macbeth*

Character	Impact



Your notes

<b>Macbeth</b>	Macbeth experiences two <b>ghostly visions</b> , the <b>dagger</b> and the <b>ghost of Banquo</b> , as well as <b>auditory hallucinations</b> when he comments: "Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more: / Macbeth does murder sleep'" (Act 2, Scene 2): <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Macbeth is initially sceptical but becomes increasingly reliant on supernatural guidance as the witches' prophecies of power channel his ambition, giving him false confidence</li><li>▪ The visions reflect his inner conflict, his guilt and his deteriorating mental state and drive his murderous actions</li></ul>
<b>Lady Macbeth</b>	Lady Macbeth also experiences <b>hallucinations</b> (spots of blood on her hands in Act 5, Scene 1): <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Her hallucinations reflect her fragile mental state and overwhelming sense of guilt</li><li>▪ The hallucinations remind the audience of the corrupting power of the dark, supernatural forces in the play</li></ul>

## Why does Shakespeare use the theme of the supernatural in his play?

### 1. Setting and atmosphere

- Creates the superstitious, medieval Scottish setting
- Establishes an ominous, foreboding atmosphere

### 2. Plot driver

- Influences Macbeth's actions through prophecies and visions
- Propels the narrative from the opening scene to the final act

### 3. Audience appeal

- Reflects the Jacobean audience's fear and fascination with witchcraft
- Aligns with his **patron** King James I's interest in the supernatural (author of Daemonologie)

### 4. Dramatic device

- Shakespeare starts and ends the play with supernatural elements (opens with "weird sisters" and closes with the fulfilment of the witches' prophecies)
- Adds dramatic tension and spectacle

## Exam-style questions on the theme of the supernatural



Your notes

Try planning a response to the following essay questions as part of your revision of the supernatural theme:

- Explore how Shakespeare presents the attitudes of Macbeth and Banquo towards the supernatural elements in the play. (You could start with Act 1, Scene 3.)
- How does Shakespeare present the supernatural elements as changing the character of Macbeth? (You could start with Act 2, Scene 1.)

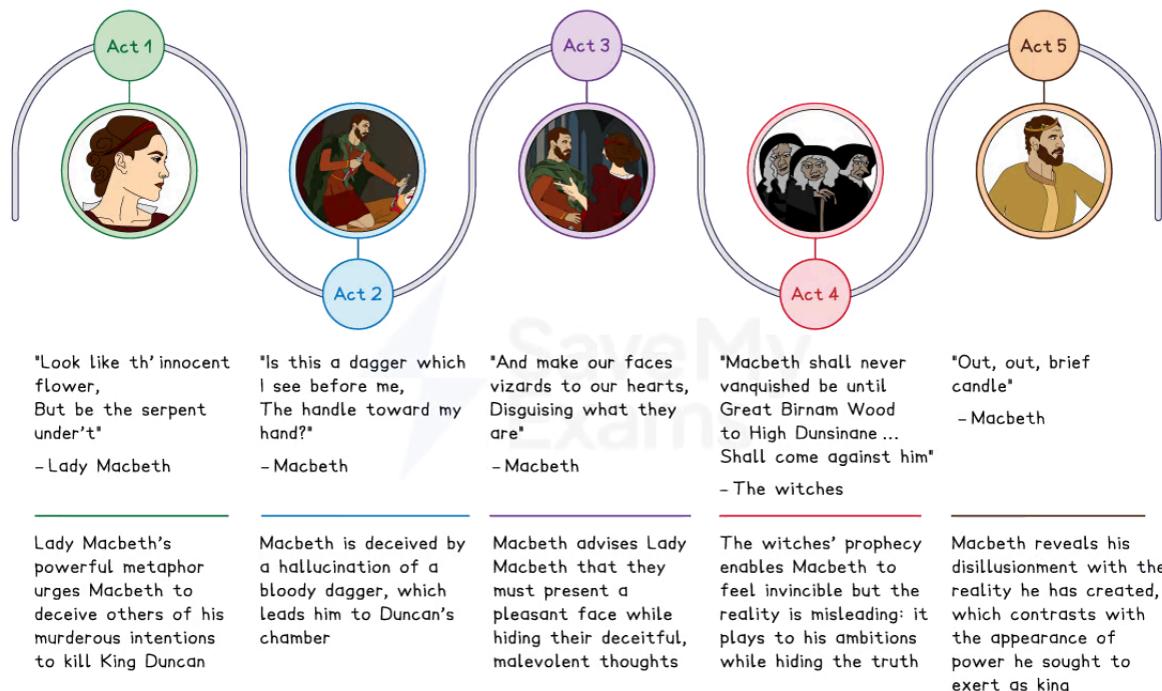


Your notes

## Macbeth Key Theme: Appearance versus Reality

### Appearance versus reality timeline

The theme of appearance versus reality in each act of Macbeth:



**Macbeth appearance versus reality timeline**

## What are the elements of appearance versus reality in Macbeth?

- **The deceptive nature of the witches:** Shakespeare portrays the witches as purposefully ambiguous, leading Macbeth to misinterpret them:
  - "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" introduces the theme of deception from the very beginning of the play
- **The bloody dagger:** Macbeth's guilt takes visual form when he hallucinates that a blood-covered dagger is leading him to murder his King and kinsman, Duncan: "Is this a dagger which I see before me?":
  - His initial appearance of loyalty to King Duncan hides his true intentions and Macbeth's betrayal creates an atmosphere of deception



Your notes

- **Lady Macbeth's strength:** Lady Macbeth is initially presented as dominant and strong but as the play progresses, she becomes fragile and haunted by guilt:
  - "Here's the smell of the blood still!"
- **Banquo's ghost:** Macbeth behaves treacherously towards Banquo and after arranging his murder, he is consumed by guilt, symbolised by the appearance of Banquo's ghost at the banquet:
  - "Thou canst not say I did it: never shake thy gory locks at me"

## The impact of appearance versus reality on characters

Characters in Macbeth present themselves in ways which do not reflect their realities and there is a sharp contrast between superficial appearances and underlying truths.

### Appearance versus Reality

Macbeth: the witches' prophecies give Macbeth a false sense of security, blurring the line between reality and illusion

Duncan: he is deceived by appearances, highlighting how easily trust can be misplaced

Banquo: although aware of the witches' deception, he fails to act on his suspicions

Lady Macbeth: she is haunted by Duncan's murder and reveals her guilt in the sleepwalking scene

The witches: their supernatural influence contrasts with the realism of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's relationship

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### Appearance versus reality in Macbeth

Character	Impact



Your notes

<b>Macbeth</b>	The witches' deceptive prophecies results in Macbeth having a false sense of security: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ As the play progresses, he can no longer trust what is real or imagined</li></ul>
<b>Lady Macbeth</b>	Despite Lady Macbeth and Macbeth's attempts to hide their guilt, Lady Macbeth is haunted by the reality of Duncan's murder in the sleepwalking scene: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him"</li></ul>
<b>Banquo</b>	Although Banquo is not entirely deceived by Macbeth, he does not act upon his suspicions in time to prevent his own death: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ However, unlike Macbeth, he is aware of the witches' deceptive nature: "The instruments of darkness tell us truths, / Win us with honest trifles, so betray's / In deepest consequence"</li></ul>
<b>Duncan</b>	Duncan is deceived into trusting both Thanes of Cawdor (who betray him), demonstrating how appearance can be misleading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ His commendation of the Macbeths' "pleasant" castle and of his "fair and noble" hostess illustrate his inability to see the reality behind their facade</li></ul>
<b>The witches</b>	Structurally, the appearances of the witches are few, but the audience is constantly reminded of their prophecies, which shape the action of the play: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ The artificial nature of their scenes contrasts with the realism of the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth</li></ul>

## Why does Shakespeare use the theme of appearance versus reality in his play?

### 1. Setting and atmosphere

- Establishes the theme of appearance versus reality as central to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's rise and fall:
  - From the very beginning, the audience is introduced to a world where nothing is as it seems

### 2. Plot driver

- Drives Macbeth's moral downfall as he is deceived by the witches' prophecies and believes he is invincible
- Creates the basis for key betrayals in the play, such as the deaths of Duncan and Banquo

### 3. Audience appeal

- Shakespeare's Jacobean audience would have been interested in regicide and treason at the time of the Gunpowder Plot (1605)
- James I, Shakespeare's patron, also feared betrayal and rebellion



Your notes

### 4. Dramatic device

- Heightens the importance of the appearance of the dagger and of Banquo's ghost, blurring the line between what is real and what is not

## Exam-style questions on the theme of appearance versus reality

Try planning a response to the following essay questions as part of your revision of the theme of appearance versus reality:

- Explore how the witches' statement "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" sets the tone for the theme of appearance versus reality in Macbeth. (You could start with Act 1, Scene 3.)
- To what extent does Macbeth's vision of the dagger and Banquo's ghost represent his deteriorating grasp on reality? (You could start with Act 1, Scene 7.)

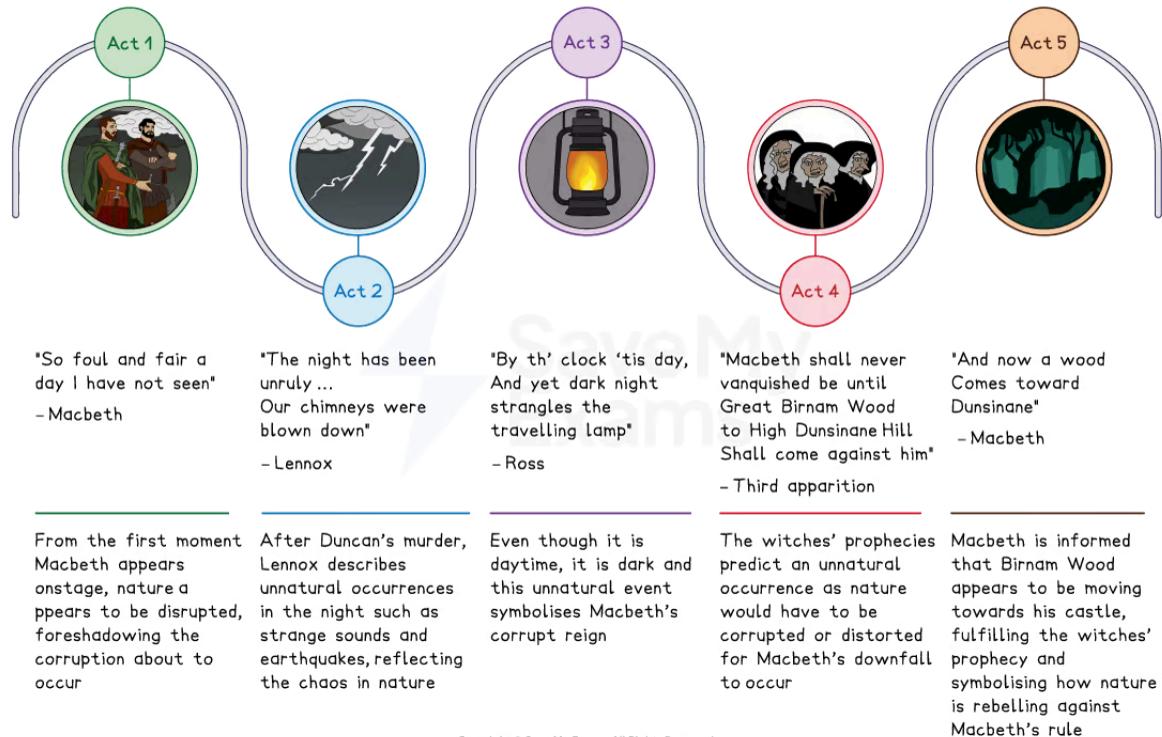


Your notes

## Macbeth Key Theme: Corruption of Nature

### Corruption of nature timeline

The corruption of nature theme in each act of Macbeth:



**Macbeth corruption of nature timeline**

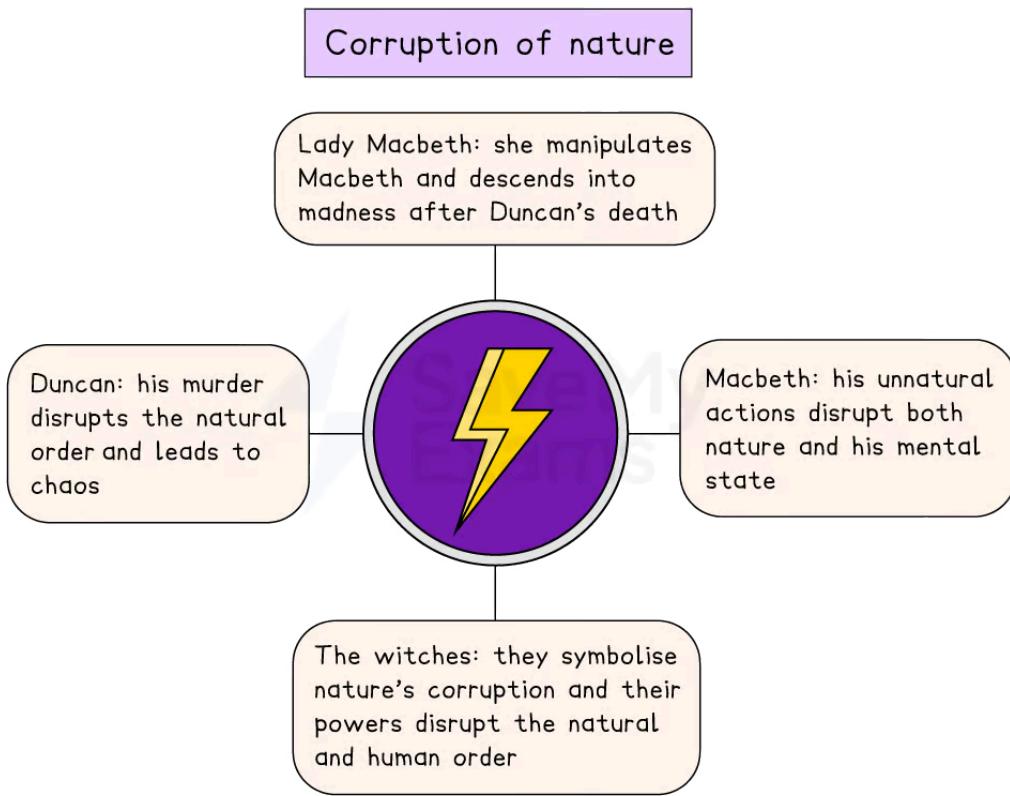
### Which elements link to the corruption of nature in Macbeth?

- **Descriptions of nature and the weather:** Shakespeare uses descriptions of the weather to foreshadow the deaths to come:
  - For example, the witches meet in "thunder" and "lightning" and Macbeth pronounces the day as "foul"
- **Duncan's murder:** Macbeth has consciously and deliberately acted against nature and as the play progresses, he continues to destabilise ordered patterns:


**Your notes**

- He acknowledges the dead Duncan is happier than he is and admits how “uneasy lies the head that wears the crown”
- In contrast, Shakespeare presents Duncan’s character as aligned with nature through pleasant descriptions (which Macbeth destroys): “the air/ nimbly and sweetly recommends itself/Unto our gentle senses”
- **Unnatural events after Duncan’s murder:** Duncan’s death occurs during a night Lennox describes as “unruly”, with “strange screams of death”:
  - This reflects the evil nature of Duncan’s death
- **Lady Macbeth’s unnatural role:** Lady Macbeth subverts the typical Jacobean gender roles, and demands the spirits to strip her of her femininity to achieve her ambition: “unsex me here”.

## The impact of the corruption of nature on characters



### Corruption of nature in Macbeth

Character	Impact



Your notes

Macbeth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Macbeth's unnatural actions lead to a disruption of both nature and his own mental state</li></ul>
Lady Macbeth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Lady Macbeth's close relationship with her husband and her knowledge of his ambitious nature enables her to manipulate him, by questioning his character: "I fear thy nature":<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Her complicity in Duncan's unnatural murder leads to her rapid descent into madness</li></ul></li></ul>
Duncan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Duncan's murder is the primary event that corrupts nature in the play and his death throws the natural order into chaos:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Duncan's horses "contending 'gainst obedience" are symbolic of the collapse of the country's social hierarchy into "most admired disorder", leading to civil war</li></ul></li></ul>
The witches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ The witches are symbolic of nature's corruption as they appear to have the power to predict the future, to defy the weather and have guiding spirits:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Their ability to "untie the winds" and disrupt nature symbolises their corruption of both the human and natural order</li></ul></li></ul>

## Why does Shakespeare use the theme of the corruption of nature in his play?

### 1. Setting and atmosphere

- Establishes a disrupted natural order from the beginning of the play
- Creates an eerie and foreboding tone

### 2. Plot driver

- Drives Macbeth's downfall as his actions continue to corrupt nature

### 3. Audience appeal

- Appeals to the audience's interest as the play reflects the volatile nature of society during the Jacobean era and the social expectations that unlawfully killing another man would be justly punished
- Challenges ideas about the role of women as Lady Macbeth's ambitious nature and controlling influence over Macbeth could be perceived as unnatural and unfeminine

### 4. Dramatic device

- Heightens the tension by using unnatural occurrences to signify the fundamental evil of the characters' actions



Your notes

## Exam-style questions on the theme of corruption of nature

Try planning a response to the following essay questions as part of your revision of the theme of corruption of nature:

- Explore how the murder of Duncan disrupts the natural order and leads to Macbeth's downfall. (You could start with Act 2, Scene 4.)
- How does Shakespeare use the theme of the corruption of nature to portray the character of Lady Macbeth? (You could start with Act 1, Scene 5.)

## Macbeth: Characters



Your notes

# Characters

It is vital that you understand the way Shakespeare uses his two main characters in the play, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. However, understanding less prominent characters and, crucially, how they compare to the main characters, will lead to the very best responses. Below you will find character profiles of:

- **Macbeth**
- **Lady Macbeth**
- **Banquo**
- **Macduff**
- **The minor characters of the Three Witches and Malcolm**

## Macbeth



- The play's **tragic hero**. This means:
  - He displays heroic characteristics



Your notes

- He has a fatal character flaw (**hamartia**): his ambition
- Despite his **hamartia**, the audience does feel some sympathy for him
- He is doomed to die at the end of the play
- At the beginning of the play, Macbeth is presented as:
  - **Brave**: he is shown to be a fearless warrior (an “eagle” and a “lion” in battle)
  - **Noble**: it is reported that he has killed a traitor in battle, showing his loyalty to King Duncan and Scotland in general
  - **Ambitious**: unlike his comrade Banquo, he is easily seduced by the witches’ dangerous prophecies
  - **Conscientious**: he questions the morality of committing regicide, which leads Lady Macbeth to challenge his courage and manliness
- For Macbeth, there is a tension between the heroic and loyal aspects of his character and his ambition. This results in him questioning his actions repeatedly, but ultimately succumbing to his darker desires
- As the play progresses, Macbeth becomes a less sympathetic character. He is shown to be:
  - **Cruel**: he murders his best friend, Banquo, and the wife and children of Macduff
  - **Paranoid**: he begins to suspect even innocent people are threats to his power, and even stops sharing things with Lady Macbeth (“full of scorpions is my mind”)
  - **Guilty**: his hallucinations represent his increasing feelings of guilt for the **regicide** and murder of Banquo
  - **Masculine**: he becomes the cruel, violent man that Lady Macbeth accuses him of not being, and becomes the dominant force in their relationship
  - **Nihilistic**: ultimately, he questions the pointlessness of life. For a Christian, **Jacobeans** audience, this would be seen as disturbing
- Despite his **hamartia**, and the barbaric villain Macbeth becomes, there are still reasons for an audience to feel sympathy for him:
  - He is tempted by evil witches
  - He is encouraged by a thoroughly unnatural woman, Lady Macbeth
  - He is thoroughly human: he is not pure evil, but a mixture of positive and negative character traits
  - This can be seen in his emotional reaction to his wife’s death and questioning of his own actions as a result (Act V, Scene V)
- Even at the end of the play, he dies a warrior’s death, which could be seen by a **Jacobeans** audience as heroic

# Lady Macbeth



Your notes

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- At the play's outset, Lady Macbeth is presented as:
  - **Ambitious:** she has a thirst for power unmatched even by Macbeth. She even calls on evil spirits to help her achieve it
  - **Ruthless:** she will do anything to gain this power. She lacks the conscience to question committing the **mortal sin of regicide**. She even says she would have "dashed out the brains" of her own baby if she had sworn to do so
  - **Duplicious:** when welcoming Duncan to Dunsinane, she has no hesitation greeting him warmly, knowing full well he would be murdered that evening
  - **Controlling:** she plans to commit **regicide**, and she dominates her husband Macbeth when he questions it
- She is also shown to be thoroughly untypical of a woman in the **Jacobean era**
- Shakespeare presents her as a character who **subverts** the typical attributes of women of that time:
  - She is **not dutiful:** she does not do what her husband tells her and is not loyal to her king
  - She is **not compassionate:** she wants to stop herself from feeling remorse for evil acts



Your notes

- She is **not nurturing**: she wants to replace the mother's milk in her breasts with "gall": courage, or in its other meaning, poison
- In many ways, Lady Macbeth is a less complex character than Macbeth. She does not have the same feelings of doubt or pangs of conscience that Macbeth does
- As the play progresses, Lady Macbeth loses control:
  - of her **resolve**: in Act V, she finally realises the true extent of her crime and its eternal consequences
  - of her **relationship**: Macbeth does not share his plans with her after Act II and becomes the dominant force in their relationship
  - of her **mind**:
    - she begins hallucinating blood (a symbol of her responsibility and guilt for the murder of Duncan)
    - she cannot stop walking and talking in her sleep (sleep is a symbol of peace, so she is now never at peace)
    - she is so tormented by guilt that she can no longer live with it and commits suicide
- Shakespeare presents a **role reversal** in the traditional husband and wife relationship:
- However, as the play progresses, Macbeth assumes the traditional, dominant role in their relationship
- Shakespeare could be suggesting that because she is a woman, Lady Macbeth is less capable of handling the power that comes with being a king or queen
- Shakespeare could also be comparing Lady Macbeth – as a woman – to the evil influence of the witches
- She is 'unnatural', just like the witches are, because of her untypical attributes and her dominance over Macbeth

For more on the key character of Lady Macbeth, including an exemplar question paper and model paragraph, click [here](#).

## Banquo



Your notes

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- Banquo acts as a contrast to the character of Macbeth. In literature, this is known as being a **foil**:
  - A **foil** (Banquo) is used to contrast with the characteristics of a **protagonist** (Macbeth)
  - A **foil**, therefore, highlights character traits that are very particular to the protagonist that an author wants to explore
- Banquo represents the typical behaviours and attitudes of the **Jacobean era**, the **societal norms**:
  - Unlike Macbeth, he is very **suspicious of the witches**. After they give their first prophecies, Banquo appeals to "reason"
  - Unlike Macbeth, he is **honest**: he tells Macbeth that he had been dreaming about the witches. In response, Macbeth lies and tells Banquo he hadn't given them any more thought
  - Unlike Macbeth, he is **loyal**: after Duncan's murdered body is discovered, he vows to fight "treasonous malice"
  - Unlike Macbeth, he is devoutly **Christian**: he compares the witches to the Devil; after the regicide, he says "in the great hand of God I stand"
- Because Banquo represents the **societal norms**, Shakespeare makes him rightly suspicious of Macbeth's behaviour:
  - Immediately after meeting the witches, he thinks Macbeth is "rapt", or spellbound

- After Macbeth becomes king, he says that he believes Macbeth “play’dst most foully for it”: he thinks Macbeth got the crown by evil means

## Macduff



Your notes

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- In the play, Macduff acts as an avenging agent who stands in contrast to the villainous Macbeth
- Like Banquo, he also represents the attributes a **Jacobean** audience would expect in a Scottish **thane**:
  - He is **noble**: when told the news of the murder of his wife and children, he gives a moving speech stating that there is more to manhood than violence and ambition. Men must also have compassion and feel grief: “I must also feel it as a man”
  - He is **loyal**: his loyalty is tested by Malcolm and he passes the test: “I am not treacherous”. He also repeatedly calls Macbeth a “tyrant”, i.e. not a true ruler, but one who rules cruelly
  - He is **brave**: he has no hesitation facing Macbeth – himself a fearsome warrior – in one-to-one combat, and he defeats him
- The audience would feel sympathy for Macduff because of the cruel murder of his innocent family
- He also acts as a symbol of the **status quo**: the actions of Macduff return order to the Kingdom of Scotland and return the rightful, God-chosen king to the throne

## Other characters



Your notes

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## The Witches

- One way of seeing the witches is as a symbol of external evil: they are the representatives of the Devil on earth, and so do the devil's work
- They are also presented by Shakespeare as:
  - **Grotesque:** they are described as having bearded faces, which heightens the sense that they are supernatural, or unnatural, and not part of God's natural order
  - **Duplicitous:** Their prophecies are deliberately misleading, leading to characters misunderstanding them
  - **Malevolent:** before delivering their first three prophecies (Act I, Scene III) they are seen plotting evil acts of torture against ordinary people. This may lead the audience to suspect they have evil ideas for Macbeth, too
  - **Disruptive:** they are constantly seen to disrupt nature (with storms and spells) and, ultimately, seek to disrupt the **Great Chain of Being** and God's authority over the world
- They can be seen as agents of fate, only predicting the inevitable consequences of characters' actions
- Shakespeare may also be suggesting that the witches are only manifestations of the characters' psychological realities: they only encourage characters to be true to their own – evil – selves

## Malcolm



Your notes

- Shakespeare uses Malcolm more as a symbol than a fully fleshed-out character
- He represents order or the **status quo**: he is the true heir to Duncan and the rightful king, as appointed by God according to the **Divine Right of Kings**
- This stands in contrast to Macbeth, who represents chaos
- Shakespeare uses Malcolm to explore the idea of what makes a good, rightful king:
  - In contrast to Macbeth, he unites the Scottish thanes to battle against Macbeth
  - In contrast to Macbeth, he is not presented as a **tyrant**
  - In Act IV, Scene III, Malcolm discusses with Macduff what makes a **tyrant**, and then assures Macduff he is no such thing
- With the rightful king (Malcolm) not on the throne, the world is thrown into disorder: the **Great Chain of Being** has been disrupted
- Shakespeare returns Malcolm to the throne in the last scene of the play and, therefore, the order is restored to the kingdom

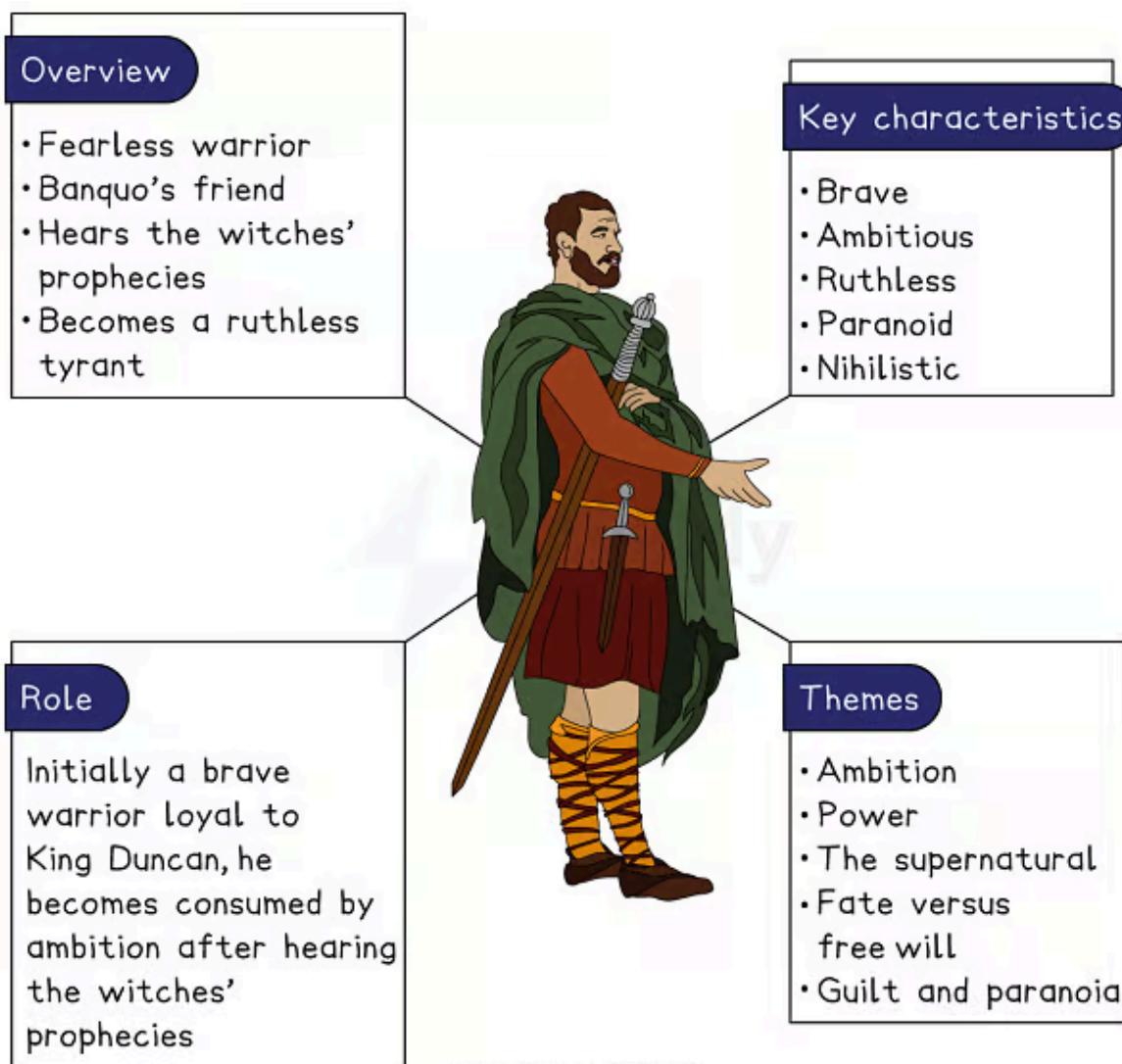


Your notes

## Macbeth Character Analysis

Macbeth is motivated by ambition, the witches' prophecies and Lady Macbeth, all of which lead to his moral corruption and tragic downfall.

### Macbeth character summary

Copyright © Save My Exams. All Rights Reserved.**Macbeth character summary**



Your notes

# Why is Macbeth important?

At the beginning of the play, Macbeth is depicted as:

- **Brave and noble:** before Macbeth appears on stage, the audience are given a positive impression of him as a fearless and noble soldier through the Captain's report. For example, he is described as "brave" and "like Valour's minion". He is also praised for his brutality on the battlefield and this violence prepares the audience for similar violence later in the play.
- **Ambitious:** in contrast to his comrade Banquo, Macbeth is immediately enticed by the witches' dangerous prophecies. Although Macbeth's **hamartia** is ambition, in a classical virtue system ambition is not a flaw unless it is misdirected or taken to extreme measures. It could then be said that Macbeth's ambition is both misdirected and taken to extremes, and that Lady Macbeth plays a crucial role in shaping and misdirecting his ambition.

As the play unfolds, Macbeth becomes increasingly unsympathetic as a character and is portrayed as:

- **Ruthless:** Macbeth's power comes from his capacity for violence and the ability to kill his enemy. In battle he is described as killing the traitor Macdonwald, unseaming "him from the nave to the chops". As king, Macbeth's ambition drives him to control and manipulate others much more ruthlessly in order to consolidate his position. For example, he hires murderers to kill Banquo, persuading them that "Banquo was [their] enemy" and orders the murder of Macduff's family.
- **Paranoid and guilt-ridden:** despite Macbeth's ruthlessness, his guilt is demonstrated when he sees Banquo's ghost: "For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind". This could be interpreted by the audience as a product of Macbeth's paranoia and guilt-ridden imagination rather than the direct influence of supernatural forces.
- **Nihilistic:** Macbeth increasingly contemplates the futility and meaninglessness of life, particularly in his final soliloquy in Act 5. His recognition of his own errors and his inevitable downfall give him a self-awareness which ultimately makes him a tragic hero.

For more on how Shakespeare presents the character of Macbeth, see our video below:

## Macbeth's use of language

The language Shakespeare uses for Macbeth, from elevated iambic pentameter to fragmented prose and introspective soliloquies, reflects his complex and changing character:

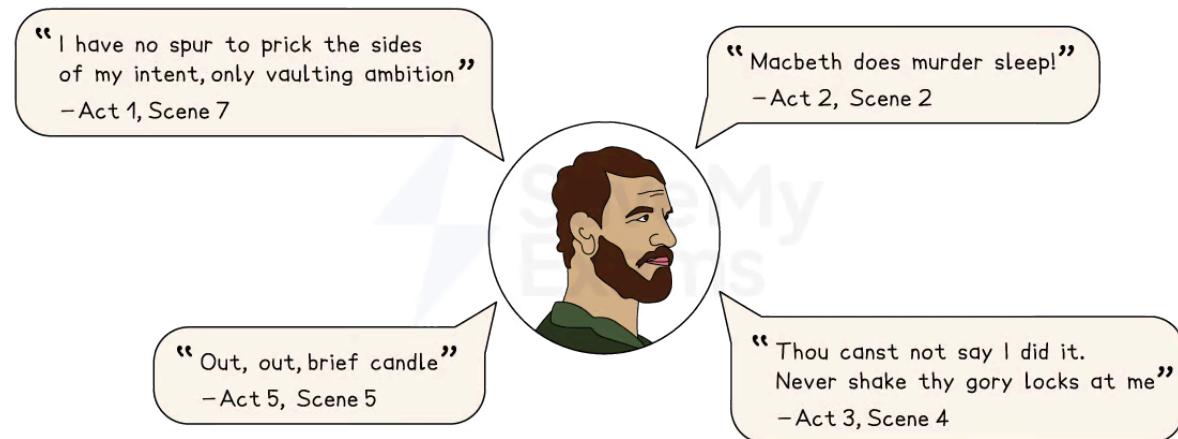
- **Iambic pentameter:** Macbeth often speaks in iambic pentameter which gives his dialogue a formal and elevated tone. This is typical of a noble or important character and conveys his high status. However, as his moral decline progresses, his speech becomes more fragmented.
- **Prose and rhyming couplets:** Macbeth occasionally shifts into prose which Shakespeare uses to distance Macbeth from his noble status and to signify his moral degradation. For example, when he speaks to Banquo's assassins Shakespeare chooses prose to illustrate his deceptive nature. Similarly,


**Your notes**

he occasionally speaks in rhyming couplets which mirrors the language patterns of the witches, linking him to their malevolence and demonstrating his corrupted state.

- Soliloquies and asides:** These dramatic techniques reveal Macbeth's ambition, guilt, paranoia and growing **nihilism** as the audience witnesses his descent from a loyal warrior to a tyrannical ruler. Dramatically, Shakespeare's soliloquies enable the audience to connect with Macbeth's inner thoughts and emotions, offering insight into the truth as he sees it. While Macbeth lies to those around him, he does not deceive the audience, nor does he deceive himself.

## Macbeth key quotes



The diagram features a central circular portrait of Macbeth with a beard and brown hair. Four speech bubbles radiate from behind him, each containing a quote and its source. The quotes are:

- "I have no spur to prick the sides  
of my intent, only vaulting ambition"  
– Act 1, Scene 7
- "Macbeth does murder sleep!"  
– Act 2, Scene 2
- "Out, out, brief candle"  
– Act 5, Scene 5
- "Thou canst not say I did it.  
Never shake thy gory locks at me"  
– Act 3, Scene 4

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## Macbeth key quotes

## Macbeth character development

Act 1, Scene 7	Act 2, Scene 1	Act 3, Scene 4	Act 5, Scene 5
<p><b>Macbeth's first soliloquy:</b> Macbeth reflects on the consequences of murdering King Duncan which reveals his internal conflict. This soliloquy is a pivotal moment in the play and it foreshadows the moral turmoil that will plague him.</p>	<p><b>The dagger soliloquy:</b> In this scene, Macbeth has a hallucination of a blood-covered dagger, leading him towards Duncan's chamber. This dramatic device is used to convey how supernatural forces</p>	<p><b>Macbeth's guilt and paranoia:</b> In the banquet scene, Macbeth encounters the ghost of Banquo and expresses his horror and guilt at its appearance. This scene signifies Macbeth's deteriorating mental state and the consequences of his ruthless quest for power.</p>	<p><b>Macbeth's isolation and final soliloquy:</b> At this point in the play, Macbeth has become increasingly isolated and is surrounded by enemies. He reflects on the meaninglessness and futility of life and his final soliloquy captures his despair.</p>

have overcome  
Macbeth.



Your notes

Structurally, Macbeth's soliloquies trace his rise and fall, revealing his awareness of the inevitable fate that controls his destiny.

For more on the development of Macbeth's character, see our video below:

## Macbeth character interpretation

### Macbeth's violence

A contemporary or modern audience may accept that violence is acceptable (even sometimes admirable) in war or when defending one's country. At the beginning of the play, Macbeth's violence could then be viewed as noble: he is described as killing a traitor and defending Scotland and its king. However, the play was written at a time when the king was widely believed to be God's representative on Earth. Therefore, Macbeth's later act of regicide (the killing of a rightful king) would have been seen as the ultimate crime, so his murder of Duncan marks his moral downfall. Indeed, the murder of Duncan is performed off-stage since a contemporary audience would have viewed the killing of a king as a horrific crime.

### The Divine Right of Kings

James I was thought to be descended from Banquo so the prophecies Banquo receives from the witches support his Divine Right to the throne, reinforcing the idea that Macbeth's rule is illegitimate.

### Jacobean societal expectations

The play reflects the volatile nature of society during both the medieval and Shakespearean era and the social expectations that unlawfully killing another would be rightfully punished. Macbeth's defiance of the law, natural justice and royal succession mean that those who rebel against him can be seen as true loyalists, with Macbeth depicted as a tyrant and usurper. Ultimately, Macbeth must be defeated to atone for his crimes and restore the moral order.

### Religion and the supernatural

The belief in witches during Shakespeare's era (King James I even wrote a book on the subject called Daemonologie) meant that engaging with fate and fortune posed a challenge to traditional religious beliefs.

Macbeth could therefore be viewed as a puppet manipulated by forces beyond his control (since some of the audience would have believed in supernatural forces) or a character who is so desperate that he resorts to achieving his goals through the darkest means possible.



Your notes

## Macbeth Key Character Profile: Lady Macbeth



### Overview

- Wife of Macbeth
- Plots the murder of Duncan
- Plagued by guilt and remorse
- Commits suicide

### Key characteristics

- Strong
- Ambitious
- Determined
- Vulnerable

### Role

She plays a pivotal role in driving the plot forward by helping Macbeth to fulfil his ambitions for the crown

### Themes

- Ambition
- Gender roles
- Corruption of nature
- Guilt and paranoia

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### Lady Macbeth character summary

Understanding Lady Macbeth and, crucially, what themes Shakespeare uses her character to explore is vital to understanding Macbeth as a play. Even in her absence from the stage she remains a crucial character to the plot of the play and influences how the other characters – particularly Macbeth – act.

In this detailed character profile you will find analysis of how Shakespeare uses the character of Lady Macbeth across his text to explore the following themes:

- Ambition
- Jacobean gender roles
- Corruption of nature



This page also includes advice on how to answer an exam question on Lady Macbeth.

## Lady Macbeth: Character summary

Lady Macbeth			
Key characteristics	Role	Themes	Overview
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Strong</li><li>▪ Ambitious</li><li>▪ Determined</li><li>▪ Vulnerable</li></ul>	She plays a pivotal role in driving the plot forward by helping Macbeth to fulfil his ambitions for the crown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Ambition</li><li>▪ Gender roles</li><li>▪ Corruption of nature</li><li>▪ Guilt and paranoia</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Wife of Macbeth</li><li>▪ Plots the murder of Duncan</li><li>▪ Plagued by guilt and remorse</li><li>▪ Commits suicide</li></ul>

## How does Shakespeare present Lady Macbeth?

The best way to understand characters in a Shakespeare play is to explore how they relate to the overarching themes of the play: ambition, gender and the corruption of nature.

### Lady Macbeth and ambition

- Both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth display the fatal flaw of ambition throughout the play:
  - The fatal flaw, or **hamartia**, is a common feature of **tragedy**
  - Typically, in a **tragedy**, this fatal character flaw will result in a character's demise, or death
  - Shakespeare conforms to the conventions of tragedy by having both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth consumed by their **hamartia** and, ultimately, dying
- It could be argued that Lady Macbeth is even more ambitious than Macbeth:



Your notes

- This makes Macbeth a true **tragic hero**: unlike Lady Macbeth, he is at first presented as brave and loyal, and has redeeming qualities
- It is just his ambition that is his downfall
- Conversely, Lady Macbeth cannot truly be considered a **tragic hero** because she is not presented at the play's outset as sympathetic
- At the outset of the play, she has no doubts about the plan to murder King Duncan
- Macbeth, on the other hand, wrestles with his conscience when weighing up whether to commit **regicide** and an audience might have more sympathy for Macbeth
- Lady Macbeth's ambition has dire consequences for her state of mind
  - She is less **bullish** about the murder of Duncan
  - She has lost control of her speech
  - She has lost the ability to control Macbeth, or the people around her
  - She ultimately loses her mind and commits suicide
  - Later in the play (in Act V, Scene I), we see that her **resolve** and authority have disappeared
- Her **hubris** (overconfidence) leads her to commit crimes that would have been considered truly shocking to a **Jacobean** audience:
  - This **hubris** comes with a fall, and she is consumed by guilt and fear of religious consequences

For more on how Shakespeare presents the character of Lady Macbeth, see our video below:

## Lady Macbeth and Macbeth's relationship: exploring Jacobean gender roles

- Shakespeare explores ideas about gender roles through the character of Lady Macbeth
  - She is shown to **subvert** the typical characteristics of a woman in that era:
    - She is not **subservient** to her husband, or other men, but rather controlling and manipulative
    - She is not presented as loving, or nurturing, or compassionate: she feels no pangs of conscience when planning, or remorse immediately after, the murder of Duncan
  - Therefore, Shakespeare presents the audience with a woman who is thoroughly untypical of **Jacobean societal norms**
- It could also be argued that Shakespeare presents a **role reversal** in the traditional **Jacobean** relationship between a husband and a wife:
  - Typically, a man, and especially a husband, would have:



Your notes

- authority over his wife, but Lady Macbeth seems to have authority over both Macbeth, and even the castle, Dunsinane, that they live in (she calls them "my battlements")
- **agency** to act as he pleases, but Lady Macbeth influences, or even manipulates, his actions in the first two acts of the play
- Interestingly, this **role reversal** incrementally switches back to **societal norms** over the course of the play:
  - As the play progresses, Lady Macbeth has less and less authority over her husband
  - Macbeth begins to keep secrets from Lady Macbeth (the assassinations, visiting the witches for a second time) and having increasing **agency**
  - By Act V, he assumes the typical, dominant role of a husband, and Lady Macbeth is reduced to a feeble, powerless wife
- Shakespeare could be suggesting that because she is a woman, Lady Macbeth is less capable of handling the power that comes with being a king or queen
- He could also be suggesting that women have less capacity to deal with guilt
  - She commits suicide while Macbeth fights bravely until the last
- A **modern audience**, with different attitudes about women's role in society, might respond differently to Lady Macbeth:
  - Her profound love for her husband leads her to evil deeds and she is motivated by her ambition for him, as his "dearest partner of greatness"
  - Rather than being an evil or demonised **caricature**, the "fiend-like queen" Malcolm describes her as, she clearly has a strong, moral conscience:
    - She calls on evil spirits to "stop up ... the passage of remorse" so that she can put aside her moral or emotional feelings about committing **regicide**
    - Later in the play, she is overwhelmed by her feelings of remorse, while Macbeth goes on to commit further murders

## Lady Macbeth and the corruption of nature

- Lady Macbeth may also been seen to represent the corruption of the proper, Christian order of things
- She cannot maintain her authority over Macbeth
- She cannot handle the consequences of **regicide**, and commits suicide as a result
- Shakespeare may be presenting a moral message here to his **Jacobean** audience: disrupt the proper Christian order and prepare to face devastating consequences
- The **Jacobbeans** believed in the **Great Chain of Being**, which asserted a rightful **hierarchy** of all things in the universe, as set out by God



Your notes

- Kings were above men, and men were above women in this **hierarchy**
- Because Lady Macbeth both plans to **usurp** the throne, and has the ability to control her husband, a man, she can be seen as disrupting this established order
- For this she is punished
- Shakespeare could also be comparing Lady Macbeth — as a woman — to the evil influence of the witches:
  - The witches also seek continually to disrupt the natural order of things by manipulating the weather, and human beings
  - She is 'unnatural', just like the witches are, because of her untypical attributes and dominance over Macbeth:
    - She also is childless, which would have marked her as an unnatural wife in the Jacobean era, having lost a child

## Lady Macbeth's use of language

The language Shakespeare uses for Lady Macbeth, from fiery blank verse to disjointed prose and spell-like soliloquies, reflects her complex and changing character:

- **Iambic pentameter:**
  - Lady Macbeth often speaks in iambic pentameter which gives her speech a formal and elevated tone, reflecting her high status early in the play
- **Prose:**
  - Later in the play, Shakespeare uses disjointed prose and repetition to reflect her mental decline as Lady Macbeth becomes increasingly isolated and overwhelmed by guilt and remorse for her crimes
  - Her incoherent, fragmented speech towards the end of the play dramatically presents her fall and reveals her vulnerability, evoking feelings of pity in other characters (the Doctor and Gentlewoman) and the audience
- **Soliloquies:**
  - In her famous "unsex me" soliloquy in Act 1, Scene 5, Shakespeare deliberately echoes the language of spells and witchcraft, with repeated references to "spirits", to align her with the evil supernatural forces in the play
  - Her speech includes commanding imperatives such as "come" to reflect her power

For more on the development of Lady Macbeth's character, see our video below:

## Answering a GCSE question on Lady Macbeth

In order to get top marks for your essay, it is very important that you know the format and requirements of the exam paper and the nature of the exam question. Start by:

- Revising the plot of the play and Lady Macbeth's most important scenes
- Revising some short key word quotations from different parts of the play:
  - This is challenging because the exam is "closed book", meaning that you will not have access to a copy of the text



In the exam, always spend time planning your answer at GCSE, as examiners repeatedly report that the highest marks are awarded to those students who have clearly set aside time to plan their essays. You can find an example essay plan below.

### Exam question

Starting with this extract, how does Shakespeare present Lady Macbeth as a powerful woman?

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a powerful woman in this extract
- how Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a powerful woman in the play as a whole

### Extract:

#### Act I, Scene VII

Lady Macbeth questions Macbeth's unwillingness to follow through with their plan to murder King Duncan

#### LADY MACBETH

Was the hope drunk

Wherein you dress'd yourself? hath it slept since?

And wakes it now, to look so green and pale

At what it did so freely? From this time

Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard

To be the same in thine own act and valour

As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that

Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,

And live a coward in thine own esteem,

Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would,'

Like the poor cat i' the adage?



Your notes

#### MACBETH

Prithee, peace:

I dare do all that may become a man;

Who dares do more is none.

#### LADY MACBETH

What beast was't, then,

That made you break this enterprise to me?

When you durst do it, then you were a man;

And, to be more than what you were, you would

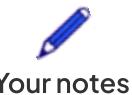
Be so much more the man.

## Lady Macbeth essay plan

**Thesis statement:** While Shakespeare initially presents Lady Macbeth as a powerful woman with agency over her husband and influence over others, later in the play she is shown to have lost her authority and ability to command. Shakespeare is perhaps suggesting that it is unnatural for a woman to hold such power, and that her character falls prey to the consequences of assuming such an uncharacteristic role as a woman.

Topic sentence	Evidence from extract	Evidence from elsewhere in play
Initially, Lady Macbeth is presented as subverting gender expectations of a woman: she has power over both her husband and her household	"When you durst do it, then you were a man" = questioning Macbeth's masculinity	"My battlements" = she believes the castle of Dunsinane is hers
Increasingly, however, Lady Macbeth loses hold on her power and is increasingly sidelined by her husband	Contrast the insults of "coward" and "green and pale"	Macbeth begins to keep secrets from her (assassinations); she is increasingly sidelined in terms of agency

Ultimately, Lady Macbeth is presented as a feeble, powerless wife, a complete reversal of her character in Act I	Contrast the interrogatives and blank verse	Prose a reflection of the complete loss of control and power; death isn't even on stage
<b>Shakespeare's methods:</b> Commanding language; characterisation across whole play		
<b>Contextual factors:</b> Jacobean expectations for women; societal norms		



## Lady Macbeth essay: model paragraph

Below is a model paragraph for the exam question.

Lady Macbeth is certainly presented as perhaps the most powerful of all Shakespeare's characters in Act I of Macbeth. However, as the play progresses, Lady Macbeth loses hold on her power, and is progressively sidelined by her husband. In this scene, the final scene of Act I, she assumes a dominant and controlling position in her marriage: in a manner thoroughly atypical of a Jacobean woman, she has the power to hurl insults at her cowed husband. She calls him a "coward" and "pale and green": these adjectives denoting sickness suggesting that he is both weak physically, but also mentally. Here, Shakespeare shows her influence over Macbeth as she convinces him to commit regicide, despite the fact that he has just stated adamantly "we will proceed no further in this business". As the play progresses, in the banquet scene, Shakespeare presents a desperate Lady Macbeth attempting to calm a visibly agitated Macbeth, who is hallucinating and vociferously ranting at a 'ghost'. Unlike earlier in the play, Lady Macbeth is unable to have Macbeth bend to her will. She still uses the same insulting language ("shame") and imperative verbs but, this time, to little or no effect. Moreover, from the point of the murder of Duncan, Macbeth begins to keep secrets from Lady Macbeth (such as the plans for assassinating Banquo and Fleance), which shows not only his increased agency, but also that the power dynamic in the relationship changing: gradually, he is becoming more powerful as Lady Macbeth's power decreases and her influence wanes. This could be Shakespeare criticising what he saw as unnatural power dynamics in their marriage. It could be argued that Shakespeare is presenting the gender roles in a relationship (so unusual at the play's outset) increasingly conforming to societal expectations, since the magnitude of the crime they have committed – the mortal sin of regicide – is assumed to be too much for a woman to handle.

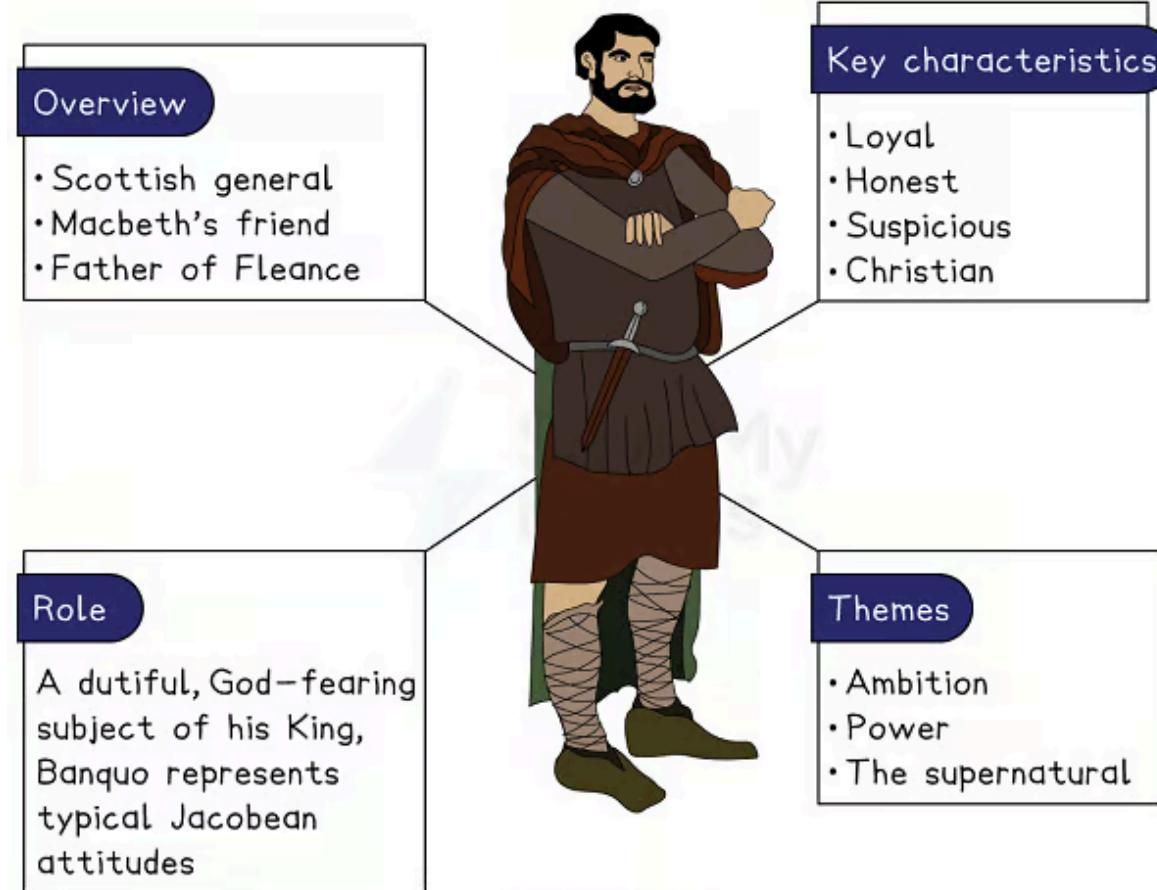


Your notes

## Banquo Character Analysis

Banquo represents loyalty, honesty and typical Christian values, all characteristics that Macbeth fails to display.

### Banquo character analysis



### Why is Banquo important?

Shakespeare uses Banquo as a **foil**, to provide a contrast to the character of Macbeth. Banquo represents many things that Macbeth is not:



Your notes

- **Trusting:** At the beginning of the play, he refers to Macbeth as "my noble partner", although later he suspects that Macbeth may have become king through evil means
- **Dutiful:** He is always shown to be faithful towards his king and kingdom, and publicly criticises the "treasonous malice" of Duncan's regicide
- **Sceptical:** Banquo distrusts the witches and their prophecies because, as a faithful Christian, he believes them to be evil

Later in the play, Banquo returns as a ghost. Banquo's ghost is only visible to Macbeth and seems **symbolic** of Macbeth's guilt.

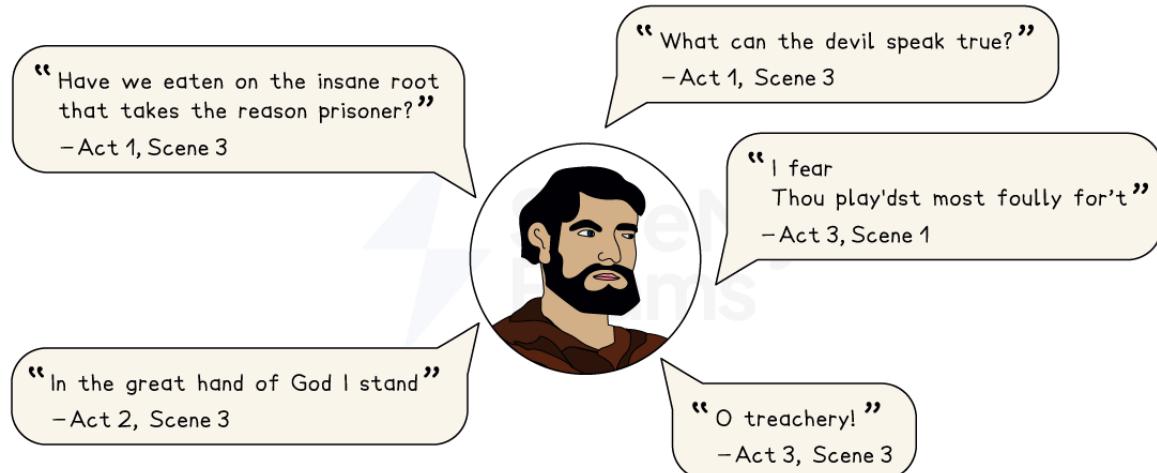
For more on how Shakespeare presents the character of Banquo, see our video below:

## Banquo's use of language

Shakespeare uses a range of techniques to compare Banquo's speech with other characters:

- **Straightforward language:** He speaks plainly throughout the play, unlike Macbeth and Lady Macbeth: he earnestly supports his king and the established order and calls on his Christian beliefs frequently to show his honesty and integrity.
- **Iambic pentameter:** This shows he is a nobleman, while Macbeth's speech is interspersed with prose or rhyming couplets to show his relative lack of virtue and the increasing corruption of his noble nature.
- **Soliloquies and asides:** Shakespeare reveals his integrity and moral clarity through his speeches. They reflect his concern that Macbeth has been deceived by the witches' prophecies and may have killed Duncan as a result.

## Banquo key quotes



“Have we eaten on the insane root  
that takes the reason prisoner?”  
–Act 1, Scene 3

“What can the devil speak true?”  
–Act 1, Scene 3

“I fear  
Thou play'dst most foully for't”  
–Act 3, Scene 1

“In the great hand of God I stand”  
–Act 2, Scene 3

“O treachery!”  
–Act 3, Scene 3

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### Banquo key quotes



Your notes

## Banquo character development

Act 1, Scene 3	Act 2, Scene 1	Act 3, Scene 1	Act 3, Scene 5
<b>Banquo questions the prophecies:</b> Although formidable allies on and off the battlefield, Macbeth and Banquo perceive the witches' prophecies differently, with Banquo urging Macbeth to "reason".	<b>Banquo's declares his faith:</b> After Duncan's murder, Banquo publicly declares his loyalty to Duncan and his faith in God (and God's choice of king).	<b>Banquo reveals his suspicions:</b> In a soliloquy, Banquo shares his fears that Macbeth's claim to the throne was achieved by "foul" means.	<b>Macbeth's betrayal:</b> Banquo's noble and trusting nature means that he is still surprised by the treachery of Macbeth — who has planned to murder him and his son Fleance.

For more on how Shakespeare presents the character of Banquo, check out our video:

## Banquo character interpretation

### Flattering King James

William Shakespeare's play Macbeth is loosely based on real events in Scotland in the early 11th century. James I — the king of Scotland and also the king of England at the time Macbeth was written and performed — believed himself to be the descendant of a historical figure called "Banquo", and so Banquo's characterisation can be seen as Shakespeare flattering his new royal sponsor.

### Embodying Jacobean values

Shakespeare's portrayal of Banquo becomes all the more significant when we learn that — according to histories of early medieval Scotland — Banquo is named as one of the co-conspirators (with Macbeth) in King Duncan's murder.

However, in Shakespeare's version, Banquo shows restraint, and is noble, Christian and dutiful: all the qualities you would want for the forefather of a line of kings, a line that will culminate in James I himself.

## Duncan Character Analysis

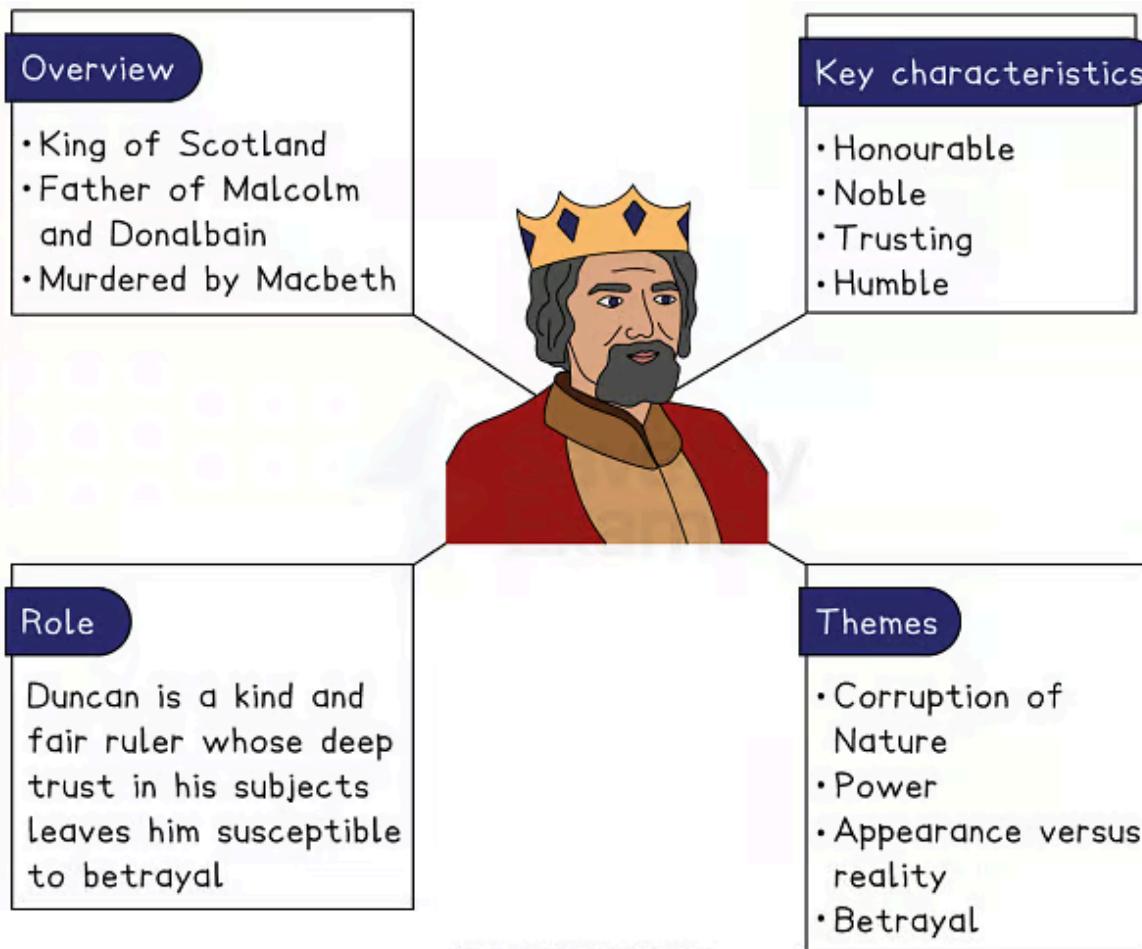


Your notes

### Duncan character analysis

Duncan is the rightful King of Scotland, a noble and respected character who is murdered by Macbeth for his throne.

### Duncan character summary

Copyright © Save My Exams. All Rights Reserved*Duncan character summary*

### Why is Duncan important?

Although Duncan makes relatively few appearances in the play (he speaks only in Act 1 and is dead by the middle of Act 2) he remains “the gracious Duncan” to characters like Lennox, who want to justify rebellion against Macbeth.



Your notes

Duncan is depicted as:

- **Honourable and noble:** Duncan exudes an aura of sanctity and honour as evident in lines such as “justice had, with valour arm’d / compelled these skipping kerns to trust their heels” and “signs of nobleness”. This reinforces the idea that any rebellion against him is an unholy act.
- **Trusting:** Duncan’s misplaced trust in the former Thane of Cawdor and his subsequent disappointment presents him as a character who expects loyalty and support from his subjects. He ultimately makes an error in trusting both Thanes of Cawdor (who betray him), while his commendation of the Macbeths’ “pleasant” castle and of his “fair and noble” hostess make him appear somewhat naive.
- **Humble:** despite his royal status, Duncan is gracious and humble as evident through his language and actions. He often expresses gratitude and admiration to other characters, for example, when he praises Banquo and Macbeth for their bravery on the battlefield.
- **A rightful, legitimate king:** in contrast to Macbeth, Duncan is an image of legitimacy. His rule is founded on natural order and divine right which reinforces his role as a symbol of moral governance.

## Duncan’s use of language

The language Shakespeare uses for Duncan – elevated iambic pentameter and poetic imagery – reflects his character as a benevolent and noble ruler.

- **Iambic pentameter and elevated diction:** Duncan speaks in iambic pentameter which gives his dialogue a formal and regal quality. In Shakespeare, this is typical of a noble or important character and conveys his high status. His language is marked by elevated and noble vocabulary which aligns him with the virtues of a rightful monarch.
- **Superlatives and exclamatory phrases:** Duncan uses frequent expressions of praise and admiration which reflect his trusting nature. However, this also reveals his inability to perceive treachery around him, making his death more tragic. For example he uses superlatives and exclamatory phrases to convey his respect for Macbeth and Banquo: “O worthiest cousin!” and “Welcome hither!”
- **Poetic imagery:** Duncan’s language often uses natural imagery and figurative language, such as “signs of nobleness, like stars shall shine” which symbolises his harmony with nature and the natural order, linking his character to a rightful and moral kingship.
- **Dramatic irony:** while Duncan’s formality signifies his role as a regal figure in Scotland, it also reveals his vulnerability as his trust in others, particularly in Macbeth, leads to his downfall. His language betrays his naivety and illustrates how little control he has over the play’s unfolding ironies.

## Duncan key quotes



Your notes



**“ O valiant cousin! Worthy gentleman! ”**  
– Act 1, Scene 2

**“ See, see our honour'd hostess! ”**  
– Act 1, Scene 6

**“ What he hath lost, noble Macbeth, hath won ”**  
– Act 1, Scene 2

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### Duncan key quotes

## Duncan character development

Act 1, Scene 2	Act 1, Scene 4	Act 1, Scene 6	Act 2, Scene 2
<p><b>Duncan hears of Macbeth's bravery:</b>   Duncan's praise of Macbeth's bravery establishes him as a generous and trusting king, who values loyalty and service. His admiration for Macbeth reinforces Duncan's position as a noble ruler, while also setting up the dramatic irony of Macbeth's eventual betrayal.</p>	<p><b>Duncan names his heir:</b>   When he names his son Malcolm as his successor, Duncan conveys his legitimate authority and moral leadership, while also foreshadowing Macbeth's disturbance of the natural order.</p>	<p><b>Duncan's arrival at Macbeth's castle:</b>   Duncan's gracious words and trust in his hosts highlight both his virtuousness but also his naivety. Dramatic irony is used to contrast Duncan's unsuspecting nature with the murderous intentions of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.</p>	<p><b>Discovery of Duncan's murder:</b>   Although conducted offstage, Duncan's murder symbolises the chaos and horror that will pervade the rest of the play, leading to Macbeth's downfall and the restoration of the natural order.</p>

## Duncan character interpretation

### The Divine Right of Kings

A contemporary audience would have been aware of the Divine Right theories of kingship, and so would associate assassination and treason to the destruction of God's order. However, succession, legitimacy and Divine Right were also highly contentious concepts in Scotland and England during this era. Therefore, Duncan's language of divine authority, like that used by James I, could be interpreted as masking a deep fear of rebellion.



Your notes

## A vulnerable monarch

As a character, Duncan is usually portrayed as quite elderly. For example, Lady Macbeth states "Had he not resembled/ My father as he slept, I had done't", and refers to him as "the old man" in her sleepwalking scene. As such, he represents old age, innocence and holiness and so the reaction of the audience to his "most sacrilegious murder" is therefore one of particular horror.

## Macduff Character Analysis

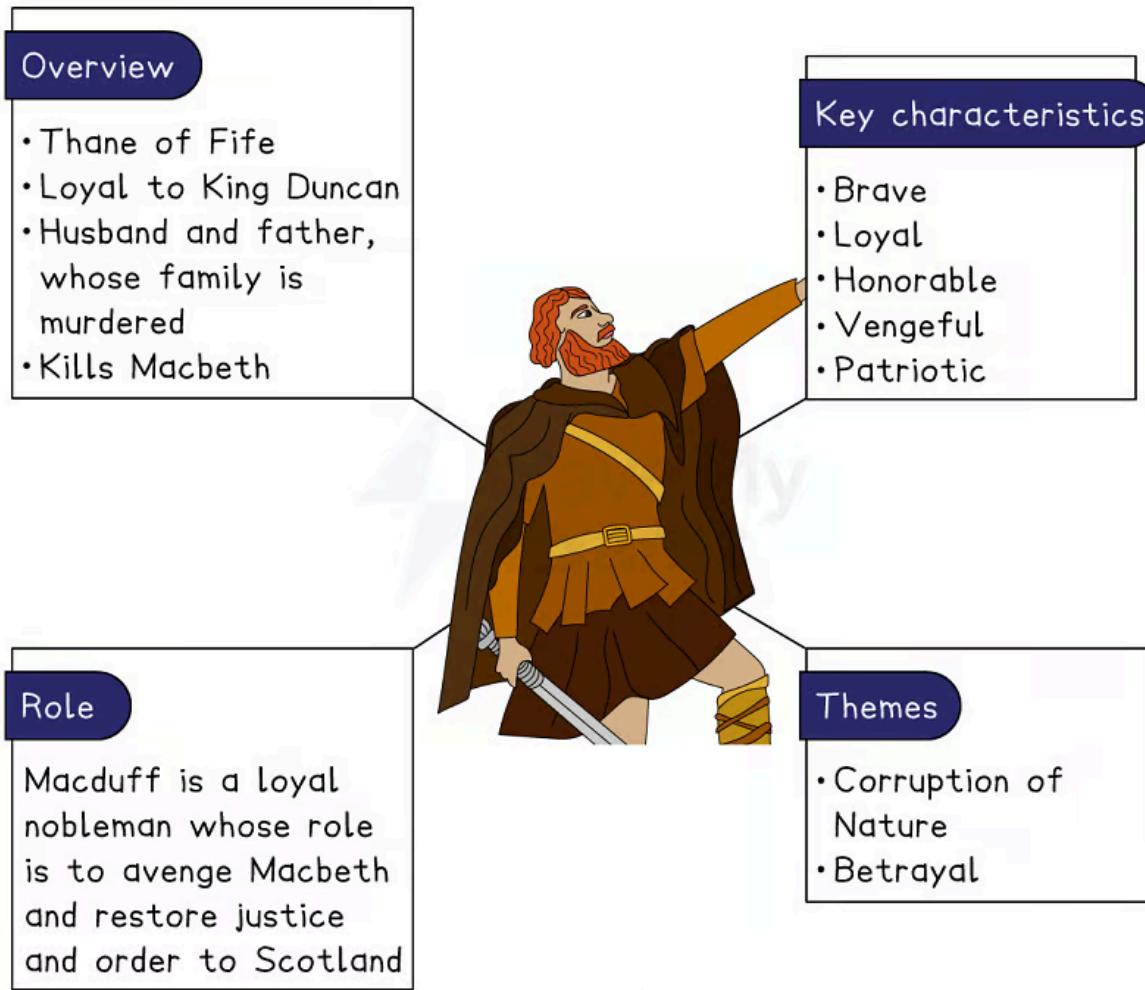


Your notes

### Macduff character analysis

Macduff is presented as a moral and patriotic nobleman who kills Macbeth and rightfully restores order to Scotland.

### Macduff character summary

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### Macduff character summary

## Why is Macduff important?

Macduff is a symbol of justice and retribution against Macbeth's tyranny. Although he is a relatively minor character and appears sporadically throughout the play, he is a pivotal character in Act 4 and Act 5.



Your notes

Macduff is depicted as:

- **Patriotic:** Macduff's patriotism is revealed when he discovers Duncan's body. He exclaims: "O horror, horror, horror!" revealing his deep loyalty and reverence to the King. His immediate mistrust and later refusal to attend Macbeth's coronation signify his loyalty to Scotland's rightful heir.
- **Vengeful:** Macduff's journey to England leaves his family unprotected and Macbeth's fear of Macduff raising an army against him has the important effect of Macbeth having Macduff's family killed: "His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls". Macduff expresses his utter heartbreak at their murder: "All my pretty chickens and their dam./At one fell swoop?" Malcolm encourages him to seek revenge for the murders: "let grief / Convert to anger". Macduff becomes more aggressive and determined to avenge their deaths.
- **Brave:** At the end of the play, Macduff's bravery and patriotism are evident when he challenges Macbeth, calling him a "hell-hound" and monster for his evil deeds. Despite the witches' predictions that Macbeth will not be killed by a man born of a woman, Macbeth is reluctant to fight Macduff when challenged. Macbeth finally accepts his guilt and admits to Macduff that his "soul is charged with blood".
- **Symbol of justice:** Macduff represents justice. By **vanquishing** Macbeth, he reinstates the rightful order in Scotland by establishing Malcolm as king. The play concludes with the violent death of Macbeth, which fulfils the prophecy of the witches that Macbeth should "Beware Macduff!"

For more on how Shakespeare presents the character of Macduff, see our video below:

## Macduff's use of language

Macduff uses language that reflects his loyalty, patriotism and deep sense of justice, often revealed through his intense emotions and religious allusions.

- **Emotive and exclamatory:** Macduff describes his family metaphorically as "pretty chickens and their dam" to convey the love he has for his family and the **abject** sadness he feels after their murders. His emotive language and repeated use of interrogatives in Act 4 reflect the disbelief he feels: "My children too?" and "My wife killed too?". Macduff's language is highly emotive and he blames himself for the murders: "Sinful Macduff!", "struck for thee...Not for their own demerits, but for mine".
- **Religious and moralistic:** Macduff's use of religious language reflects his deep belief in justice and the Divine Right of Kings, and conveys his moral righteousness. He refers to King Duncan's death as a "most sacrilegious murder". After discovering Duncan's body, Macduff uses religious allusions and exclamatory phrases to reflect his deep shock: "Merciful Heaven!" and "O hellkite!".

## Macduff key quotes



Your notes


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### Macduff key quotes

## Macduff character development

Act 2, Scene 3	Act 4, Scene 3	Act 5, Scene 8
<p><b>Macduff discovers King Duncan's murder:</b></p> <p>Macduff reveals his utter horror and despair upon discovering that King Duncan has been murdered. In this scene, Shakespeare establishes Macduff as a character of moral integrity and righteousness.</p>	<p><b>Macduff's reacts to the brutal murder of his family:</b></p> <p>Macduff is overcome with grief, revealing his highly emotional state. His initial tone of disbelief and sorrow quickly shifts to one of anger and aggression. He intensifies his vow to avenge his family and Scotland.</p>	<p><b>Macduff confronts Macbeth:</b></p> <p>Macduff reveals he was “from his mother’s womb untimely ripped” which fulfils the witches’ prophecy. He restores order to Scotland by killing Macbeth and is portrayed as the patriotic hero of the play.</p>

For more on the development of Macduff's character, see our video below:

## Macduff character interpretation

### The Divine Right of Kings

Kingship and loyalty were important aspects of Jacobean life and the murder of a king was viewed as evil and against the belief in the Divine Right of Kings. Therefore a contemporary audience would have understood Macduff's role in restoring God's order through the rightful heir to the throne. Social expectations at the time would also have expected good to overcome evil and so Macbeth must be destroyed to **atone** for his crimes.

## Alternative presentation of gender roles

Macduff's character challenges traditional representations of masculinity in the scenes where he conveys his overwhelming grief, compassion and vulnerability. This expression of his feelings would have been unconventional during Shakespeare's era. Macduff's emotional depth and sensitivity is juxtaposed with Shakespeare's presentation of masculinity through Macbeth, who is associated with brutality, ruthlessness and violence.



Your notes

## Macbeth: Context



Your notes

### Context

It is easy to spend a long time revising context. However, if you keep your revision focused on the themes of the play, your exam responses will be equally focused and awarded high marks. Each of the below topics links directly to Shakespeare's ideas in Macbeth:

- **James I**
- **Witchcraft**
- **Gender Roles**
- **God and the Great Chain of Being**

### James I

- Macbeth was written during the reign of James I:
  - The time under James I is known as the **Jacobean era**
- When Shakespeare was writing Macbeth, James I was a relatively new king of England (he succeeded Elizabeth I in 1603; Macbeth was written in 1606):
  - Shakespeare was very popular with Elizabeth I
  - He wanted to remain a favourite of the new king
  - Therefore, Macbeth can be seen as a play written specifically for – and to flatter – James I
- James I had been King of Scotland since 1567:
  - This is why Shakespeare set Macbeth in Scotland
  - James I believed he was descended from a medieval thane called Banquo
  - So Shakespeare's Banquo is brave, loyal and conscientious
  - This can be seen as Shakespeare flattering his new king
  - Shakespeare could also be **legitimising** James's rule
- When he took over the throne he became ruler of England, Scotland and Ireland
- As king, James I aimed to unify the three nations into "Great Britain":
  - This is why Malcolm – a good and rightful king – is seen unifying the lords and **thanes** of England and Scotland in the play



Your notes

- Macbeth – a **tyrant** and **illegitimate** king – is seen as creating division
- Although James I was mostly popular, there were many plots to kill him
- The most serious, and famous, of these plots was the Gunpowder Plot of 1605:
  - These plots were acts of **treason**
  - Shakespeare includes multiple references to **treason** in Macbeth, the most serious being the **regicide** of King Duncan
  - In the play, all these acts of **treason** have terrible consequences for those who commit them – all are killed, either in battle, by execution, or from suicide
  - Again, Shakespeare could be appealing to James I by presenting a warning to any potential traitors: attempt a plot against the king and suffer eternal consequences
- James I wrote a book – the *Basilikon Doron*, or “Royal Gift” – which set out his belief in the **Divine Right of Kings**:
  - The **Divine Right of Kings** was a belief that kings and queens are chosen by God
  - These rulers are, therefore, representatives of God on Earth
  - This would mean there would be religious consequences for anyone attempting to overthrow a king
  - Shakespeare includes multiple references to the afterlife in Macbeth, suggesting that anyone plotting against a king would end up in Hell

## Witchcraft

- In **Jacobean** England, there was a widespread belief in witches
- James I was fascinated by witchcraft:
  - He attended witch trials and even supervised the torture of women accused of being witches
  - In 1597, James I wrote a book called *Daemonologie* where he set out his beliefs that witches are slaves of Satan and should be executed
- Shakespeare was inspired by James I's *Daemonologie*
- Shakespeare is appealing to James I's fascination with witches in Macbeth:
  - He begins the play with an ominous scene featuring three “weird sisters” (which fit James's description of witches)
  - Witchcraft features prominently in the play:
    - There are four separate scenes featuring witches



Your notes

- The three witches are seen plotting to commit evil acts against innocent men
- They are presented making evil spells
- They are seen causing numerous natural disturbances
- When James I came to the throne, being a witch was already punishable by death
- James I outlawed even being associated with witches:
  - A **Jacobean** audience would have been fearful and distrustful of witches
  - The fact that a character as seemingly brave and loyal as Macbeth can be tempted by the witches would have only made the witches seem even more terrifying
  - Shakespeare is again appealing to James I by making the witches the main cause of evil in the play
  - Shakespeare presents the witches (and those characters tempted by them) as disruptive forces, set against the moral goodness and order of Malcolm, the rightful king
  - Shakespeare is associating all kings (including James I) with moral goodness and order

## Gender Roles

- Gender roles and expectations in **Jacobean** England were very different from those today
- Women:
  - Often couldn't choose who they married
  - Couldn't own their own property
  - Were controlled by their fathers until they got married
  - Were controlled by their husbands after marriage
    - All of this shows women had a lack of **agency**
    - Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as attempting to have **agency**: control over her status, husband and future
    - Shakespeare may be suggesting that it is better for women to stick to **societal norms**
    - Shakespeare could be suggesting her downfall comes from her unnatural attempt to have control over her husband and her status
- Women were expected to be:
  - **Subordinate**: lower in status than men
  - **Dutiful**: obedient; doing what they were told, especially by men
  - **Nurturing**: kind and mothering, and concerned with having children and looking after the home



Your notes

- Lady Macbeth **subverts** these expectations
- Women who subverted these expectations were seen as unnatural, perhaps even similar to witches
- Shakespeare could be offering a warning that women who do not conform to expectations and are unnatural are doomed to suffer negative consequences
- In the Jacobean era, men were expected to be:
  - **Dominant**: they were expected to have authority over their households and all the people living in them, including their wives
  - **Superior**: men were seen as physically and mentally superior to women
  - **Noble**: men, but most especially **thanes** like Macbeth, were expected to be brave and loyal to their king
- Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a character who fails to display the expected traits of a man and thane:
  - For this he is accused of being weak, mentally ill and unmanly by Lady Macbeth (Act II, Scene II)
  - Being mentally ill was seen as a sign of moral weakness
  - Shakespeare could be suggesting that Macbeth, because he fails to conform to gender expectations, is more easily influenced by evil

## God and the Great Chain of Being

- **Jacobean** audiences would have been overwhelmingly Christian
- They believed in the literal word of the Bible
- This meant they had a very real fear of Hell, witches, demons and the Devil:
  - Lady Macbeth calling upon evil “spirits” in Act I, Scene V, would have been seen as **blasphemous** and shocking
  - Regicide was a **mortal sin**, for which the culprit would go to Hell
  - Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth ask for their crimes to be hidden from God and Heaven because they know the consequences of committing **regicide**
  - The repeated appearances of the witches symbolise the presence of evil in the world of Macbeth
  - The witches represent temptation to do evil for the human characters
  - Because of the widespread belief in witches, their presence in the play represents a very real threat to order in Scotland
- **Jacobean** audiences would also have believed in the **Great Chain of Being**:

- The **Great Chain of Being** was a belief in an order of things in the universe
- It represented a hierarchy of all things that asserted God's authority at the top of the chain
- In essence, the **Great Chain of Being** was God's plan for the world
- Witches and the Devil existed outside of this chain
- The Devil, demons and witches attempted to break the **Great Chain of Being**, sometimes by tempting humans to commit sinful acts
- Any attempt to break the chain would upset God's order and bring about disorder to the world
- An attempt to break the **Great Chain of Being** was, therefore, **blasphemous**
- Any instance where human characters act not according to their proper status is an example of the chain being broken:
  - Macbeth becoming king (he should only be a **thane**)
  - Lady Macbeth dominating Macbeth (a woman controlling a man)



Your notes



Your notes

## Macbeth: Writer's Methods & Techniques

The best responses at GCSE don't limit their analysis to individual words and phrases. Examiners are really looking for an analysis of Shakespeare's overall aims, so try to take a "whole-text" approach to the writer's methods and techniques. Each of the below topics do just that:

- **Form**
- **Structure**
- **Blank verse and prose**
- **Motifs and symbolism**

### Form

Macbeth is a Shakespearean **tragedy**. It is important that the examiner knows from your essays that you understand the conventions of tragedy, as this is a valuable – and sophisticated – understanding of the writer's craft and methods.

**Shakespearean tragedies usually consist of:**

- **A tragic hero:** a once-heroic figure (in this case Macbeth) who is destined to die because of his...
- **Fatal flaw (hamartia):** is a character trait that leads to the tragic hero's downfall. For Macbeth, it is his ambition
- **A foil:** a character who stands in contrast to the tragic hero, who conforms to the typical societal expectations of the era (here: Banquo; he is much more skeptical of the witches, for example)
- **Fate:** all tragic heroes cannot escape their fate or destiny. In Macbeth, it can be seen as an expression of man's powerlessness over God and his natural order
- **The supernatural:** the supernatural represents a threat to the **natural order** of things, as set out by God. Here, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth essentially side with the supernatural and, therefore, against God's plan
- **Catharsis:** a moment of shared expression for the audience. In Macbeth, it is more than relief that Macbeth (ultimately, our villain) has died, it is sympathy for the once heroic figure that he was, and could have been. This is sometimes known as a technique called the **tragic waste**
- **Conflict:** in Macbeth we have external conflict (assassinations; Macduff's ultimate revenge) and internal (the mental decline of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth)

- **A final restoration of the status quo:** this means, essentially, that things go back to normal after the death of the tragic hero. Here, Malcolm (the rightful heir to the throne) is installed as king



Your notes

## Structure

### The structure of a tragedy

Many of Shakespeare's tragedies follow the same five-part structure:

1. **Exposition:** this is the introduction to the play for the audience, and an introduction to the themes and atmosphere. In Macbeth, it is very significant that we are introduced to witches (the supernatural) in a storm, who claim that "fair is foul and foul is fair" (the natural order is about to be disrupted).  
**Foreshadowing** often occurs in the exposition
2. **Rising action:** here is when the tragic hero's tragic flaw is exposed and an inevitable chain of events starts. In the play, it could be said that Macbeth believing the witches' prophecies and sending the letter to Lady Macbeth represents this stage
3. **Climax:** this is the turning point in the play where the tragic hero has come too far to go back. In the language of tragedy, this is called **peripeteia**. In Macbeth, it is Macbeth finally deciding to go ahead and kill King Duncan
4. **Falling action:** tragic hero and avenging hero (Macduff) clash. The tragic hero finally comes to the realisation that he is to be defeated (Macbeth realises that he is not, in fact, invincible). This moment of realisation is called the **anagnorisis**
5. **Denouement:** normality and the natural order is restored. Macbeth is killed and Malcolm becomes king, as rightful heir to Duncan

## Blank verse and prose

- Shakespeare used three forms of poetic language when he wrote his plays:
  - Blank verse
  - Rhymed verse
  - Prose
- Each of the three forms are used throughout Macbeth
- Shakespeare used these different forms of language for dramatic purposes; they performed different functions:
  - To distinguish characters from one another
  - To reveal the psychology of characters
  - To show character development

## Blank verse

- Blank verse consists of unrhymed lines of ten syllables, although it does not always exactly fit that pattern
- Typically in Shakespeare plays, the blank verse represents human feelings in speeches and soliloquies, and the everyday ordinariness of life. It is the form used the most by Shakespeare
- In Macbeth, the famous soliloquies before the murder of Duncan from Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are in blank verse



Your notes

## Rhymed verse

- Rhymed verse consists of sets of rhymed couplets: two successive lines that rhyme with each other at the end of the line
- Shakespeare used rhymed verse to reflect ritualistic and supernatural events in his plays
- In Macbeth, the witches speak in rhyming couplets
  - This is reminiscent of the chanting of a spell
  - It separates them from the human characters and makes them seem unnatural
- But – unusual for a human character – Shakespeare also has Macbeth speak in rhymed couplets:
  - Shakespeare has Macbeth echo the form of language of the witches to link them together in evil, and to suggest Macbeth has been enchanted by their prophecies
  - Although it is typical for Shakespeare to finish each of his scenes with a rhyming couplet, the words that Macbeth rhymes at the end of Act II, Scene I, ("knell" and "Hell") put the audience immediately in mind of the witches
  - After he sees Banquo's ghost in Act III, Scene IV, Shakespeare has Macbeth speak the final 10 lines of the scene in rhyming couplets, perhaps showing that he has been corrupted by the supernatural

## Prose

- Prose is unrhymed lines with no pattern or rhythm
- Shakespeare used prose for serious episodes, letters or when characters appear to be losing their minds (when it would be unrealistic for them to speak poetically)
- In Macbeth, Shakespeare uses prose when presenting the letter to Lady Macbeth from Macbeth concerning the witches' prophecies
- More significantly, Shakespeare expresses Lady Macbeth's madness in Act V, Scene I using prose:
  - She no longer has the ability to speak in the ordinary speech of blank verse
  - This is a reflection of her disordered mind

- It may also be Shakespeare suggesting that she has lost touch with reality

## Motifs and symbolism



Shakespeare uses many symbols throughout the play. If a symbol is used repeatedly throughout the play, it is known as a **motif**. If you understand the following **motifs**, you will be able to refer to them in almost any essay.

### Sleep

- In the play, sleep represents peace or calm
- Immediately after he murders Duncan, Macbeth hears a disembodied voice telling him that "Macbeth does murder sleep" (Act II, Scene II):
  - He is hallucinating, and Shakespeare may be suggesting it is his conscience talking
  - By committing the **mortal sin of regicide**, Macbeth has ended the possibility of a peaceful life, with extreme feelings of guilt keeping him awake
  - Shakespeare could also be suggesting that Macbeth will be prevented from having eternal peace or going to Heaven
- The peace that sleep represents in the play could also be a reference to the disruption of the **Great Chain of Being**:
  - Macbeth has disrupted God's order by murdering a king
  - There is now no peace and order in the kingdom
- Lady Macbeth eventually has her own sleep disrupted: she walks and talks in her sleep in Act V, Scene I:
  - Guilt has finally overwhelmed her
  - She, too, will be prevented from having the eternal peace of going to Heaven

### Blood

- After the murder of King Duncan, blood comes to represent guilt
- Even before Duncan's murder, Macbeth sees a hallucination of a bloodied dagger:
  - This **foreshadows** the feelings of guilt Macbeth feels towards the murder of Duncan
  - Later in the same **soliloquy**, Macbeth talks of "gouts" (spots) of blood on the dagger
  - This **foreshadows** Lady Macbeth later in the play who hallucinates "spots" of blood
- Immediately after the murder of Duncan, Lady Macbeth suggests that "a little water clears us of this deed":
  - She is confidently assuring Macbeth that they can easily clear their consciences of the guilt



Your notes

- This represents the **hubris**, or arrogance, of Lady Macbeth
- Later in the play Lady Macbeth cannot stop hallucinating that she has blood on her hands:
  - The blood (guilt) is on her hands and is sending her insane
  - This is ironic, given her calm assertion earlier in the play that dealing with regicide would be easy
- Banquo's ghost is also covered in blood:
  - Shakespeare is, therefore, suggesting that Macbeth feels guilty for the murder of his comrade and best friend
  - Macbeth also states that "blood will have blood" in the same scene (Act III, Scene IV), suggesting that he is trapped in a cycle of unending violence and guilt

## Hallucinations

- Like blood, hallucinations represent the guilt Macbeth and Lady Macbeth feel for having committed the **mortal sin of regicide**
- The hallucinations include:
  - The bloody dagger (seen by Macbeth, Act I, Scene VII)
  - The voice stating that Macbeth has murdered sleep (Macbeth, Act II, Scene II)
  - Banquo's ghost (Macbeth, Act III, Scene IV)
  - Blood on hands (Lady Macbeth, Act V, Scene I)
- Only Lady Macbeth and Macbeth hallucinate in the play, and only they can see their own hallucinations:
  - Shakespeare may be suggesting that these are not, in fact, real visions, but exist only in the minds of our main characters
  - They could, therefore, represent the characters' psychological realities
- The hallucinations could also be seen as a symbol of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth losing their grip on reality:
  - Shakespeare could be suggesting this mental decline is the result of extreme guilt and the **hubris** of believing they could deal with **regicide**
  - Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's mental disorder could also represent greater disorder in the **Great Chain of Being**
  - This is the chaos brought about by murdering God's choice of ruler

## Light and dark

- In Macbeth, light and dark stand for good and evil



Your notes

- When Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are plotting the murder of King Duncan, Shakespeare frequently includes imagery of light and dark in their soliloquies:
  - In Act I, Scene V, Lady Macbeth calls for a “thick night” and the “dun nest (murkiest) smoke”
  - These are explicitly dark, and represent Lady Macbeth’s evil desires
  - In Act I, Scene VII, Macbeth also expresses his “deep desires”, which he describes as “dark”, while also commanding the “light” not to see them
  - Shakespeare is suggesting that Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are fully aware of the evil and sinful nature of their plan and want to hide it from God (represented by “light” and “stars”), but their own ambition leads them to act anyway
- The three witches also create darkness
- In Act I, Scene I, the three witches create a storm, which reflects their own evil natures and also **foreshadows** the evil acts that will be committed later in the play
- The chaos that Macbeth has brought to the Kingdom of Scotland results in darkness:
  - There are thunderstorms the night of the **regicide**
  - In Act II, Scene IV, characters talk about strange natural occurrences, including the day being as dark as night
  - These are all the result of the disruption to the **Great Chain of Being**: evil being allowed into the world



Your notes

## Macbeth: Key Quotations

The best way to revise quotations is to group them by character or theme. Below you will find definitions and analysis of the best quotations, arranged by the following themes:

- Ambition and power
- The supernatural
- Appearance versus reality
- Corruption of nature

### Ambition and power

Principally, Macbeth is a play about **ambition and its consequences**. It can also be seen as a warning against those who seek to undermine or overthrow the rule of a rightful king.



“I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, only vaulting ambition”



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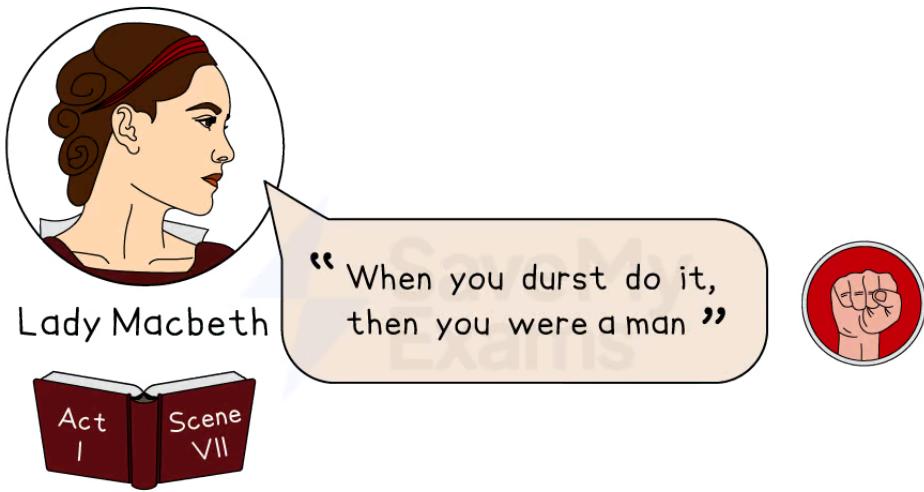
**“I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, only vaulting ambition”** Macbeth, Act I, Scene VII

#### Meaning and context

- Macbeth is saying that it is his own ambition that is his only motivation to murder King Duncan
- This **soliloquy** comes as Macbeth is deciding whether to kill King Duncan or not

#### Analysis

- Shakespeare has his protagonist, Macbeth, clearly state his **hamartia** ("ambition") to the audience
- It is implied that there is no other motivation for Macbeth ("no spur")
- Shakespeare could be suggesting that Macbeth's fatal flaw ("ambition") overcomes all of his other, positive character traits
- Later in the same **soliloquy**, Macbeth says this ambition "overleaps itself" (trips itself up), suggesting Macbeth is aware on some level that he is doomed if he commits **regicide**



**“When you durst do it, then you were a man”** Lady Macbeth, Act I, Scene VII

#### Meaning and context

- Lady Macbeth is suggesting that only if Macbeth commits the murder of King Duncan that he could be considered a real man
- This comes after Macbeth has expressed doubts about the plan to commit **regicide**

#### Analysis

- Lady Macbeth is attacking Macbeth's masculinity
- It would hurt Macbeth's pride; in the **Jacobean** era, manliness would have been equated with strength, so here Lady Macbeth is calling Macbeth weak
- It is an example of **role reversal**: Lady Macbeth, unusually for a woman, is manipulating and dominating a man
- As a woman, Lady Macbeth's power is in her skills of deception and manipulation



“Life [...] is a tale told  
by an idiot, full of sound  
and fury, signifying nothing”



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**“Life [...] is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”** Macbeth, Act V, Scene V

### Meaning

- Macbeth is suggesting that although in life lots seem to happen, ultimately, it is meaningless and without purpose
- This powerful **soliloquy** comes after Macbeth is told of the death of Lady Macbeth

### Analysis

- This is an example of **nihilism**: a belief that life is pointless (“signifying nothing”)
- For a largely Christian **Jacobeans** audience, this rejection of God’s plan and the suggestion of a rejection of Heaven and Hell, would have been shocking
- However, it is also a moment of **pathos**: the audience, despite his **blasphemous** words, would still feel sympathy for a once noble general who has lost his wife
- It perhaps also represents a moment of **anagnorisis**: a tragic hero’s realisation that all his actions were for “nothing” and that he will be defeated

## The Supernatural

The vast majority of people in Jacobean England were Christian and believed in the literal word of the Bible. Supernatural events or characters, therefore, would have been seen as evil and the work of the devil.

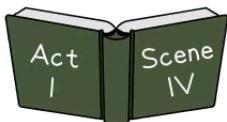
### Paired Quotations:



Your notes



Macbeth



“ Stars hide your fires; let not light  
see my dark and deep desires ”



Lady Macbeth



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“ Stars hide your fires; let not light see my black and deep desires ” Macbeth, Act I, Scene IV

“ Come, thick night and pall thee in the dunkest smoke of Hell [...] nor Heaven peep through ” Lady Macbeth, Act I, Scene V

#### Meaning and context

- Both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are asking for their evil desires to be hidden from God
- Both quotations come as they are plotting the murder of King Duncan

#### Analysis

- Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are both on their own on stage when they speak these lines, suggesting that these **soliloquys** reveal the characters' true feelings



Your notes

- The fact that Lady Macbeth echoes Macbeth's words shows that they still have a close relationship based on shared ideas (unlike later in the play)
- The religious symbolism ("stars", "light", "Heaven") suggests that both characters are aware of the significance and consequences ("Hell") of committing **regicide**
- Both characters use **imperative verbs** ("hide", "come") to command the natural world ("stars", "night"). This could be seen as **blasphemous** and an attempt to disrupt the Great Chain of Being or God's plan



“The dead butcher and his fiend-like queen”

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**“The dead butcher and his fiend-like queen”** - Malcolm, Act V, Scene IX

#### Meaning and context

- Malcolm is describing the now-dead Macbeth and Lady Macbeth
- This comes as part of the final **soliloquy** of the play after Macduff has killed Macbeth and Malcolm is restored to the throne

#### Analysis

- A “butcher” is someone who kills without feeling or remorse. Shakespeare is suggesting that, because of his ambition, Macbeth turned from noble general to common murderer
- Malcolm doesn't refer to either character by name: this omission shows their immediate fall in status
- Lady Macbeth is described as a “fiend”: a demon. She is being compared to the evil forces present in the play – the witches – who aim to bring chaos to the kingdom of Scotland

“

"Fair is foul and foul is fair" — The witches, Act 1, Scene 1



Your notes

### Meaning and context

- At the beginning of the play, Shakespeare introduces the supernatural setting and the "weird sisters" as a malevolent force

### Analysis

- Shakespeare establishes the disruption of the natural order and the corruption of nature through the use of paradoxical language and **parallelism**
- The use of rhyming language conveys the impression of evil spellcasting, adding to the supernatural atmosphere

“

"A dagger of the mind" — Macbeth, Act 2, Scene 1

### Meaning and context

- Shakespeare reveals the danger of the supernatural elements in the play through the corrupt transformation of the protagonist:
  - His vision of an imaginary dagger leads him to commit regicide and kill King Duncan

### Analysis

- Shakespeare's use of metaphorical language shows Macbeth's awareness of the malevolent effect of the vision
- The vision acts as a catalyst for his murderous actions, showing impact of the supernatural on Macbeth

“

"Do not shake thy gory locks at me" — Macbeth [to Banquo's ghost], Act 3, Scene 4

### Meaning and context

- Macbeth sees a vision of the assassinated Banquo at the feast, a sign of his guilt

### Analysis



Your notes

- As the play progresses, Shakespeare presents the moral and psychological decline of Macbeth through his use of supernatural visions and auditory hallucinations
- The use of **assonance** and monosyllabic words heightens the sense of his abject terror at seeing the ghost

“

“By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes” — The witches [as Macbeth enters the scene], Act 4, Scene 1

#### Meaning and context

- The witches' observation about Macbeth's wickedness signposts his descent into evil for the audience

#### Analysis

- The **rhyming couplets** and use of trochaic tetrameter for the witches' speech suggests their supernatural difference
- The use of assonance and superstitious references in this couplet also reinforces their supernatural wickedness

## Appearance versus Reality

Shakespeare plays with the concept of perception throughout Macbeth: are we seeing what's really there? And are characters who they seem to be?



Lady Macbeth



“ Come you spirits [...]  
Unsex me here ”



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**“Come you spirits [...] Unsex me here”** Lady Macbeth, Act I, Scene V



Your notes

## Meaning and context

- Lady Macbeth is calling on evil spirits to take away her feminine traits
- This is part of a long **soliloquy** after Macbeth has written her a letter outlining the witches' prophecies

## Analysis

- Shakespeare has Lady Macbeth use **imperative verbs** (“Come”; “unsex”) when commanding evil spirits:
  - This shows her power at this point in the play (or at least the power she believes she commands)
  - The fact that she is commanding evil spirits shows her **hubris**: it is arrogant for humans to believe they can control evil forces
- She wants to remove her feminine traits (being **nurturing, dutiful**, powerless) and become “unsexed”:
  - She wants to **subvert** the characteristics of a typical woman
  - Shakespeare could be suggesting that only by adopting male characteristics can women gain power
  - This would have been seen as disturbing to a **Jacobean** audience and very unnatural, perhaps akin to the actions of a witch



Lady Macbeth



“Look like the innocent flower  
but be the serpent underneath it”



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**“Look like the innocent flower but be the serpent underneath it”** Lady Macbeth, Act I, Scene V

## Meaning and context

- Lady Macbeth is suggesting that Macbeth hide his true, **treasonous** self from King Duncan
- This comes as the couple are first plotting the murder of Duncan



Your notes

### Analysis

- This quotation is reflective of Lady Macbeth's **duplicitous** nature
- Her use of the **imperative verb** "look" also shows her power over Macbeth
- She has no trouble acting like "an innocent flower" in the very next scene when greeting King Duncan
- The "serpent" has religious connotations: it is a reference from the Christian Bible to the snake (a representation of the Devil), who tempts Eve in the Garden of Eden:
  - Lady Macbeth is also a woman who is tempted by evil and, in turn, tempts a man (Macbeth)
  - In the Bible, this temptation causes the fall of man. In Macbeth, it causes the downfall of Lady Macbeth and her husband
  - This could be Shakespeare suggesting that committing **blasphemous** acts will always lead to ruin

### Paired Quotation:



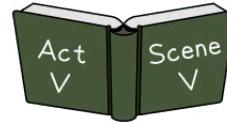
Lady Macbeth



“Out, damned spot: out, I say!”



Macbeth



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“Out, damned spot: out, I say!” Lady Macbeth, Act V, Scene I

“Out, out, brief candle” Macbeth, Act V, Scene V

### Meaning and context

- Lady Macbeth is desperately pleading for the hallucination of blood on her hands to disappear
- It comes as she is losing her mind and just before her suicide
- Macbeth is commenting on the brief nature of life
- It is part of a long **soliloquy** after he is told about the death of Lady Macbeth

### Analysis

- Lady Macbeth's desperation is apparent in her ramblings: to show this, Shakespeare:





Your notes

- uses lots of punctuation to reflect her disjointed mind
- uses repetition ("out") to show her increasing desperation
- The use of **imperative verbs** ("out") is ironic: whereas earlier in the play she used commanding language with evil spirits, she has now completely lost power. Commands have turned into pleas of desperation
- Macbeth echoes the language of Lady Macbeth ("out, out")
- However, unlike other times when Macbeth echoes the language of Lady Macbeth or the witches, this quotation doesn't imply he is being led by them
- Lady Macbeth's desperation has turned into a reflection of Macbeth:
  - It is a realisation that what he – and Lady Macbeth – have done was worthless
  - It creates a sense of **pathos** for the audience
  - Macbeth using Lady Macbeth's words brings the couple closer again

**Paired Quotation:**



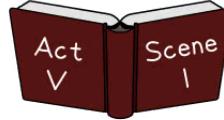
Lady Macbeth



“A little water clears us of this deed”



Lady Macbeth



“All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand”

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**“A little water clears us of this deed” Lady Macbeth, Act II, Scene II**

**“All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand” Lady Macbeth, Act V, Scene I**

### Meaning and context

- Lady Macbeth at first suggests that it won't take much for their consciences to be cleared after Duncan's murder; later, she realises that nothing could remove the feelings of guilt
- These quotations come before the murder of King Duncan, and then after Lady Macbeth has lost her mind, right before her suicide

### Analysis

- Lady Macbeth displays **hubris** when she confidently asserts that she and her husband will not be troubled by feelings of guilt or remorse



Your notes

- Her confidence contrasts with Macbeth's belief that all the water in "Neptune's ocean" couldn't wash the blood (symbolising guilt) from his hand
- "Hands" here represent responsibility
- It is ironic that later in the play, Lady Macbeth sees blood on her hands (guilt and responsibility for the murder of Duncan)
- However, it also becomes clear that her original confidence was misplaced: her "little hand" is dirtied by blood, and seemingly nothing (even "all the perfumes of Arabia") can cleanse it of her guilt and responsibility
- Shakespeare could be suggesting that once Lady Macbeth accepted responsibility for the murder, the guilt was overwhelming

## Corruption of Nature

Jacobean audiences believed in a set structure in the world: the world according to God's plan. Any disruption to the world was, therefore, disruption to God's ordained order.

**Paired quotation:**

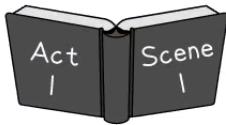


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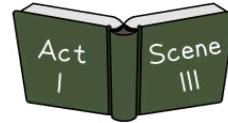


Three Witches

“Fair is foul and foul is fair”



Macbeth



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“So foul and fair a day I have not seen”

**“Fair is foul and foul is fair”** Three Witches, Act I, Scene I

**“So foul and fair a day I have not seen”** Macbeth, Act I, Scene III

### Meaning and context

- The witches are warning the audience that what may be seen as good might well be bad, and vice versa
- It comes from the very first scene of the play
- Macbeth is commenting on the very strange weather that comes after his victory in battle
- His lines come just before his first encounter with the witches

### Analysis

- The witches are presenting the audience with a **paradox**: a contradictory statement that suggests that the play will involve the themes of deception and appearance versus reality



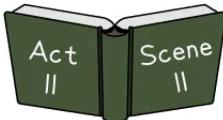
Your notes

- It is also a suggestion from Shakespeare of the disruption and chaos to come, of a kingdom turned upside down
- The **paradox** suggests that the words of the witches might be in the form of riddles: confusing, or misleading, just as their prophecies are to Macbeth
- Macbeth, without having met the witches, echoes their language:
  - This suggests he is already being led by them, or under their spell
  - This suggests to the audience that perhaps his “fair” character will be corrupted and become most “foul”



Macbeth

“ Macbeth does murder sleep! ”

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**“Macbeth does murder sleep!”** Macbeth, Act II, Scene II

### Meaning and context

- Macbeth is quoting a voice he can hear that tells him that he has murdered sleep
- It comes immediately after the murder of King Duncan when Macbeth returns to Lady Macbeth

### Analysis

- Macbeth returns from murdering Duncan in a panicked state and is hallucinating
- He hears a voice telling him he will no longer be able to sleep
- “Sleep” symbolises peace or calm, so this is a suggestion that Macbeth will no longer be at peace because he committed **regicide**
- Shakespeare could be suggesting that in the act of murdering a king, he has murdered his own chance at peace – and perhaps eternal peace: Heaven

- The voice he can hear might be interpreted as his own conscience



Your notes



Your notes

## Macbeth: Character Quotations

GCSE English Literature exam questions usually focus on a theme, a character or a relationship between two or more characters. Examiners reward responses that track the development of characters or themes through the play.

When revising, try to consider quotes in terms of their narrative effects — how characters are presented, what attitudes or relationships are presented and why these ideas have been shown to the reader.

- Macbeth
- Lady Macbeth
- The Witches
- Banquo



### Examiner Tips and Tricks

One thing you can do to improve the quality of your response is to focus closely on the question. To do this, consider what the character in the extract represents within society (e.g. Macbeth represents a soldier and a husband). It is always a good idea to examine contrasts and relationships too. For instance, you could consider Macbeth's relationship with Lady Macbeth. You may also want to consider what ideas the character presents, such as how the characters respond to the witches and how this illustrates attitudes about the supernatural.

Examiners like you to use references or quotes as support for your ideas. That's why we've included a "key word or phrase" from every one of our longer quotations to help you memorise only the most important parts of each quotation.

## Macbeth

“

**“Cannot be ill, cannot be good: if ill,/Why hath it given me earnest of success,/Commencing in a truth?”** – Macbeth, Act 1 Scene 3

 <b>Macbeth</b>	<b>Key word or phrase to memorise:</b> “Cannot be ill, cannot be good” and “earnest of success”	<b>What the quotation means:</b> In an aside, Macbeth evaluates whether the witches’ prophecies are good or bad, but goes on to question how they could possibly be bad as the witches predicted his successful future alongside a truth (that he was Thane of Glamis and Cawdor)	<b>Theme:</b> Fate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Shakespeare raises questions about fate and free will through his <b>protagonist</b>:           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ His tragic hero expresses uncertainty about the ambiguous prophecies</li> <li>▪ The <b>oxymoronic</b> “ill” or “good” conveys <b>dichotomies</b> in his dilemma</li> <li>▪ Macbeth, via his questioning nature, is presented as doubtful and reflective</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Shakespeare presents Macbeth as, initially, dubious about the witches’ prophecies:           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ However, his question suggests he is inclined to believe the witches’ words</li> <li>▪ This may imply his receptiveness to supernatural ideas, as well as his ambition</li> </ul> </li> </ul>			



“ ”

“I dare do all that may become a man;/Who dares do more is none” – Macbeth, Act 1 Scene 7

 <b>Macbeth</b>	<b>Key word or phrase to memorise:</b> “dare do all” and “dares do more”	<b>What the quotation means:</b> Macbeth denies Lady Macbeth’s challenge to his masculinity and insists that he is a brave man, arguing that what he does already proves that, and that if he were to “do more” (kill King Duncan), he would be less of a man	<b>Theme:</b> Loyalty
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- Shakespeare illustrates the pressures between Macbeth and his wife:
  - Macbeth’s loyalty is challenged
  - While their relationship is close, gender issues cause conflict as a result of Lady Macbeth’s masculine qualities

- The **alliterative anaphora** “dare do all” and “dares do more” stresses Macbeth’s attitudes towards masculinity:
  - Macbeth’s repetition of “dare” links to bravery and, perhaps, recklessness
  - His loyalty to the king, Macbeth suggests, makes him more of a man



Your notes

“

“Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear

Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts,” – Macbeth, Act 2 Scene 1

 Macbeth	<b>Key word or phrase to memorise:</b> “for fear” and “stones prate”	<b>What the quotation means:</b> When Macbeth hallucinates that he sees a dagger and begins to doubt his senses, his paranoia increases so that, by the end, he believes that every footstep alerts the castle, as if the stones talk (“prate”)	<b>Theme:</b> Guilt
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- Shakespeare’s tragic hero experiences psychological turmoil and guilt:
  - Macbeth’s hallucination indicates his anxious need to detach from reality
  - His soliloquy expresses his troubled state as he doubts his senses
- The scene’s tension is emphasised by the silence to which Macbeth refers:
  - This emphasises Macbeth’s paranoia about being caught
  - As he talks to himself, he draws attention to his footsteps
  - He **personifies** the stones, believing that they will expose him

## Lady Macbeth

“

“That I may pour my spirits in thine ear;

**And chastise with the valour of my tongue**

All that impedes thee from the golden round" – Lady Macbeth, Act 1 Scene 5



Your notes

 <b>Lady Macbeth</b>	<b>Key word or phrase to memorise:</b> "the valour of my tongue" and "All that impedes thee"	<b>What the quotation means:</b> After Lady Macbeth reads about the prophecy, she decides to help Macbeth overcome all obstacles to the crown ("golden round"), and says that she will need to persuade him ("pour" her "spirits") with the power of her "tongue", and that she may need to "chastise" (lecture) him	<b>Theme:</b> Loyalty
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- Shakespeare initially introduces Lady Macbeth as a loyal wife:
  - Her determination to help Macbeth fulfil his destiny is conveyed by the phrase "All that impedes thee"
  - She implies that her power lies in the strength of her speech and her ability to manipulate Macbeth to her bidding
- Shakespeare foreshadows Lady Macbeth's relentless persuasion in Act 1 Scene 7:
  - In her soliloquy, audiences hear her plans to scold Macbeth

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**"A foolish thought, to say a sorry sight."** – Lady Macbeth, Act 2 Scene 2

 <b>Lady Macbeth</b>	<b>Key word or phrase to memorise:</b> "foolish thought" and "sorry sight"	<b>What the quotation means:</b> After the murder of King Duncan, Macbeth is distressed and expresses remorse, but Lady Macbeth tells him that it is silly to feel sorry for his actions	<b>Theme:</b> Guilt
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- Shakespeare presents contrasting characters in Lady Macbeth and Macbeth:



Your notes

- The reversed gender roles is significant in this scene
  - Macbeth weakens and wails while Lady Macbeth is emotionless
- While the scene is tense, the unexpected responses create some humour:
  - Lady Macbeth's frustration at her lamenting husband is conveyed in the **sibilant** "sorry sight"
- This line highlights her distinct lack of guilt:
  - The word "foolish" implies her pragmatic response to the murder

“

**“Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand” –**

Lady Macbeth, Act 5 Scene 1

 <b>Lady Macbeth</b>	<b>Key word or phrase to memorise:</b> “smell of blood still” and “all the perfumes”	<b>What the quotation means:</b> Lady Macbeth is overcome with guilt and imagines that she can smell King Duncan's blood on her hands, adding that all the perfume in “Arabia” would not make her hands smell sweet as they are forever stained with guilt	<b>Theme:</b> Guilt
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- Lady Macbeth's line ironically illustrates the error of her previous arrogance:
  - Earlier, she tells Macbeth that “a little water” will clean his hands of blood
  - By Act 5, a contrast in her attitude is highlighted by the word “all”, implying nothing can remove the blood
- Shakespeare's ideas about guilt are conveyed with **metaphor**:
  - Lady Macbeth is haunted by the blood that is “still” on her hands
  - Arabia is associated with the finest perfumes
  - Her guilt leads to mental decline
  - Shakespeare raises questions about Machiavellian success

## The witches

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"When the hurlyburly's done,

When the battle's lost and won" -The Witches/Second Witch, Act 1 Scene 1



Your notes



The witches

**Key word or phrase to memorise:**  
"hurlyburly's done" and "lost and won"

**What the quotation means:** The witches, in a deserted place, say that they will meet Macbeth once the chaos of the "battle" is over

**Theme:**  
Supernatural

- Shakespeare opens his play ominously foreshadowing the witches' influence:
  - They discuss events in rhyme, making their speech chant-like as if casting a spell
  - Nevertheless, their words are ambiguous and mysterious
  - Chaos, or "hurly-burly", is implied
- Shakespeare creates **dramatic irony**, as audiences hear the witches' plans:
  - This suggests their power in the play
  - In this way, ideas about the influence of supernatural forces are raised

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"Lesser than Macbeth, and greater" - The Witches/First Witch, Act 1 Scene 3

 <b>The witches</b>	<b>Key word or phrase to memorise:</b> "Lesser" and "greater"	<b>What the quotation means:</b> The witches prophesise that Banquo will have a lesser status than Macbeth, but that he will also be better or "greater"	<b>Theme:</b> Fate
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- Shakespeare uses the witches to present ideas about fate and free will:
  - The witches are perceived as having supernatural qualities
  - Yet it is Macbeth's response to their words that realises their prophecies
- The **oxymoron** "Lesser" and "greater" presents alternative versions of success:
  - Although Macbeth will be king, Banquo's legacy makes him "greater"
  - Macbeth's jealous paranoia once he is king leads to his ruin

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**"He will not be commanded: here's another,**

**More potent than the first"** – The Witches/First Witch, Act 4 Scene 1

 <b>The witches</b>	<b>Key word or phrase to memorise:</b> "not be commanded" and "More potent"	<b>What the quotation means:</b> When Macbeth returns to the witches, keen to hear more about Banquo, they warn him about his impending death, and become frustrated at his arrogant self-absorption	<b>Theme:</b> Supernatural
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- Shakespeare presents the witches' loss of power over Macbeth once he becomes king:
  - His obsession with Banquo's legacy blinds him to the witches' warnings
  - The witches are frustrated with his refusal to be "commanded"

- They make the visions scarier to try to shock him



Your notes

## Banquo

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“And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,  
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,  
Win us with honest trifles, to betrays  
In deepest consequence” - Banquo, Act 1 Scene 3

 <b>Banquo</b>	<b>Key word or phrase to memorise:</b> “instruments of darkness” and “honest trifles”	<b>What the quotation means:</b> Banquo warns Macbeth that the witches’ prophecies may be tempting him with a small truth to lead him to towards darker consequences that will cause him harm	<b>Theme:</b> Supernatural
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- Shakespeare’s plays often present the danger of placing trust in the supernatural:
  - Banquo resists the witches
  - Imagery emphasises his belief that they are harmful tools of “darkness”
  - The oxymoron (“honest trifles” and “betrays/In deepest”) implies Banquo sees the witches as deceitful
- Banquo acts as a **foil** to Macbeth:
  - While Macbeth is uncertain, Banquo has clarity and self-assuredness
  - Macbeth is lured into betraying his king, but Banquo remains loyal

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“Thou hast it now: king, Cawdor, Glamis, all,

As the weird women promised, and, I fear,

Thou play'dst most foully for't" - Banquo, Act 3 Scene 1



Your notes

 <b>Banquo</b>	<b>Key word or phrase to memorise:</b> "all" and "most foully"	<b>What the quotation means:</b> Banquo reflects on Macbeth's success (that he has "all" he was promised), but he is concerned that Macbeth has won this success by "playing" unfairly	<b>Theme:</b> Fate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Shakespeare illustrates the growing conflict in Macbeth and Banquo's friendship:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Banquo suspects that his friend has acted "foully"</li><li>▪ This raises ideas about Machiavellian success</li></ul></li><li>▪ Shakespeare questions ideas about fate, free will, and the power of the supernatural:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ This line mirrors the witches' words, "foul and fair"</li><li>▪ The line is blurred between the prophecies and the way in which Macbeth responds</li></ul></li></ul>			

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"O, treachery! Fly, good Fleance, fly, fly, fly!

Thou mayst revenge" - Banquo, Act 3 Scene 3

 <b>Banquo</b>	<b>Key word or phrase to memorise:</b> “treachery”	<b>What the quotation means:</b> Banquo appears surprised that his friend, Macbeth, has betrayed him and sent men to murder him and his son	<b>Theme:</b> Loyalty
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ The climax of the play signals a turning point for Macbeth, the tragic hero:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ His submission to egomania and violence leads to mental decline and, ultimately, his downfall</li><li>■ His “treachery” (as cried out by Banquo) makes him irredeemable</li></ul></li><li>■ However, notably, Banquo calls to his son to seek vengeance:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Perhaps Shakespeare implies that loyalty can create a continuous cycle of violent revenge</li></ul></li></ul>			

  
Your notes

## Source

Macbeth: Entire Play, <https://shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/full.html>. Accessed 31 May 2024.