

Macbeth

IGCSE Revision

A Lesson for **IGCSE Literature in English**

Edexcel 4ET1

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Assessment Objectives

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- **AO1:** Demonstrate a close knowledge and understanding of texts, maintaining a critical style and presenting an informed personal engagement.
- **AO2:** Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects.
- **AO4:** Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written.

Past questions

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Past paper questions

***Macbeth*, William Shakespeare**

EITHER

13 Captain: 'The merciless Macdonald – / Worthy to be a rebel ...'

Discuss the theme of betrayal in *Macbeth*.

You must consider language, form and structure and refer to the context of the play in your answer.

(Total for Question 13 = 30 marks)

OR

14 Discuss the presentation of **one** character you sympathise with in the play.

You must consider language, form and structure and refer to the context of the play in your answer.

Past paper questions

***Macbeth*, William Shakespeare**

EITHER

13 In what ways does Macduff contribute to Macbeth's downfall in the play?

You must consider language, form and structure and refer to the context of the play in your answer.

(Total for Question 13 = 30 marks)

OR

14 'Shakespeare makes great use of symbols, such as weather and blood.'

Explore the significance of symbols in *Macbeth*.

You must consider language, form and structure and refer to the context of the play in your answer.

Past paper questions

***Macbeth*, William Shakespeare**

EITHER

13 'Throughout the play there is a battle between good and evil.'

Explore the theme of good versus evil in *Macbeth*.

You must consider language, form and structure and refer to the context of the play in your answer.

(Total for Question 13 = 30 marks)

OR

14 How does Shakespeare present the character of Macbeth in the play?

You must consider language, form and structure and refer to the context of the play in your answer.

Past paper questions

Macbeth, William Shakespeare

EITHER

13 Discuss the presentation of **one** character you think changes most in the play.

You must consider language, form and structure and refer to the context of the play in your answer.

(Total for Question 13 = 30 marks)

OR

14 Explore the theme of power in *Macbeth*.

You must consider language, form and structure and refer to the context of the play in your answer.

Past paper questions

***Macbeth*, William Shakespeare**

EITHER

13 In what ways are the Witches important in *Macbeth*?

You must consider language, form and structure and refer to the context of the play in your answer.

(Total for Question 13 = 30 marks)

OR

14 Explore the theme of ambition in the play.

You must consider language, form and structure and refer to the context of the play in your answer.

Essay structure

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Option #1

- Introduction
- Before Duncan's death
- After Duncan's death
- In the end
- Conclusion

Option #2

- Introduction
- At first,
- Then,
- However,
- Conclusion

Option #3

- Introduction
- At first,
- Then,
- Ultimately,
- Conclusion

Context



Key context points:

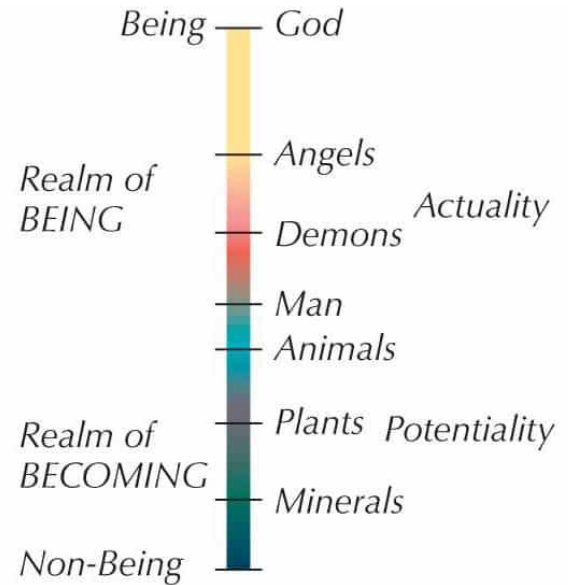
- King James I
- Great Chain of Being
- Divine Right of Kings
- The Gunpowder Plot
- Women and patriarchal society
- Witches and the Supernatural

King James I

- Previously known as King James VI of Scotland, he had recently ascended to the English throne –and Shakespeare sought to impress him by addressing his interests, such as kingship and witchcraft.
- King James had a deep interest in the supernatural and had also recently survived the Gunpowder Plot to kill him.
- He was therefore anxious about threats to his power from witchcraft and other potential assassins.
- The play also complimented the king's ancestry (Banquo, a noble character, was named after one of James' ancestors).

Great Chain of Being & Divine Right

- In Jacobean times, people believed that all life was part of a strict hierarchy, with God at the top.
- Kings were thought to have been appointed by 'divine right' (selected by God) and therefore higher than the rest of mankind.
- To challenge one's position (and to challenge the King) was an affront to God and would create great chaos – a disruption of the natural order.



The Gunpowder Plot

- In 1605, a group of rebels, including Guy Fawkes, attempted regicide by plotting to blow up Parliament.
- Shakespeare shows how those who **commit regicide** will be tormented by guilt and ultimately meet a tragic end.



Women & Patriarchy



- Society was '**patriarchal**' (led by men). Women were said to be lower than men in The Great Chain of Being.
- A woman's role in Jacobean times was clearly defined. They were expected to marry, to bear children and be subservient to men.
- Women who challenged this concept were sometimes labelled as witches and ostracised from society, or worse...

Witches & the Supernatural

- There was real superstition and anxiety about the evils of witchcraft, in the lower classes and in royalty.
- King James had previously written a book called '**Demonology**' which was a study of the evils of magic.
- He also asked Parliament to pass an anti-witchcraft law, which he then used to execute several witches in the North Berwick Witch Trials.



Shakespeare's intentions

Shakespeare's intentions

- Macbeth serves as a warning against “vaulting ambition”, urging respect for the natural order.
- The pursuit of power will lead to isolation, paranoia and ruin.
- Guilt and conscience are inescapable and eventually sins must be paid for, whether in life or the afterlife.
- Macbeth's choices are his own, therefore arguing for human responsibility for one's own actions.
- Actions against moral and social laws, like regicide, will lead to temporary chaos and unhappiness but ultimately order will be restored.

Characters

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Macbeth

- The character of MACBETH represents bravery, ambition, betrayal and guilt.
- His **hamartia** (fatal flaw) is his “vaulting ambition”
- The witches’ prophecies transform him from a loyal warrior to a morally weakened and psychotic “tyrant”
- From “brave Macbeth” to “the dead butcher”



Lady Macbeth



- The character of LADY MACBETH represents ambition, cunning, manipulation and guilt.
- She is a rebel, challenging the submissive role of women and the divine right of kings, asking to be “unsexed”
- Yet she is transformed by guilt to madness, softness and a victim of her own actions: “out, out damn spot” and “who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?”

King Duncan

- The character of KING DUNCAN symbolises nobility, dignity and trust.
- A compliment to the royalty: he is a “most sainted king”
- He is respecting and trusting to Macbeth, calling him “valiant” and “worthy”
- But then betrayed as appearances are deceiving; Macbeth turns out to be “foul” not “fair”
- His death marks the disruption of the natural order, which is restored when Macbeth is killed.



Banquo



- The character of BANQUO symbolises nobility, loyalty and trust.
- Through his loyalty and rejection of the prophecies, he is a **foil** to the character of Macbeth (a contrast).
- He is cautious: "instruments of darkness tell us truths"
- Though he also receives prophecies that his sons will be kings, he does not act upon it – this makes him a threat to Macbeth

The Witches

- THE WITCHES represent the supernatural, evil and equivocation.
- The witches' prophecies never give the full answer (they '**equivocate**') and therefore tempt Macbeth towards his tragic end.
- They are the Other, existing literally on the outskirts of society on a "heath"
- They **blur natural boundaries** between male and female, present and future
- They are unnatural: they "look not like the inhabitants of the earth" and play with weather



The Macduffs



- THE MACDUFFS symbolise family, loyalty and vengeance
- The Macduffs serve as a contrast to the Macbeths: they are loyal; they are a loving family; Macduff is the noble warrior when he kills Macbeth.
- Macduff's manliness is secure, involving both fighting and feeling
- Macduff refuses to "dispute it like a man" but he says he "must also feel it as a man"
- Lady Macduff's death haunts Lady Macbeth: "the Thane of Fife had a wife, where is she now?"

Themes



Themes

Guilt	Kingship	Ambition	Gender
Consequences of immoral actions, haunting characters like Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.	Contrasts rightful rule (Duncan) with tyranny (Macbeth's unlawful reign).	Driving force of Macbeth's downfall; unchecked ambition breeds destruction.	Challenges traditional roles; LM manipulates Macbeth by attacking his masculinity.
Appearance and reality	The supernatural	Loyalty and betrayal	Good versus evil
Deception dominates; things are not what they seem.	Witches and visions influence Macbeth's fate and moral decline.	Betrayal of Duncan and others disrupts natural order.	Struggle between morality (Macduff, Malcolm) and corruption (Macbeth).

Form and structure

Circular Structure



The play starts and ends on a battlefield, with Macbeth showing great courage and violence. However, by the end, he has no loyalty, no comrades and dies alone. This is part of his tragedy.

The natural order is broken and then restored by the end of the play:

- Malcolm is crowned: great chain of being is restored
- Macbeth is beheaded
- **"Time is free"** – showing Scotland's liberation from Macbeth's oppressive rule

Tragic Fall – Structure

- Aristotle stated that the hero must begin the story in a position of power, nobility, or prosperity and end in a state of misfortune or downfall.
- This trajectory is central to the emotional impact of tragedy and serves key purposes within the structure of the genre.
- Begins “brave Macbeth” > ends a “dead butcher” and a “tyrant”



Tragic Fall – Structure



- **Hamartia** (fatal flaw): “vaulting ambition”
- **Hubris** (excessive pride and arrogance): “none born of woman shall harm Macbeth”
- **Peripetia** (a turning point): a point of no return, such as when Macbeth realises that “I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er”
- **Anagnorisis** (crucial discovery): Macbeth realising he is not invincible, “Macduff was from his mother's womb untimely ripped”
- **Catharsis** (cleansing of anxiety): Macbeth is killed and natural order is restored

Iambic Pentameter & Blank Verse

- Most of the play (particularly noble and powerful characters) is written in iambic pentameter and blank verse (not rhyming)
- ba-DUM, ba-DUM, ba-DUM, ba-DUM, ba-DUM.
- This controlled meter conveys power and authority.
- When Lady Macbeth breaks down, she stops using blank verse.
- Similarly, the metre becomes irregular in Macbeth's "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" soliloquy, showing his fragmented state of mind.



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<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=68457210>

Trochaic Tetrameter



- A rhythmic pattern that consist of four 'trochees' per line:
- DUM-da, DUM-da, DUM-da, DUM-da.
- "DOUble, DOUble, TOIL and TROUble / Fire BURN and CAULdron Bubble"
- This sounds like unnatural, eerie chanting, representing their otherness and how they exist on the outside of society
- Also often speak in **rhyming couplets**: light-hearted rhythm contrasts with sinister prophecies

Prose

- This means normal speech without a set rhythm.
- Shakespeare uses it to show a lack of power and authority (the drunk Porter, Lady M's attendants, the Murderers)
- It also represents a loss of formality or control (Macbeth's letter to Lady M; Lady M sleepwalking).



Soliloquys

- A speech to oneself –but overheard by the audience, allowing them to understand the character's inner thoughts and conflict.
- Notable soliloquys include...
 - “Is this a dagger I see before me?”
 - “To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus”
 - “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day”



Dramatic irony



When the audience knows something that the characters do not, heightening tension and suspense

- When Duncan arrives at Macbeth's castle, he states "This castle hath a pleasant seat", but the audience know of Macbeth's plans to murder him
- When Lady Macbeth swoons after Duncan's body is found, the audience know this is all an act
- Banquo's ghost – only Macbeth and the audience can see

Motifs



Motifs in Macbeth

- Blood
- Hands
- Birds
- Storms
- Light and dark
- Infertility

Motif meanings

- **Blood:** Guilt, violence, and the permanence of Macbeth's crimes.
- **Hands:** Responsibility and the physical manifestation of guilt.
- **Birds:** Omens, both good and bad, and natural order.
- **Storms:** Chaos, turmoil, and disruption of the natural order.
- **Light and dark:** Good vs. evil, truth vs. deception, and moral conflict.
- **Infertility:** Lack of legacy and the failure of ambition.

Blood

Guilt, violence, and the permanence of Macbeth's crimes.

- "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?" (Act 2, Scene 2)
- "Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand." (Act 5, Scene 1)
- "Blood will have blood." (Act 3, Scene 4)
- "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!" (Act 5, Scene 1)
- "Make thick my blood, / Stop up the access and passage to remorse." (Act 1, Scene 5)



Hands



Responsibility and the physical manifestation of guilt.

- "A little water clears us of this deed." (Act 2, Scene 2)
- "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?" (Act 2, Scene 2)
- "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!" (Act 5, Scene 1)
- "Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand." (Act 5, Scene 1)
- "Give me your hand. / What's done cannot be undone." (Act 5, Scene 1)

Birds

Omens, both good and bad, and natural order.

- "The raven himself is hoarse / That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan." (Act 1, Scene 5)
- "It was the owl that shrieked, the fatal bellman." (Act 2, Scene 2)



Storms



Chaos, turmoil, and disruption of the natural order.

- "When shall we three meet again / In thunder, lightning, or in rain?" (Act 1, Scene 1)
- "So foul and fair a day I have not seen." (Act 1, Scene 3)
- "Lamentings heard i' the air, strange screams of death." (Act 2, Scene 3)
- "Blow, wind! Come, wrack! / At least we'll die with harness on our back." (Act 5, Scene 5)

Light and dark

Good vs. evil, truth vs. deception, and moral conflict.

- "Stars, hide your fires; / Let not light see my black and deep desires." (Act 1, Scene 4)
- "Come, thick night, / And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell." (Act 1, Scene 5)
- "Their candles are all out." (Act 2, Scene 1)
- "The night has been unruly." (Act 2, Scene 3)
- "Out, out, brief candle!" (Act 5, Scene 5)



Infertility



Lack of legacy and the failure of ambition.

- "I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me." (Act 1, Scene 7) (implying Lady Macbeth's lost motherhood)
- "Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown / And put a barren sceptre in my gripe." (Act 3, Scene 1)
- "For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind." (Act 3, Scene 1)
- "Your children shall be kings." / "You shall be king." (Act 1, Scene 3) (Macbeth's jealousy over Banquo's lineage)

Key quotations

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Key quotations

- "Fair is foul, and foul is fair."
- "What are these
So wither'd and so wild in their attire,
That look not like the inhabitants o'
the earth,
And yet are on 't?"
- "And fill me from the crown to the
toe top full
Of direst cruelty;"
- "Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall,"
- "Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' the milk of human
kindness."
- "Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps
itself,
And falls on the other."
- "Screw your courage to the sticking-
place,
And we'll not fail."

Key quotations

- "The bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to
hell."
- "Had he not resembled
My father as he slept I had done't."
- "Glamis hath murdered sleep, and
there Cawdor
Shall sleep no more, Macbeth shall
sleep no more!"
- "A little water clears us of this deed."
- "Thou hast it now: King, Cawdor,
Glamis, all,
As the weird women promised; and,
I fear,
Thou play'dst most foully for't."
- "Upon my head they placed a
fruitless crown,
And put a barren sceptre in my
gripe,
Thence to be wrench'd with an
unlineal hand,
No son of mine succeeding."

Key quotations

- "We have scorched the snake, not killed it;"
- "Thou canst not say I did it; never shake
Thy gory locks at me."
- "By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes."
- "Out, damned spot! out, I say!"
- "Yet who would have thought the
old man to have had so much blood
in him?"
- "All the perfumes of Arabia will not
sweeten this little hand."
- "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-
morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to
day"
- "Out, out, brief candle!"
- "Macduff was from his mother's
womb
Untimely ripped."

Key quotations

- More key quotations: [Macbeth - Full Analysis](#)

Practice question

Your question

Explore the significance of the **theme of ambition** in Macbeth.

You must consider language, form and structure, and refer to the context of the play in your answer.

- **Language** – word choice, simile, metaphor, symbolism, etc
- **Form** – features of a play, soliloquy, iambic pentameter, setting, dramatic irony, features of tragedies
- **Structure** – how the play is organised, order of events, how characters and their relationships change

You should have mentioned...

- Hamartia/fatal flaw
- Divine Right of Kings / King James I / Gun Powder Plot
- “Vaulting ambition”
- “Fruitless crown” / “barren sceptre”
- Leads Macbeth to commit sin of regicide and murder
- Murders of King Duncan, Banquo, Macduff’s family
- Macbeth’s loss of sanity, reason, hallucinations (“is this a dagger I see before me?” “never shake thy gory locks at me”)
- Ambition comes from Macbeth alone; responsible for the murders of Banquo and Macduff’s family (“be innocent of the knowledge”)
- Upon hearing Witches’ prophecies, he’s immediately taken with the idea of being King (“if chance may have me king, why chance may crown me without my stir”)
- Or does he begin innocent (“too full of the milk of human kindness”) and his ambition leads him astray along with the women in the play?
- Macbeth’s “vaulting ambition” is contrasted with the good nature of Banquo, Macduff and Malcolm; he is a “butcher” and a “tyrant”
- Tragic fall from “brave Macbeth” to “butcher” – but wasn’t this always the case? “Unseam’d him from the knave to the chops”
- Contrast of Macbeth’s Kingship with Duncan’s; under Macbeth, Scotland “bleeds” whereas Duncan is a paragon of virtue
- Warning to those who defy Divine Right of Kings, especially after Gun Powder Plot
- References to supernatural to appeal to James I, who wrote Of Daemonologie on the subject of Witches

You should have mentioned...

- Typical gender role and expectations of the era: Macbeth represents a bloody and brutal masculinity in comparison to Macduff's measured masculinity ("I must also feel it as a man")
- Christian attitudes towards regicide (Macbeth) and suicide (Lady Macbeth)
- King James I was really descended from Banquo
- By the end of the play, Macbeth is diminished, beheaded and the natural order is reinstated, shown using Malcolm "planting" a new peace at the end of the play
- Shakespeare explores the corrupting nature

of power, especially for those whom God never intended to have it

Model essay:

<https://codexterous.home.blog/2021/04/07/a-macbeth-model-essay-macbeth-and-ambition/>

Central messages explained:

<https://awildsurmise.medium.com/macbeth-shakespeare-s-masterpiece-b144698e2c6c>

More resources

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