



Macbeth

by William Shakespeare

Revision

This Booklet Belongs to

Contents Page

Knowledge Organiser	1
Plot	2
Key Themes and Top Ten Quotes	2
Key Terminology - Shakespeare's methods	3
Characters	3
Key Context	3
Key Quotes & analysis	4
Themes	6
Context	7
Practice Questions	9
Exemplar Student Answers	14
An example essay from last year's exam	17

Knowledge Organiser

MACBETH

Literature paper 1 Section A: 30 + 4 marks ~ 50 minutes

AO1 (response, references) AO2 (methods, subject terminology) AO3 (context)
AO4 (SPaG)

Plot

Act 1	Macbeth comes back from battle covered in glory. He is called "Brave Macbeth." Macbeth and Banquo meet witches, Cawdor executed, Lady M reads letter says "unsex me here," persuades Macbeth, Duncan arrives.
Act 2	Macbeth hallucinates a dagger, kills Duncan, Lady Macbeth takes over, Malcolm flees, Macbeth crowned King.
Act 3	Macbeth murders Banquo, Fleance escapes, Macbeth haunted by Banquo's ghost.
Act 4	3 more witches' prophecies, Macduff flees to England, family murdered, Macduff finds out & swears revenge
Act 5	Lady Macbeth sleepwalks and dies, Macduff & Malcolm join forces & attack, Macduff kills Macbeth, Malcolm restored as King.

Key Themes and Top Ten Quotes

Appearance vs reality, equivocation	The witches: "Fair is foul and foul is fair"
Violence	Captain about Macbeth: "he unseam'd him from the nave to th'chaps"
Supernatural, ambivalence	Macbeth about the witches: "This supernatural soliciting/ Cannot be good, cannot be ill"
Ambition appearance/ reality	Macbeth: "stars, hide your fires / let not light see my black and deep desires"
Ambition	Macbeth: "I have no spur... but only/vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself"
Femininity/ Masculinity	Lady Macbeth: "Come you spirits...unsex me here"
Deception, appearance/ reality	Lady Macbeth: "look like th'innocent flower/ but be the serpent under't"
Guilt	Macbeth: 'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood/Clean from my hand?'
Evil	Macbeth: "Oh, Full of scorpions is my mind dear wife"
Regret	Macbeth: "Life's but...a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing"

Key Terminology - Shakespeare's methods

Prose – ordinary speech with no pattern

Lady Macbeth uses this when she sleepwalks – implies she has lost control

Language (words and techniques)

Light and dark imagery Illustrates battle between good and evil and Macbeth's corruption

Blood motif - repeated symbol Reflects Macbeth's guilt

Symbolism References to disrupted nature show the repercussions of Macbeth's actions

Structure (order of ideas)

Rhyming couplets - two lines which rhyme Reflect the supernatural (incantations/spells) and link Macbeth to the witches

Order of ideas Look for how ideas develop in the extract or turning points

Foil - a character used for contrast Loyal Banquo is a foil to disloyal Macbeth

Form (type of text)

Soliloquy - one character speaking their thoughts and feelings aloud
Reveals thoughts of characters; Macbeth makes audience complicit in his crimes

Dramatic Irony - Audience knows something the characters don't
Creates tension – audience know Duncan will die

Hamartia - a tragic flaw within a character
Macbeth's own 'vaulting ambition' causes his downfall

Blank verse – unrhymed **iambic pentameter** (10 or 11 syllables per line)
Shows high status of the characters

Characters

Macbeth Protagonist, ambitious and ruthless

Lady Macbeth Defies expectations, strong and ambitious, but goes mad

Witches Supernatural beings, make prophecies could represent conscience

Banquo Macbeth's friend, son's prophesied to rule, killed and returns as ghost

Duncan Good king, praises M at start, murdered in Act 2

Macduff Wife and children killed, kills Macbeth, born by caesarean

Malcolm Heir to throne, finally crowned

Fleance Banquo's son, represents innocence

Key Context

Following the failed **gunpowder plot**, Macbeth can be read as a cautionary tale for anyone considering attempting to **overthrow the king**.

The '**Weird Sisters**' would have appealed to King James's fascination with the **supernatural** – he believed that **witches** were emblems of darkness and conflict.

Lady Macbeth negates her own **femininity**, directly subverting social **expectations of women** at the time, who were expected to be nurturing and caring.

By killing Duncan, Macbeth is defying the '**Divine right of Kings**,' i.e. interfering with God's will as Jacobians believed that God chose the King.

Shakespeare shows the repercussions of breaking the '**Great Chain of Being**' (hierarchical order of the world, with God at the top) through negative consequences on Scotland and Macbeth after he commits **regicide**.

Key Quotes & analysis

Quotation	What is happening	What it means	Language device	Link with context
1.1 (Witches) " Fair is foul and foul is fair "	Witches await Macbeth.	Everything is reversed, unnatural, distorted.	Oxymoron, repetition	Witchcraft
1.2 " he unseam'd him from the nave to th'chops " (About Macbeth)	Captain describes Macbeth's violence in battle to Duncan.	Macbeth, even at the start, has the ability to be brutal.	Metaphor	Masculinity Heroism
1.2 " For brave Macbeth... Like valor's minion carved out his passage "	Captain describes Macbeth's bravery in battle to Duncan.	Macbeth is extremely brave and determined. He is well respected, if not feared.	Metaphor Simile	Masculinity Heroism
1.3 (Banquo) " The instruments of darkness tell us truths "	Witches talk to Banquo and Macbeth.	Banquo believes the witches' prophecy, but fears what the effect might be.	Metaphor	Tragedy/fate; belief in the supernatural
1.3 (Banquo) " New horrors come upon him, like our strange garments "	Banquo comments on the effect of the witches' prophesy.	Macbeth appears transformed by the thought that he may be king.	Simile	Belief in the supernatural
1.4 " let not light see my black and deep desires "	Macbeth plots Duncan's murder	Macbeth knows what he is planning is wrong	Metaphor Light/dark imagery	Concept of good/evil, light/dark.
1.5 (Lady Macbeth) " Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here "	Lady Macbeth's soliloquy, wishing her husband was more decisive and less scrupulous.	She wants to be more like a man, to take charge herself.	Imagery, unusual and powerful verb ("unsex")	Role of women, patriarchal society
1.5 (Lady Macbeth) " Come, thick night, and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell "	Lady Macbeth's soliloquy, following the news that Duncan will visit. She is plotting his death.	She wants to become evil, cruel – to turn to the dark side.	Metaphor	Fate, the concept of evil, role of women
1.5 " look like th'innocent flower/but be the serpent under't "	Lady Macbeth trying to persuade Macbeth to kill Duncan	She is false, duplicitous, manipulative.	Biblical Metaphor	Religion, role of women

1.7 (Macbeth) “If it were done when ‘tis done, then ‘twere well it were done quickly”	Macbeth is worrying about killing King Duncan.	If he has to kill Duncan, he wants to get it over with rapidly. He is having doubts.	Repetition	Regicide, Divine Right of Kings
1.7 (Macbeth) “Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself and falls on the other”	Macbeth is worrying about killing King Duncan.	He fears his aim to become ruler may lead him to make a tragic mistake.	Metaphor	Regicide, Divine Right
1.7 (Lady Macbeth) “Was the hope drunk wherein you dress’d yourself?”	Lady Macbeth tries to talk her husband into killing King Duncan.	She is insulting Macbeth, insinuating that he is a coward who merely pretended to be courageous.	Metaphor	Patriarchal society, reversal of gender stereotypes
1.7 (Lady Macbeth) “I would, while it was smiling in my face, have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums, and dash’d the brains out, had I so sworn as you have done to this.”	Lady Macbeth tries to talk her husband into killing King Duncan.	She would rather have killed her own child than to backtrack on the plan to kill Duncan, as Macbeth is trying to do.	Hyperbole	Reversal of gender stereotypes
2.1 (Macbeth) “Is this a dagger that I see before me, the handle toward my hand?”	Macbeth is preparing to kill King Duncan and hallucinates.	He is imagining the murder weapon – possibly the sign of a guilty mind.	Imagery	Regicide
2.1 (Macbeth) “Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell that summons thee to heaven or to hell.”	A bell sounds as Macbeth goes off to kill Duncan.	He takes the bell as a portent of death.	Symbolism , imagery	Religion, regicide
2.2 (Macbeth) “Methought I heard a voice cry ‘Sleep no more!’ Macbeth does murder sleep”	Macbeth returns to his wife after killing Duncan.	He is overcome with guilt.	Symbolism , imagery	Regicide, guilt, madness
2.2 “Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood/Clean from my hand?”	Macbeth returns to his wife after killing Duncan.	He realises there is no return from the deed he has committed	Metaphor Blood motif Foreshadowing (LM)	Regicide, guilt, madness
3.1 (Banquo) “Thou play’dst most foully for’t”	Banquo is concerned about Macbeth.	He suspects Macbeth is guilty of murder.	Emotive language	Regicide, guilt
3.4 (Macbeth) “If charnel-houses and our graves must send those that we bury back,	At a grand feast to celebrate his coronation, Macbeth sees the blood-covered ghost of	He is appalled at the gory spectacle of the dead coming back to haunt him.	Imagery	Guilt, madness

our monuments shall be the maws of kites.”	Banquo – the friend he has had killed.			
4.1 (First Apparition) “Beware the thane of Fife.”	The witches present a series of apparitions to Macbeth, foretelling his fate.	The spirit (“an armed head”) is warning him that Macduff is his most dangerous enemy.	Imperative verb (“beware”)	Belief in the supernatural, portents, fate
4.1 (Second Apparition) “None of woman born shall harm Macbeth”	The witches present a series of apparitions to Macbeth, foretelling his fate.	The spirit (“a bloody child”) seems to imply that Macbeth cannot be defeated.	Prediction takes the form of a riddle (perhaps hinting that it is misleading).	Belief in the supernatural, portents, fate
5.1 (Lady Macbeth) “Out, damned spot! Out, I say!”	She is sleepwalking, imagining she is washing her hands.	She sees blood on her hands – a symbol of her guilt.	Repetition, exclamation	Madness, role of women, guilt over regicide
5.1 (Lady Macbeth) “What’s done cannot be undone.”	She is sleepwalking, pondering on her own guilt over Duncan’s death.	King Duncan is dead and cannot be brought back to life.	Repetition? Has the air of an adage.	Fate, fatalism, guilt over regicide, madness
5.5 (Macbeth) “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player...”	Macbeth learns that his wife has killed herself.	Life is unreal – like a stage performance that is not important.	Metaphor	Theatre of the time, fate
5.8 (Macduff) “Macduff was from his mother’s womb untimely ripped.”	Macbeth and Macduff fight.	Macduff reveals that he was born by caesarean section, so he can defeat Macbeth.	Imagery	Fate, prophesy, the supernatural

Themes

Make sure you have learnt quotes and contextual analysis for each of these themes. You might get a question on any of them.

- Violence
- Supernatural
- Ambition
- Masculinity
- Deception
- Ambition
- Guilt
- Evil
- Regret
- Appearance vs Reality

For more information on themes, see:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/higher/english/macbeth/themes/revision/1/>

<http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/macbeth/themes.html>

Context

King James I and the Gunpowder Plot

King James I was at the centre of many Catholic plots to kill him. The most famous of these assassination attempts is known as ***The Gunpowder Plot*** of 1605.

Interestingly, to commemorate King James' lucky escape a medal was commissioned showing a snake concealed by flowers. In the play, when plotting the regicide of King Duncan, Lady Macbeth tells her husband: ***“Look like the innocent flower/But be the serpent under’t.”***



Above: *the medal issued to commemorate the failed assassination of King James I*

Also, one of the men involved in the Gunpowder Plot, Everard Digby, had been a close friend of King James and in the play is probably mirrored by the treasonous thane of Cawdor. No wonder King Duncan says of the thane of Cawdor: ***“There’s no art/To find the mind’s construction in the face./He was a gentleman on whom I built/An absolute trust.”*** King James, sitting in the audience watching the very first performance of ***‘Macbeth’***, knew only too well the sense of betrayal expressed by King Duncan here.

The Divine Right of Kings and the Great Chain of Being

By killing Duncan, Macbeth is defying the ***‘Divine right of Kings,’*** i.e. interfering with God’s will as Jacobians believed that God chose the King.

Shakespeare shows the repercussions of breaking the ***‘Great Chain of Being’*** (hierarchical order of the world, with God at the top) through negative consequences on Scotland and Macbeth after he commits ***regicide.***

King James I and Witchcraft

Belief in witches and witchcraft was widespread across Europe during the 16 and 17th centuries and during the reign of Elizabeth I, persecution of people accused of witchcraft reached terrifying proportions. Hundreds of people – mostly women – were tortured, convicted and then executed for this crime between 1560 and 1603 in England.

People genuinely believed that witches possessed diabolical powers: it was believed that witches could fly, sail in sieves, create night during the day (we call this a solar eclipse today), cause fogs and storms, disease and even a person or an animal to die because of a curse.

When Lady Macbeth conjures evil spirits, the Jacobean audience watching the play would have identified her as a witch inviting spirits to take possession of her body. They would have been horrified that she so willingly condemns her Christian soul to Hell because of her lust for power.

In 1604 when Shakespeare was writing the play, an Act of Parliament decreed that the punishment for those convicted of witchcraft would be execution.

The '**Weird Sisters**' would have appealed to King James's fascination with the **supernatural** – he believed that **witches** were emblems of darkness and conflict.

In 1590 it was alleged that a group of witches had plotted to kill him. One of the accused – Agnes Sampson – claimed during her trial to have sailed out to sea in a sieve whereupon she threw various body parts of a cat into the sea, casting a spell which would raise a storm so ferocious it would sink the king's ship. Shakespeare includes subtle references to this trial in Act 1 scene 3 when the first witch, speaking of a sailor, proclaims: "***In a sieve I'll thither sail ... Though his bark cannot be lost/Yet it shall be tempest-tossed.***" King James would, no doubt, have drawn parallels between this and the events of his own life.

So fascinated did he become through his personal involvement in the trial, King James personally investigated other cases of witchcraft. In fact, in 1597 he published a book called '**Daemonologie**' (meaning, 'the study of demons') and later, when he became King of England, he decreed that the book must be printed.

Demonic Possession and Hell

England during the reign of King James I was a deeply religious place. Despite the deep divisions which existed between Protestants and Catholics, virtually everyone believed in the concept of Heaven and Hell and they lived in fear of eternal damnation. Jacobean audiences would have been very familiar with the 'signs' to look out for in a person suffering demonic possession. These signs feature prominently in the play and would have been much more obvious to a Jacobean audience than to me or you watching the play in the 21st century. The signs are these:

- **Trance** – "Look how our partner's rapt" or entranced, says Banquo of Macbeth
- **Inability to pray** – "Amen/Stuck in my throat," says Macbeth to his wife
- **Visions** – "Is this a dagger I see before me?" says Macbeth as he waits to commit regicide
- **Invitations to demonic possession** – "Come, you spirits" invites Lady Macbeth

Shakespeare presents Macbeth and his wife as damned people who invite, and are seized by, demonic possession. Perhaps Shakespeare is also subtly reminding Jacobean audiences of the fate that they, too, can expect if they try to remove their Catholic king, James I, from the throne of England as people had tried – and failed – to do only a year before the play's first performance.

Following the failed gunpowder plot, **Macbeth can be read as a cautionary tale** for anyone considering attempting to overthrow the king.

Practice Questions

Use this list to practice writing your own answers. Remember to use quotations, key vocabulary, contextual understanding and a clear structure.

You can find more practice questions online.

Extract 1

Macbeth – from Act 1 Scene 5, lines 36 to 75

In this extract, Lady Macbeth has just received the news that Duncan is coming to the castle.

LADY MACBETH Give him tending;
He brings great news.

Exit Messenger.

The raven himself is hoarse
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan 40
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood;
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances 50
You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry 'Hold, hold!'

Enter MACBETH.

Great Glamis! worthy Cawdor!
Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter!
Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant.

MACBETH My dearest love,
Duncan comes here to-night.

LADY MACBETH And when goes hence? 60

MACBETH To-morrow, as he purposes.

LADY MACBETH O, never
Shall sun that morrow see!
Your face, my thane, is as a book where men
May read strange matters. To beguile the time,
Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under't. He that's coming
Must be provided for: and you shall put
This night's great business into my dispatch;
Which shall to all our nights and days to come 70
Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.

MACBETH We will speak further.

LADY MACBETH Only look up clear;
To alter favour ever is to fear:
Leave all the rest to me.
Exeunt

1 Starting with this speech, explain how far you think Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a powerful woman.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth in this speech
- how Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]
AO4 [4 marks]

Extract 2

Macbeth – from Act 1 Scene 7, lines 1 to 27

In this extract, Macbeth is trying to decide whether or not to murder Duncan.

MACBETH If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
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 10
Commends the ingredience 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; 20
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 th'other.

1 (a) Starting with this soliloquy, explore how Shakespeare presents the character of Macbeth as indecisive.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents Macbeth as indecisive in this speech
- how Shakespeare presents Macbeth as indecisive in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]
AO4 [4 marks]

Extract 3

Macbeth – from Act 3 Scene 1.

At this point in the play, Macbeth is now king of Scotland. His friend Banquo expresses his private fears that Macbeth was involved in the murder of King Duncan.

BANQUO

Thou hast it now: king, Cawdor, Glamis, all,
As the weird women promised, and, I fear,
Thou play'dst most foully for't: yet it was said
It should not stand in thy posterity,
But that myself should be the root and father
Of many kings. If there come truth from them--
As upon thee, Macbeth, their speeches shine--
Why, by the verities on thee made good,
May they not be my oracles as well,
And set me up in hope? But hush! no more.

*Enter MACBETH, as king, LADY MACBETH, as queen, LENNOX, ROSS,
Lords, Ladies, and Attendants*

MACBETH

Here's our chief guest.

LADY MACBETH

If he had been forgotten,
It had been as a gap in our great feast,
And all-thing unbecoming.

MACBETH

To-night we hold a solemn supper sir,
And I'll request your presence.

BANQUO

Let your highness
Command upon me; to the which my duties
Are with a most indissoluble tie
For ever knit.

Q1: Starting with this conversation, explain how Shakespeare presents the relationship between Banquo and Macbeth.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents their relationship in this conversation
- how Shakespeare presents the relationship in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]

Extract 4

Read the following extract from Act 1, Scene 5 of Macbeth and then answer the question that follows/

At this point in the play, Lady Macbeth is speaking. She has just read Macbeth's letter telling her about his meeting with the three witches.

LADY MACBETH

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be
What thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win. Thou'd'st have, great Glamis,
That which cries, "Thus thou must do," if thou have it,
And that which rather thou dost fear to do,
Than wishest should be undone. Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear
And chastise with the valor of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round,
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crowned withal.

Q1: Starting with this speech, explore how Shakespeare presents ambition in Macbeth.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents ambition in this speech
- how Shakespeare presents ambition in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]

Extract 5

Read the following extract from Act 3, Scene 1 of Macbeth and then answer the question that follows.

At this point in the play, Macbeth is speaking. He is king and has just invited Banquo to a celebration feast, but he is not feeling secure in his power.

MACBETH

To be thus is nothing;
But to be safely thus. Our fears in Banquo
Stick deep; and in his royalty of nature
Reigns that which would be fear'd: 'tis much he dares;
And, to that dauntless temper of his mind,
He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour
To act in safety. There is none but he
Whose being I do fear: and, under him,
My Genius is rebuk'd; as, it is said,
Mark Antony's was by Caesar. He chid the sisters
When first they put the name of king upon me,
And bade them speak to him: then prophet-like
They hail'd him father to a line of kings:
Upon my head they plac'd 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. If 't be so,
For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murder'd;
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace
Only for them; and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common enemy of man,
To make them kings, the seeds of Banquo kings!
Rather than so, come fate into the list.
And champion me to the utterance!

Q1: Starting with this speech, explore how Shakespeare presents ambition in Macbeth.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents ambition in this speech
- how Shakespeare presents ambition in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]
AO4 [4 marks]

Exemplar Student Answers

Question:

Starting with **Extract 1** (Act 1 Scene 5), explain how far you think Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a powerful woman.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth in this speech
- how Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth in the play as a whole.

Exemplar response:

Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth primarily as a strong and powerful woman, but contrasts it with subtle juxtapositions that undermine her supposed power, perhaps hinting at her later demise.

This scene is one the first impressions the audience has of Lady Macbeth and reveals what she is like as a character. The soliloquy is a way of further consolidating her power as in the Jacobean period there was a harsh divide between men and women. It was unusual for women to be allotted an inner voice so their perspective could be heard.

Furthermore, there is use of much violent and shocking imagery through her character. Regicide, for a large majority was thought of as an unthinkable act, due to the high status of kings, they were thought of as descendants of God. This, coupled with words like 'cruelty and blood' would shock the audience and would subvert any prejudiced views they held about women. This portrays Lady Macbeth as a woman who possesses no apparent fear of reprisal and emphasises her aggressive and powerful attributes.

The soliloquy also implies Lady Macbeth is capable of commanding the 'thick night' to come, which she hopes will block out heaven. This is her way of turning her back on God, blatantly stating that the reasoning behind her actions are so that heaven can not 'peep through the blanket of dark'. This would be seen as blasphemy, cementing her power as she is even able to ignore God.

However, Lady Macbeth's character is not made up entirely of evil. It would be too easy for Shakespeare to make her character with no other attributes, but the soliloquy alludes to the fact that she is not capable in her current form. She claims that she needs the spirits to 'unsex me here'. She desires to be stripped from any femininity and that the only way she is able to go through with the deed is to become a man, no longer having any feelings of remorse, signally her lack of power.

Additionally, despite Lady Macbeth's perpetual mocking and belittling of her husband, telling him to 'screw' his 'courage to the sticking post' she later admits that she wouldn't be able to fill Duncan as he resembles her 'father as he sleeps'. This is clear hypocrisy. Lady Macbeth has an entire soliloquy insisting that her husband's compassionate nature is a flaw, yet she is not powerful enough to murder Duncan herself.

Overall, Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a figure of power, but occasionally undermines that assertion, preparing for her eventual descent into madness. The start of the play enforces this idea of power but as soon as Macbeth becomes King, it catastrophically disintegrates.

Starting with Extract 5 (Act 3, Scene 1), explain how Shakespeare presents ambition in *Macbeth*.

Write about:

- How Shakespeare presents ambition in this extract

- *How Shakespeare presents ambition in the play as a whole.*

Shakespeare explores the idea that unchecked and unrestrained ambition leads to the destruction of one's moral code and ultimately leads to great unhappiness. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth sacrifice their moral code and conscience in favour of great political and social power, but as a direct result of their sacrilegious actions, they become monsters who are destroyed by their ambitions.

In the passage it is clear that the depths of Macbeth's ambitions results in him feeling insecure and disheartened. Although Macbeth is now King of Scotland, it doesn't make him content or satisfied. His soliloquy begins with the declarative that 'To be thus is nothing' which literally refers to the idea that the crown means nothing to Macbeth if he cannot hold onto it. Metaphorically it is clear that Macbeth's desire for power leads to him becoming gluttonous as the negative 'nothing' suggests emptiness and desolation; Macbeth's desire for everlasting power leads him to becoming tyrannical as he cannot appreciate what he has – he wants more and sees everyone, including his friend as an enemy. Macbeth is paranoid and self-doubting when he declares that 'our fears in Banquo stick deep'. The plural noun 'fears' suggests that Macbeth believes his crown is in jeopardy and his friend, the nobleman and general Banquo stands in the way. It is interesting that Macbeth positions Banquo, his ally as his enemy in this scene – the taste of power leads to Macbeth wanting to destroy anyone that stands in his way, including those whom he might have once respected and loved.

In this passage Macbeth's mind is corrupted by his 'vaulting ambition' and this is marked in the way he focuses on Banquo as a noble and virtuous man who must be destroyed. Macbeth names Banquo and repeats his name three times in his soliloquy to show his regard and high estimation for Banquo but equally his distrust at the fact Banquo still exists. Macbeth uses a historical reference when he compares himself to 'Mark Antony' and Banquo to 'Caesar'. Literally, Macbeth fears becoming like Mark Antony who was defeated by Octavius Caesar. One could argue that the language of battle and combat shows the erosion of his humanity as he clinically treats his friend as an adversary whom he must defeat.

Shakespeare creates a semantic field of childlessness to demonstrate that Macbeth is preoccupied with maintaining the throne even after he dies. Adjectives such as 'barren', 'fruitless' and 'unilineal' imply that Macbeth feels jealous of Banquo who is the epitome of renaissance ideas about masculinity as he has been successful in having children while Macbeth has not; it is clear that Macbeth fears the witches prophecy that Banquo's children will become kings and thus denying Macbeth's future children.

Macbeth's obsession with power is also illustrated in the lexical field of nouns associated with sovereignty – references such as 'King', 'jewel', 'crown' and 'sceptre' all indicate that wealth and kingship means more to him his personal relationships. The absence of emotive language is interesting in Macbeth's soliloquy as Shakespeare exemplifies the notion that ambition leads to one's moral decay, evident in the fact Macbeth declares the witches as 'prophet-like'. Macbeth's language would have been construed as blasphemous by the contemporary audience who believed the witches were synonymous with evil. Macbeth's lust for power is endless and has no limit. *This idea is illustrated when Macbeth visits the witches in Act 4, Scene 1. The sinful act is of his own volition, showing us he is partially responsible for his downfall. Macbeth's moral degeneration as a result of his cavernous desire for more power is mirrored in the way the witches see him. They say 'something wicked comes this way' when Macbeth approaches. Their refusal to name Macbeth and associate him with inequity and evil, demonstrates the idea his soul is beyond saving because he has become a slave to ambition.*

By the end of the soliloquy Macbeth's ambition to retain the crown and secure his legacy as a King means he becomes a cold megalomaniac. At the end of the soliloquy Macbeth personifies fate saying he will challenge it and attempt to defy the witches' predictions by planning Banquo's assassination. Macbeth says 'Rather than so,

come fate into the list./And champion me to the utterance!' which literally shows us that he sees himself as a powerful force that can overcome and master fate itself. Symbolically, Shakespeare might be exploring the idea that unrestrained ambition is dangerous as it leads to man growing into a monster, as here Macbeth decides to transgress the limited powers granted to him as a man – he is willing once again to sacrifice his morals to achieve his goal of long-lasting power and influence. *Compared to Macbeth's previous soliloquys (1.7) which showed confusion, remorse and guilt, there is only cold blooded calculation here: at this point in the play Macbeth is losing his humanity.* In this way Macbeth becomes a typical tragic hero, who was once good but becomes blinded by his hamartia which is his grotesque ambition that attempts to defy traditional beliefs about power such as the Chain of Being – the belief in a fixed social order as set out by God.

Macbeth's rapid moral decay as a result of his unrestrained ambition is evidenced in Act 4 when he remorselessly ensures the defenseless Lady Macduff and her children are killed. Anyone that threatens Macbeth is destroyed. The number of deaths in the play symbolizes Macbeth's greed and depravity as a result of his pursuit for power. Prince Malcolm also comments on the selfishness of Macbeth's ambition in the play when he personifies Scotland and comments on how 'Our country weeps, it bleeds', which shows that Macbeth's ambitions have had a great political impact – Scotland is now in turmoil because Macbeth the unlawful and corrupt king has subverted the natural order of power. Shakespeare's audience believed that the health of a country was directly related to the goodness and legitimacy of the king and Macbeth's blasphemous and immoral assassination of the King is mirrored in the physical decay of the country. In the play the natural world is constantly discussed as being in a state of chaos to emphasise the horror of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's terrible ambitions.

Macbeth himself is aware of the rapid deterioration of his humanity as a result of his uncontrolled ambitions, demonstrated best in his final soliloquy in Act 5. Macbeth comments on how he has forgotten the taste of fear, showing the erosion of his humanity as a result of his rotten actions; Macbeth is cold-hearted and monstrous as he no longer understands that fear keeps us alive and ensures we understand we are mortal and do not have unchecked power. Macbeth also seems world weary as the repetition of 'tomorrow' shows he no longer enjoys living nor looks forward to the joys of a new day. The fact that Macbeth seems to barely react to the death of his wife shows he has become numbed by his terrible actions. That Lady Macbeth dies alone signifies the idea that cold ambition leads to fractured relationships and an inability to empathise with one another. Macbeth uses a metaphor when he compares life to a 'tale' and he says that it is 'full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'; his soulless speech here demonstrates his unhappiness and his nihilism – life has no purpose or meaning anymore for him because by becoming a slave to his own ambitions he has destroyed his own personal happiness.

Finally, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's deaths at the end of the play heightens the idea that naked ambition which transgresses one's moral and social conscience, leads to destruction. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth never achieve happiness, which illustrates the idea that ambition doesn't necessarily lead to fulfilment. Given that they are described using derogatory epithets such as 'dead butcher' and 'fiend-like' shows that uncontrolled ambition merely results in moral and physical decay.

Top band

An example essay from last year's exam

