

PLOT SUMMARY BY ACT

MACBETH knowledge organiser

KEY VOCABULARY KEY THEMES

Act 1	The play opens with three witches chanting on a bleak moorland. In the next scene we hear a battle report in which a soldier Macbeth bravely fought in a battle to defend Scotland. On a bleak Scottish moorland, Macbeth and Banquo, two of King Duncan's generals, discover three strange women (witches). The witches prophesy that Macbeth will be promoted twice: to Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland. Banquo's descendants will be kings, but Banquo isn't promised any kingdom himself. Macbeth and Banquo want to know more, but the "weird sisters" disappear. Soon afterwards, King Duncan names Macbeth Thane of Cawdor as a reward for his success in the recent battles. The promotion seems to support the prophecy. The King then proposes to make a brief visit that night to Macbeth's castle. Lady Macbeth receives news from her husband about the prophecy and his new title. She vows to help him become king by whatever means are necessary...	dramatic irony	Ambition —Despite being a loyal and brave soldier at the beginning of the play, Macbeth can not resist the power of his ambition (his fatal flaw). Lady Macbeth’s ambition also knows no bounds. Both characters are willing to disobey God to fulfil their ambitions. But consider where ambition leads these characters...
		Hamartia (fatal flaw)	
		Hubris (excessive pride/ego)	
		tragic hero	
		remorse / remorseful	
		paranoia / paranoid	
		deception / deceive	
		role reversal	
		betrayal / betray	
		manipulation / manipulate	
Act 2	Macbeth returns to his castle, followed almost immediately by King Duncan. The Macbeths plot together to kill Duncan and wait until everyone is asleep. At the agreed time, Lady Macbeth gives the guards drugged wine so Macbeth can enter and kill the King. He regrets this almost immediately, but his wife reassures him. She leaves the bloody daggers by the dead king just before Macduff arrives. When Macduff discovers the murder, Macbeth kills the drunken guards in a show of rage and retribution. Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, flee, fearing for their own lives; but they are, nevertheless, blamed for the murder.	courage / courageous	Appearance and Reality - Shakespeare introduces this theme immediately when the Witches chant ‘Fair is foul and foul is fair’ in the very first scene. This is a play where people’s outward appearances cannot be trusted. What might initially appear good, often turns out to be evil...
		nihilism / nihilistic	
		inevitability / inevitable	
		equivocal/equivocator	
		Machiavellian	
		tyrant/ tyrannical/ tyranny	
		supernatural	
		treason/treachery	
		valiant	
		malevolent	
Act 3	Macbeth becomes King of Scotland but is plagued by feelings of insecurity. He remembers the prophecy that Banquo's descendants will inherit the throne and arranges for Banquo and his son Fleance to be killed. In the darkness, Banquo is murdered, but his son escapes the assassins. At his state banquet that night, Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo and worries the courtiers with his mad response. Lady Macbeth dismisses the court and unsuccessfully tries to calm her husband.	macabre	Guilt — Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are plagued by guilt after the regicide. As a result of this, the mental stability of both characters suffers a dramatic decline. Lady Macbeth grossly underestimates the power of guilt and is made to pay for this with her life. In the play the motif of blood represents guilt.
		Natural order	
		regicide	
		duplicity	
		soliloquy	
		catharsis	
Act 4	Macbeth seeks out the witches who say that he will be safe until a local wood, Birnam Wood, marches into battle against him. He also need not fear anyone born of woman. They also prophesy that the Scottish succession will still come from Banquo's son. Macbeth embarks on a reign of terror, slaughtering many, including Macduff's family. Macduff had gone to seek Malcolm (one of Duncan's sons who fled) at the court of the English king. Malcolm is young and unsure of himself, but Macduff, pained with grief, persuades him to lead an army against Macbeth.		Power —The battle for power can be seen throughout the play. Arguably, some of the most powerful characters are female: Lady Macbeth and the Witches. Both forces are able to manipulate the play’s protagonist: Macbeth. However, the power of God cannot be ignored. Are Macbeth and Lady Macbeth punished for committing regicide (a sin against God)?
Act 5	Macbeth feels safe in his remote castle at Dunsinane until he is told that Birnam Wood is moving towards him. Malcolm's army is carrying branches from the forest as camouflage for their assault on Macbeth's stronghold. Meanwhile, an overwrought and guilty Lady Macbeth walks in her sleep and tells her secrets to her doctor. She commits suicide. As the final battle commences, Macbeth hears of Lady Macbeth's suicide. In the midst of a losing battle, Macduff challenges Macbeth. Macbeth learns Macduff is the child of a caesarean birth (loophole!), realises he is doomed, and submits to his enemy. Macduff triumphs and brings the head of the traitor Macbeth to Malcolm. Malcolm declares peace and goes to Scone to be crowned king.		Chaos and Disorder — At the beginning of the play, everything is in order. However, when Divine Right is challenged, with the murder of King James, the balance of The Great Chain of Being is offset. The play’s events that succeed the regicide are marked by chaos and disorder, be it the mental state of the play’s protagonists: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth; the state of Scotland or the weather / nature. Order is only restored at the very end of the play when the King is returned to its rightful owner: Malcolm (the eldest son of Duncan).
EXAMPLE EXAM QUESTIONS			KEY QUOTATIONS
1.	Starting with this speech, explore how Shakespeare presents ambition in Macbeth.		
2.	Starting with this moment in the play, explore how Shakespeare presents the attitudes of Macbeth and Banquo towards the supernatural.		
3.	Starting with this speech, explore how far Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a violent character.		
4.	Starting with this speech, explore how far Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a powerful character.		
5.	Starting with this speech, explore how Shakespeare presents the differences between appearance and reality in Macbeth.		
USEFUL EXAM PHRASES			
<i>Shakespeare presents... / shows... / hints... / creates... / uses ...</i>			
<i>Through the character of... Shakespeare shows / explores / questions...</i>			
<i>Shakespeare challenges the belief that...</i>			
<i>Shakespeare asks his reader to question / consider...</i>			
<i>Shakespeare reinforces this idea earlier / later in the play when...</i>			
<i>Shakespeare sends a clear message to his audience...</i>			

Key characters—function and analysis		Context and writer’s intentions
Macbeth	A captain in Duncan's army, later the Thane (Lord) of Glamis and Cawdor. When Three Witches predict that he will one day be king of Scotland, he takes his fate into his own hands, allowing his ambition and that of his wife’s to overcome his better judgement. His bloody reign culminates in a battle against Malcolm and the English forces. Macbeth is the epitome of a tragic hero . He represents the dangers of overstepping your position in life—Great	Divine Right —The belief that the King was chosen by God. Thus, to commit regicide meant disobeying the will of God. A Jacobean audience believed people who committed regicide would be punished by God. The mental decline of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, having been plagued with guilt, is Shakespeare’s way of showing that regicide does not go without punishment.
Lady Macbeth	Macbeth’s wife whose ambition helps to drive her husband toward the desperate act of regicide. Subsequently, her husband's tyranny and her own guilt recoil upon her, sending her into a madness from which she never recovers and leads to her suicide. Shakespeare demonstrates how a powerful, ambitious and ruthless character cannot escape the consequences of their own actions. Defies gender expectations of women at the time. Linked with the	
Banquo	Macbeth’s close friend and ally who also receives predictions from the witches. His response however, is more cautious than Macbeth’s. The prediction, that Banquo’s child will become king, is sufficient to spell Banquo’s death, ordered by an increasingly resentful and paranoid Macbeth. The vision of Banquo’s ghost later haunts Macbeth. He represents rationality and reason in contrast to Macbeth.	
King Duncan	King of Scotland. His victories against rebellious kinsmen and the Norwegians have made him a popular king. When Macbeth initially decides not to kill the king, he gives Duncan’s many qualities as his reasons. He names his eldest son—Malcolm—as his heir. He dies at the hands of Macbeth and therefore the Chain of Being or Natural Order is disrupted. Too trusting—his trust in the original Thane of Cawdor was betrayed—as was his trust in Mac-	
Macduff	The Thane of Fife. He is loyal to Duncan and becomes suspicious of Macbeth early on in the play. He leaves Scotland to join Malcolm in England. The witches warn Macbeth to “Beware Macduff” prompting Macbeth to have Macduff’s family killed. Macduff’s role is vital as his killing of Macbeth allows the Natural Order to be restored. He remains the noble hero throughout and serves as a contrast to Macbeth.	
Malcolm	Duncan’s rightful heir. He leaves for England after his father’s murder and enlists the support of the English king and English lords. He is shown as being noble and deserving of the throne. Malcolm is the embodiment of all that is good in kingship, and this is seen particularly in Act 4, Scene 3, in which he tests the allegiance of Macduff. His restoration to the Scottish throne is essential for the Chain of Being/Natural Order to be restored.	Religion —A Jacobean audience were extremely religious, believing life to be sacred and God to be the creator of everything. Thus, when Macbeth claims life is ‘a tale told by an idiot...signifying nothing’ a Jacobean audience would have been greatly shocked. This nihilistic language (rejecting all religious and moral principles in the belief that life is meaningless) solidifies Macbeth’s ‘tyrant’ and ‘hellhound’ status towards the end of the play.
The Witches	The witches directly influence the actions of Macbeth . He did not have to act on their prophecies, but when he did, his death was sealed. This conflict between man and the supernatural runs throughout the play. The witches represent the dangers of the supernatural.	
Witchcraft —King James I was obsessed with magic and witchcraft and ordered several witch-hunts during his reign as King, even producing a treatise on witchcraft called Daemonologie (‘the Science of Demons’). In 1542, fifty years before Shakespeare wrote <i>Macbeth</i> , King Henry VIII passed the first English Witchcraft Act, which officially made the practice of witchcraft punishable by death. The inclusion of the three Witches in Shakespeare’s ‘Macbeth’ would have greatly interested King James. Shakespeare’s portrayal of the Witches shows them to cast spells and use familiars. The Witches’ conspiracy against the state (monarchy) was something that would have instilled great fear amongst the audience. Moreover, the ‘spot’ on Lady Macbeth’s hand is also an reference to what was known as ‘the devil’s mark’ (something that would condemn any suspected Witch to death).		The Gunpowder Plot — King James I was the intended victim of Guy Fawkes’ Gunpowder plot. This made him nervous of future regicide attempts. Shakespeare’s ‘Macbeth’ would have been popular with King James because it shows that those who commit regicide are greatly punished / mentally tortured. The message of Shakespeare’s play acts as a deterrent to anyone thinking of committing regicide.

WRITER’S METHODS	EXAM TIPS	FORM
Use of soliloquy/aside —notice when Macbeth starts using asides and what this might suggest about his changing character (e.g when he starts having dangerous thoughts!) Soliloquies are often used when characters have a decision to make. It shows characters in turmoil. Usually by the end they have made a decision.	1. Read the information AQA provides you (about the extract) at the top. It gives you clues about where in the play the extract appears.	The play is a Shakespearean tragedy . Tragedies usually adhere to a set of conventions :
Pathetic Fallacy —consider how the weather is highlighted by Shakespeare at key points in the play and how the weather reflects the mood. E.g the play opens with ‘thunder and lightning’ -Shakespeare immediately sets an ominous mood. Think about the night of the murder and the weather/reaction of the earth to the murder.	2. Also, double check which characters are speaking in the extract as students sometimes make mistakes with this.	The play centres around a tragic hero. Usually he is male, usually with high status at the start of the play and some moral virtues. Through a combination of the character’s fatal flaw (their <i>hamartia</i>) and the intervention of fate, the character is set off on a path of self-destruction from which they cannot escape. They may have a moment of realisation in which they realise their mistake, but it is too late to turn back. The play ends with their death, and then the natural order is re-stored.
Symbolism/motif : when an object is used to represent a deeper more significant meaning. E.g. blood as a symbol of guilt in the play. Another important symbol is sleep (or lack of) - references to sleep and sleeplessness reveal the deterioration of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth’s turmoil too.	3. Read the question at the bottom of the extract before you read the extract so you can look for the most relevant quotations.	Audiences were meant to feel a sense of catharsis —that is, they could experience the intense emotions of the plot without making the same mistakes as the protagonist.
Dramatic irony —when the audience knows something that one or more characters do not eg. We know Duncan shouldn’t trust Macbeth. We also witness Macbeth lie to Banquo about the witches when he says “consider it not so deeply” and we’ve just seen him “consider it deeply!”	4. Start your answer with a confident thesis—your response to the question.	It might be useful to think about where in the plot of Macbeth these stages above occur and how Shakespeare portrays the various stages of Macbeth’s downfall.
Contrasting imagery eg. Heaven/hell light/dark good/evil occurs throughout the play. Notice what these images suggest eg. Evil is sometimes shown through dark imagery.	5. Aim to zoom in on individual words / short phrases within the extract, explaining their significance in detail as well as Shakespeare’s intentions.	
	6. Now start to consider other parts of the play where the question focus is relevant.	
	7. Fewer points that are wholly relevant to the question (and explore it in detail) are better than responses that do not address the question and are more general in approach.	