

YORK NOTES for GCSE

STUDY GUIDE

New for GCSE (9–1)



MACBETH

William Shakespeare



YORK NOTES



MACBETH

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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PART ONE: GETTING STARTED

PREPARING FOR ASSESSMENT

HOW WILL I BE ASSESSED ON MY WORK ON *MACBETH*?

All exam boards are different but whichever course you are following, your work will be examined through these four Assessment Objectives:

Assessment Objectives	Wording	Worth thinking about ...
A01	Read, understand and respond to texts. Students should be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response ● use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How well do I know what happens, what people say, do etc? ● What do I think about the key ideas in the play? ● How can I support my viewpoint in a really convincing way? ● What are the best quotations to use and when should I use them?
A02	Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What specific things does the writer 'do'? What choices has Shakespeare made (why this particular word, phrase or speech here? Why does this event happen at this point?) ● What effects do these choices create – suspense? Ironical laughter? Reflective mood?
A03	Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What can I learn about society from the play? (What does it tell me about witchcraft in Shakespeare's day, for example?) ● What was society like in Shakespeare's time? Can I see it reflected in the story?
A04	Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How accurately and clearly do I write? ● Are there small errors of grammar, spelling and punctuation I can get rid of?

Look out for the Assessment Objective labels throughout your York Notes Study Guide – these will help to focus your study and revision!

The text used in this Study Guide is the Penguin Shakespeare edition, 2005.

HOW TO USE YOUR YORK NOTES STUDY GUIDE

You are probably wondering what is the best and most efficient way to use your York Notes Study Guide on *Macbeth*. Here are three possibilities:

A step-by-step study and revision guide	A 'dip-in' support when you need it	A revision guide after you have finished the play
<p>Step 1: Read Part Two as you read the play as a companion to help you study it.</p> <p>Step 2: When you need to, turn to Parts Three to Five to focus your learning.</p> <p>Step 3: Then, when you have finished use Parts Six and Seven to hone your exam skills, revise and practise for the exam.</p>	<p>Perhaps you know the play quite well, but you want to check your understanding and practise your exam skills? Just look for the section which you think you need most help with and go for it!</p>	<p>You might want to use the Notes after you have finished your study, using Parts Two to Five to check over what you have learned, and then work through Parts Six and Seven in the immediate weeks leading up to your exam.</p>

HOW WILL THE GUIDE HELP YOU STUDY AND REVISE?

Margin boxes draw your attention to important ideas or test your knowledge

Clear explanatory text helps you remember key details

Clear 'AO' icons remind you what objective to focus on

Sample student responses with useful annotations, show you how it's done

Follow-up task gives you the chance to apply what you have learned

Introduces an important quotation, explains what it means and shows its effects

Extra references to help you focus your revision

PART FOUR: THEMES, CONTEXTS AND SETTINGS

THEMES

AMBITION

Ambition is the fundamental theme and the driving force of Macbeth's life. It is also the theme (in this play) that informs the Shakespearean idea of *tragedy*. In Macbeth the hero's greatest weakness (causing him to fall from grace and inevitably die) is ambition.

- Macbeth acknowledges his 'vaulting ambition' (I.7.27) specifically when he is contemplating the murder of Duncan. This acknowledgement comes after he has considered all the good reasons for not murdering Duncan – only ambition is left to overrule Macbeth's troubled conscience.
- Although the influence of both Lady Macbeth and the witches is strong, their power over Macbeth is only possible because his ambition is already there.
- On first meeting Macbeth we find him startled and fearful of something that sounds 'so fair' (I.3.53). This seems to be because his ambition has already triggered treasonous thoughts.
- Macbeth, then, is a hero but one who is fatally undermined by his ambition. The consequences of this ambition form the fabric of the play.

TOP TIP: WRITING ABOUT CONTRASTING AMBITIONS A02

Macbeth and Banquo each receive prophecies from the witches. However, where Banquo is wary of the 'Weird Sisters', Macbeth's ambition is fuelled by their claim that he will become king. When Malcolm is given the title 'Prince of Cumberland' by his father, Macbeth's reaction shows how he sees the natural heir to the throne as an obstacle: 'That is a step which must fall down, or else o'erleaps; For in my way it lies' (I.4.48–50). When writing about ambition it is important to see that while Banquo may have his own ambitions he does not act on them, whereas Macbeth doggedly pursues his.

Remember too that ambition is also explored through Lady Macbeth, who is similarly inclined. We can contrast their approaches to ambition: she is strong initially while Macbeth wavers, and finally he is strong while she breaks down.

AIMING HIGH: THE ROLE OF FATE

A key question to ask yourself when writing about Macbeth is to what extent Macbeth is responsible for his own downfall? Ambition is undoubtedly Macbeth's fatal flaw, but events are triggered by the witches' prophecies, which suggest that the fates of Macbeth, Macduff and Banquo are already sealed. Which do you think is the more powerful driver in the play – Macbeth's ambition or the hand of fate? We could argue that a great deal of the tension in the play comes from the clash of these two important forces.

THEME TRACKER A01

Ambition

- I.4: Macbeth sees Malcolm as an obstacle.
- I.7: Macbeth admits to his 'vaulting ambition'.
- IV.3: Malcolm's ambitions to overthrow Macbeth are revealed.

Themes are explained clearly with bullet-points which give you ideas you might use in your essay responses

This section helps you tackle or explore challenging ideas or gives you a deeper insight into the writer's methods



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Each key section of the book ends with a **Progress and Revision Check**:

A set of quick questions tests your knowledge of the text

PART TWO PLOT AND ACTION

PROGRESS AND REVISION CHECK

SECTION ONE: CHECK YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Answer these quick questions to test your basic knowledge of the play, its characters and events:

- Who is with Macbeth when he first meets the witches in Act 1?
- What do the witches predict will happen to Macbeth?
- Who tells Macbeth that he is Thane of Cawdor?
- How does Macbeth communicate the news of the witches' prophecy to his wife?
- What does Lady Macbeth call on to give her strength?
- How does she persuade Macbeth to go through with the murder?
- Who do the Macbeths plan to blame for killing Duncan?
- What else does Macbeth murder?
- Where do Malcolm and Donalbain go?
- Whose mind is 'full of scorpions' (III.2.36)?
- How many murderers does Macbeth employ to kill Banquo and his son?
- Whose ghost appears at the feast?
- What ingredients do the witches add to their cauldron?
- Who should Macbeth beware of?
- How many kings do the witches show to Macbeth?
- Who are the 'pretty chickens' (IV.3.217)?
- Where does Lady Macbeth appear to see a 'damned spot' (V.1.33)?
- How does Birnan Wood move to Dunsinane?
- Who tells Macbeth his wife is dead?
- How does Macbeth die?

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PLOT AND ACTION PART TWO

SECTION TWO: CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Here are two tasks about the significance of particular moments in the play. These require more thought and slightly longer responses. In each case, try to write at least three to four paragraphs.

Task 1: Act I Scene 1: How does this opening scene with the witches establish the mood and key themes for the rest of the play?

Think about:

- Language – in particular the apparently contradictory 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' (I.1.9)
- Stagecraft – how atmosphere could be created on stage with this scene.

Task 2: Act III Scene 2: How does Shakespeare show the change in the Macbeths' relationship in this scene? Compare their relationship here with Act I Scene 7.

Think about:

- Language – compare Lady Macbeth's persuasive language in Act I Scene 7 with her more submissive language here.
- Themes – notice how the theme of ambition is presented in each scene.

PROGRESS CHECK

GOOD PROGRESS

- I can:
- understand how Shakespeare sequences and reveals events.
 - refer to the importance of key events in the play.
 - select well-chosen evidence, including key quotations, to support my ideas.

EXCELLENT PROGRESS

- I can:
- refer in depth to main and minor events and how they contribute to the development of the plot.
 - understand how Shakespeare has carefully ordered or revealed events for particular effects.
 - draw on a range of carefully-selected key evidence, including quotations, to support my ideas.



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Further substantial and 'open' tasks test your understanding

Self-evaluation - so you can keep a record of how you are getting on

... and don't forget Parts Six and Seven, with advice and practice on **improving your writing skills**:

- Focus on **difficult areas** such as 'context' and 'inferences'.
- Short snippets of other students' work** to show you how it's done (or not done!)
- Three, annotated **sample responses** to a task at different levels, with **expert comments**, to help you judge your own level.
- Practice questions**
- Answer key** with answers to the **Progress and Revision Checks** and **Checkpoint** margin boxes.

Now it's up to you! Don't forget – there's even more help on our website with more sample answers, essay planners and even online tutorials. Go to www.yorknotes.com to find out more.

PART TWO: PLOT AND ACTION

PLOT SUMMARY: WHAT HAPPENS IN *MACBETH*?

ACT I: PROPHECIES AND PLOTS

- King Duncan plans to reward brave Macbeth with the title Thane of Cawdor for having defeated rebel forces in battle.
- Three witches prophesy that Macbeth will be Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland.
- Macbeth is officially informed that he has become Thane of Cawdor. He is amazed the witches' prophecy has come true and reveals his hopes for the crown of Scotland.
- Macbeth's wife, Lady Macbeth, shares his ambition and calls on evil spirits to give her the strength to undertake the murder of Duncan.
- Duncan arrives at Macbeth's castle, where he is welcomed.
- When Macbeth arrives home his wife insists on planning the murder.

KEY CONTEXT

A03

Some actors consider *Macbeth* to be 'unlucky' and instead refer to it as 'The Scottish Play'. This reflects the supernatural themes in the play.

ACT II: MURDER MOST FOUL

- Worried about the murder he is about to commit, Macbeth sees a vision of a dagger.
- He murders Duncan, although afterwards Lady Macbeth criticises him for being distressed. She helps to cover up the murder and they then go to bed to pretend innocence.
- Macduff, another Thane, finds Duncan murdered and the alarm is sounded.
- Macbeth slays Duncan's guards to cover his crime, but says he did it in fury because they murdered Duncan.
- Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, slip away in fear of their lives.
- Macbeth succeeds to the throne but Macduff will not attend Macbeth's coronation.



ACT III: BRUTALITY AND BETRAYAL

- Banquo suspects Macbeth of treachery and Macbeth orders his murder and the murder of Banquo's son, Fleance. Although Banquo is killed, Fleance escapes.
- Banquo's ghost appears at Macbeth's banquet and terrorises Macbeth, whose behaviour indicates his guilt to fellow guests.
- Macbeth, now acting independently of his wife, plans to see the witches again.

- The witches prepare to meet him.
- Macduff flees to the English court, leaving his wife and children behind at his castle.

ACT IV: REVENGE

- Macbeth visits the witches and discovers that he should fear Macduff, but that no man born of a woman can harm him. He also learns that he will never be beaten until Birnan Wood comes to Dunsinane.
- After leaving the witches, Macbeth orders the murder of Macduff's wife and children.
- In England, Malcolm tests the loyalty of Macduff, who has recently arrived there from Scotland.
- Macduff learns of the slaughter of his entire family by murders on Macbeth's orders.
- When Malcolm informs Macduff that England will provide an army under Seyward to defeat Macbeth, Macduff vows personally to kill Macbeth.



ACT V: DOWNFALL OF THE MACBETHS

- The English army marches on Macbeth disguised with branches taken from Birnan Wood. Macbeth fortifies his castle at Dunsinane and prepares for a long siege.
- Macbeth learns his wife has died – apparently by suicide – but he is unconcerned, as his life appears to lack any meaning.
- He is enraged when a messenger tells him that Birnan Wood is coming to Dunsinane.
- He abandons his siege plan and goes out to fight; although his army is losing, nobody seems able to kill Macbeth himself. He meets Macduff, who was born by Caesarean (so not of woman), and Macduff kills Macbeth in single combat.
- Macduff hails Malcolm as King of Scotland and Malcolm invites all to attend his coronation at Scone.

TOP TIP

A03

It is useful to know that Shakespeare used real historical figures as the basis for this story: Malcolm reigned as Malcolm III and his son, Duncan, became Duncan II. Consider how this might have been appealing to the royal patron, James I.

REVISION FOCUS: MAKE SURE YOU KNOW THE PLOT



It is very important you know all the key events in the play so you can make reference to them as needed in the exam. Create a visual reminder chart to make sure you know what happens and when. Either draw images or print them from an internet image search to create a page of collage for each Act. When you have finished, cover the images and see if you can remember each one. Keep testing yourself until you know exactly what happens in each Act.

ACT I SCENE 1: THREE WITCHES

SUMMARY

- Three witches meet in the middle of a storm.
- They speak in riddles and rhymes, using strange language such as 'hurly-burly' (line 3).
- They are preparing to entice Macbeth 'upon the heath' (line 6).
- A sense of foreboding is created by their **choral** lines that set up the theme of deception where 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' (line 9).

WHY IS THIS SCENE IMPORTANT?

- A It **immediately** grabs our **attention** with its dramatic nonrealism.
- B It raises our sense of **curiosity** and **expectancy**.
- C It establishes the importance of **supernatural powers** in the play.

CHECKPOINT 1

A01

How does Shakespeare show and interest us in the witches at the beginning of the play?

KEY SETTING: MOOD AND ATMOSPHERE

A02

The opening scene of the play is brief, but effective in creating an ominous atmosphere. The stage directions ask for '*Thunder and lightning*' and this weather disturbance reflects the evil, disruptive nature of the witches. Shakespeare heightens this atmosphere by starting the scene with a question '*When shall we three meet again?*' (line 1). This implies that the witches have prior experience of casting malevolent spells. The air is '*filthy*' (line 12) and this also suggests dark deeds are about to happen – the audience's imagination is captured.



KEY CHARACTERS: THE WITCHES

A02

Shakespeare presents the witches as **ambiguous** creatures. In Act I Scene 3 they refer to themselves as '*The Weird Sisters*' (line 31). Their evil nature is revealed in the final **rhyming couplet** of this scene where they offer the contrary idea that good is bad and vice versa. Shakespeare suggests that the witches violate the natural order of things by meddling with right and wrong.

KEY CONTEXT: WITCHCRAFT

A03

In the 1600s it was common to think that witchcraft was real. Shakespeare's patron, King James I, believed in witchcraft, and during his reign practising it was a crime punishable by death. The rhyming language and **alliteration** of the witches' speech reminds us of a spell and a contemporary audience would have found their contradictory claim that '*fair is foul and foul is fair*' particularly unnerving.

ACT I SCENE 2: BRAVE MACBETH

SUMMARY

- King Duncan receives news that the battle against the rebel Macdonwald was evenly balanced, but that Macbeth has killed him.
- The Captain brings news to Duncan that, thanks to Macbeth's and Banquo's courageous actions, his army has won.
- Duncan then declares that the traitorous Thane of Cawdor will be executed and bestows his title and lands on Macbeth as a reward.

WHY IS THIS SCENE IMPORTANT?

- A Shakespeare deepens our **interest** in the character of **Macbeth** by revealing his character through **report**.
- B We switch from the **shadowy** world of witches to the **physical** world of battle.
- C We discover that Macbeth and Banquo have displayed outstanding **bravery**.
- D We find out that Macbeth is to be made **Thane of Cawdor**.

KEY CHARACTER: MACBETH

A01

Shakespeare has not yet shown us Macbeth, but we have heard about him from the witches in Scene 1 and now from the Captain. While the battle has been violent, their descriptions imply that Macbeth has played a brave and heroic role.

Macbeth is described as '**Valour's minion**' (line 19) and '**Bellona's bridegroom**' (line 55), meaning bravery's favourite and the husband of war. Duncan praises Macbeth as '**valiant**', a '**Worthy gentleman**' (line 24) and as '**noble**' (line 70).

KEY THEME: BRAVERY

A01

Macbeth and Banquo are both presented as heroic warriors. It could be argued that both remain brave throughout the play, though of course many of Macbeth's later actions are wicked and cowardly. Notice how appeals to courage always tempt Macbeth – for Macbeth bravery is the essence of being a man.

TOP TIP

A01

Contrast the characters of Banquo and Macbeth – both are brave, but how differently do these characters develop?

AIMING HIGH: UNDERSTANDING DRAMATIC IRONY



Understanding the concept of **dramatic irony** – where the audience are aware of something that the characters are not – and exploring how Shakespeare uses it is important for attaining higher grades. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare shows the subtle distinctions between what appears to be and what actually is. In this scene, he uses dramatic irony to achieve this. The execution of the previous Thane of Cawdor allows Duncan to say that he will not deceive him any longer (lines 66–7). However, as the audience learn from Macbeth's **asides**, the new Thane of Cawdor, is already plotting against the king.

ACT I SCENE 3: ALL HAIL, MACBETH!

SUMMARY

- The witches meet as planned, in thunder and rain.
- They greet Macbeth and Banquo and tell them that Macbeth will become both Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland.
- Macbeth is stunned by these prophecies. Banquo demands the witches tell him of his future too. They predict that he will not be king, but his offspring will.
- The witches vanish and messengers from King Duncan arrive. They report that Macbeth is now Thane of Cawdor.
- Macbeth is astonished by the news and Banquo warns him of danger. Macbeth is preoccupied by thoughts of kingship, which he tries to hide.

WHY IS THIS SCENE IMPORTANT?

- A The witches' prophecies establishes the importance of **fate**.
- B Shakespeare draws significant **contrasts** between Banquo and Macbeth.
- C The theme of **ambition** is introduced when Macbeth becomes preoccupied with thoughts of becoming king.

KEY CHARACTERS: MACBETH AND BANQUO

A02

Macbeth and Banquo are together when the witches prophesy their future. When Ross arrives and tells Macbeth he has become the Thane of Cawdor both are amazed. We begin to see Macbeth's ambition unfolding through the **asides** he delivers to the audience. Banquo warns of the danger of trusting such supernatural messages, but Macbeth is lost in his own thoughts, considering the implications.

It is Banquo who thinks the witches are evil: '**What! Can the devil speak true?**' (line 108). Macbeth does not. Note how keen Macbeth is to hear more of this '**strange intelligence**' (line 77): '**Would they had stayed!**' (line 83). In contrast, Banquo's description of the witches is significant in showing us how unnatural they are: they seem to be women but are not.

CHECKPOINT 2

A01

Why does Shakespeare have Macbeth wish the witches had stayed?

TOP TIP: WRITING ABOUT IMAGERY

A02

Notice how Shakespeare begins to develop the **imagery** of clothing – '**borrowed robes**' (line 110) and '**strange garments**' (line 146). This is significant because clothing is a powerful image suggesting concealment and disguise: later, Macbeth, as it were, hides behind his clothes of office. Look for this imagery in other, later references.



ACT I SCENE 4: MALCOLM TO BE KING

SUMMARY

- King Duncan asks his son, Malcolm, to confirm that the Thane of Cawdor has been executed.
- He is told that Cawdor died with dignity, repenting his actions.
- Macbeth and Banquo enter and are thanked by Duncan for their efforts in the war.
- Duncan proclaims that Malcolm will be his heir. He also says that he will visit Macbeth at home.
- Macbeth says he will write to his wife and prepare for the arrival of the king. He is unhappy about Duncan's announcement that Malcolm is next in line to the throne.
- In Macbeth's absence, Duncan praises him to Banquo.

CHECKPOINT 3 **A03**

How does the announcement of Malcolm as heir to the throne affect Macbeth?

WHY IS THIS SCENE IMPORTANT?

- A** The King's announcement that Malcolm will be the next king provides Macbeth with **motivation** to prevent this happening by committing **murder** and **treason**.
- B** Shakespeare shows how Macbeth's **attitude** has changed and hardened when he sees that Malcolm is in his way.
- C** Macbeth's character is **contrasted** with those of Duncan, Banquo and even the executed Thane of Cawdor.

KEY LANGUAGE: CONTRAST

A02

Shakespeare reveals Macbeth's character through contrasts in this scene: between Duncan and Banquo, who are open and direct, and Macbeth, who hides his desires and intentions. Typically, for Duncan, '**stars, shall shine**' (line 42), whereas for Macbeth they 'hide' so that darkness prevails (lines 50–1). We also hear of the former Thane of Cawdor's death, in which he showed repentance. This contrasts with the living Thane of Cawdor's evil ambition.

It is **ironic** that Duncan should comment about the former Thane of Cawdor that '**There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face**' (lines 11–12), since he so clearly fails to read what is in the new Thane of Cawdor's face. His trust of Macbeth leads to his death. Shakespeare's use of these contrasts serves to establish two contrary things: first, just how good and worthy a king Duncan is; second, just how appalling a crime it would be for Macbeth to murder him.

AIMING HIGH: CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT



In this scene Shakespeare shows that Macbeth's attitude to murdering the king has changed, even hardened. In Scene 3 the prospect, though desirable, was terrifying. His **soliloquy** (lines 49–54) reveals a new determination to carry it through. The **vocabulary** has switched from abstract, complex speech to simple matter-of-factness. **Couplets** reinforce the importance of the lines and the sense of inevitability about the deed Macbeth must do.

TOP TIP

A03

When writing about themes, try to link them to historical context. For example, if you are writing about gender, examine the roles of men and women in Shakespeare's time and compare those expectations then with those in today's society.

TOP TIP

A03

Notice how Lady Macbeth immediately understands what her husband's letter means. She taps into the supernatural world, inviting 'spirits' (line 25) to possess her.

ACT I SCENE 5: LADY MACBETH'S LETTER

SUMMARY

- Lady Macbeth reads a letter from her husband describing his encounter with the witches.
- She is convinced by the witches' prophecy because, as they promised, Macbeth has been made Thane of Cawdor.
- She worries that Macbeth is too kind-natured to be able to take the crown. She is determined that she will assist him through 'the valour of my tongue' (line 26).
- Lady Macbeth is overjoyed to learn that Duncan will stay in their castle overnight. She calls on demonic spirits to harden her resolve and to destroy any weakness or pity.
- Macbeth enters and she starts convincing him that he should murder Duncan.
- She insists that the deed must be done, that she will personally organise its operation, and finally that failure to accomplish it would be a form of fear.

WHY IS THIS SCENE IMPORTANT?

- A Shakespeare establishes the **close relationship** between Macbeth and his wife.
- B **Supernatural forces** are reintroduced with Lady Macbeth calling on them.
- C Her **language** heightens the scale of evil that she is contemplating.
- D We learn that Macbeth has 'human kindness' (line 16) in him that may conflict with his **ambition**.



KEY CHARACTERS: LADY MACBETH

A02

The letter to Lady Macbeth shows not only Macbeth's complete trust in his wife – for such a letter could be interpreted as treasonous – but also affection and love: 'my dearest partner of greatness' (line 10) suggests a warm equality. Later we will see how this affection cools.

KEY THEME: GENDER

A02

There is a curious parallel between Lady Macbeth and the **ambiguous** sexuality of the witches. Lady Macbeth asks the spirits to 'unsex' her (line 40) and her 'woman's breasts' (line 46) are no longer to be used for milk but for murder. It is as if, at this level of evil, Lady Macbeth, like the witches, abandons being either male or female – becoming instead a neutral, 'it'. Later (I.7.46), Macbeth, in trying to deflect his wife's arguments, puts forward the view that in daring to do more than what is proper – or natural – for a man to do, one is no longer a man. Despite his argument, he does precisely that when he murders the king.

EXAM FOCUS: WRITING ABOUT MOTIFS

A02



When writing about **motifs**, or recurring images, aim to look for different ways in which the image is used. Find examples from the whole text. Here is an example of writing about the motif of blood in *Macbeth*:

Links to earlier in the play

Uses literary term and explains effect

Shakespeare uses the motif of blood throughout the play, starting with the **bloody** nature of battle in Act I Scene 2. In Act I Scene 5, Lady Macbeth demands that the spirits 'Make thick [her] blood'. Here blood is seen as a **natural function of the human body**, one that feeds the human capacity for compassion and repentance – things she does not want. 'Make thick my blood' is a **metaphor**, representing life and death. It is **effective** because it also makes us think of the blood she intends to shed – i.e. Duncan's.

Explains quotation

Now you try it:

Add two more paragraphs about the importance of blood in *Macbeth*. You could refer to the bloody daggers in Act II Scene 2 and the spot of blood that Lady Macbeth struggles to wash from her hands in Act V Scene 1.

KEY QUOTATION: KIND AND NURTURING

A02

Lady Macbeth says her husband is 'too full o'the milk of human-kindness' (line 15). Shakespeare uses this **metaphor** to suggest that despite his reputation as a brave warrior, Macbeth also has a strong sense of compassion. Milk is mild, natural and, importantly, white. We associate this with purity, yet as the play progresses, Macbeth will be increasingly linked to the contrasting red of blood.



ACT I SCENE 6: DUNCAN ARRIVES AT MACBETH'S CASTLE

SUMMARY

- King Duncan arrives at Macbeth's castle, Glamis, with his sons, Banquo and attendant thanes.
- Lady Macbeth greets Duncan and they exchange compliments. Duncan takes her hand and is led into the castle.

WHY IS THIS SCENE IMPORTANT?

- A Shakespeare continues developing the **theme** of **appearances** (loyalty to the king) versus reality (plotting to murder him).
- B Shakespeare shows Lady Macbeth fully involved in the **deception** and the **treachery**.
- C Duncan's open and generous nature is **contrasted** with that of the Macbeths.

KEY THEME: APPEARANCE AND REALITY

A02

Once more Shakespeare shows how reality and appearance are different. The air appears '**delicate**' (line 10) and the castle is '**loved**' (line 5), but in reality this is to be the setting for foul murder.

Duncan asks after Macbeth with his new title, '**Thane of Cawdor?**' (line 20) – **ironically** reminding us that the first Thane of Cawdor committed treason.

Lady Macbeth speaks of '**those honours deep and broad**' (line 17) that Duncan has rewarded Macbeth with – while planning to murder him. Although she expresses appreciation for the honours, she is full of contempt, ingratitude and murder. She alludes to her two-faced nature when she says all her service is '**twice done and then done double**' (line 15).

CHECKPOINT 4

A01

Shakespeare shows appearances can be deceptive: where else in the play is this evident?

TOP TIP

A03

When writing about Duncan, you could think about whether he has any weaknesses as a character in spite of all his good qualities. Is it a weakness to be so trusting as a king?

TOP TIP: WRITING ABOUT KING DUNCAN

A01

Duncan is a major character. His influence pervades the play and he sets the standard for what a king should be. Think about the following when writing about Duncan:

- When Shakespeare was writing, the king was considered to be next in line to God.
- Duncan is honest, sincere and above all, honourable. Macbeth describes Duncan as '**gracious**' (III.1.65) after he has murdered him.
- The view of Duncan is consistent throughout the play (unlike views of Macbeth).
- He seems to enjoy the achievements of others and his gifts are not given to gain his own advantage.
- Our final view of Duncan is of him kissing his hostess Lady Macbeth. We later learn that he has sent her a diamond as a present (Act II Scene 1). Consider how a contemporary audience would respond to such a king. How does his rule compare to Macbeth's?

ACT I SCENE 7: VAULTING AMBITION

SUMMARY

- In a **soliloquy**, Macbeth debates the pros and cons of murdering Duncan.
- He worries that the act of murdering his king and guest will return to plague him. He admits that Duncan has been a good king and worries that heaven itself will expose his wickedness.
- Macbeth says that the only justification for murder is his ambition.
- He is frightened by his own **imagery** of damnation and he resolves not to go ahead with the murder.
- Lady Macbeth enters and Macbeth informs her that he will not murder Duncan. He has been '**honoured**' (line 32) recently by the king and does not want to '**cast aside**' (line 35) this recognition.
- Lady Macbeth is contemptuous of his change of heart and accuses him of cowardice. They argue but her violent determination wins out. She outlines the plan and he agrees to it.



WHY IS THIS SCENE IMPORTANT?

- A Shakespeare graphically shows Macbeth **wrestling** with his own **conscience** – the choice of evil is not inevitable or even easy for Macbeth.
- B The major theme of **ambition** is stated overtly in this scene.
- C Shakespeare shows Macbeth's **vulnerability** to accusations of cowardice and lack of manliness.
- D Lady Macbeth's **responsibility** for what is to unfold is established.
- E The idea that one murder will be sufficient – Macbeth's earlier hope – is already **undermined** in Lady Macbeth's immediate plan to implicate the guards.

KEY THEME: COURAGE AND MANLINESS

A02

Lady Macbeth attacks her husband exactly where she knows it will hurt: his courage and manliness are at stake. And she does what she said she would do in Act I Scene 5, '**pour my spirits in thine ear**' (I.5.25). Shakespeare demonstrates her strength of purpose and her leadership, which offer a remarkable contrast to Macbeth's performance at this stage.

Later, once he is king, Macbeth will appeal to Banquo's murderers in exactly the same way: if they are 'men' they will commit murder (III.1.91–107). At the end of the play, his courage and manhood are all that is left of him; so he fights Macduff knowing that he is doomed.

This is the critical scene in which all the arguments against treason and murder are explicitly and strongly made. Lady Macbeth demolishes each one, questioning her husband's manhood. Macbeth almost concedes that his wife is more manly than he is: her '**undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males**' (lines 73–4). Thus, he falls into her way of thinking.

TOP TIP

A01

Notice how Shakespeare uses his final words in this scene, '**False face must hide what the false heart doth know**' (line 82), to echo Lady Macbeth's earlier advice about appearing as an '**innocent flower**' whilst being '**the serpent under't**'. (I.5.61–4).



ACT II SCENE 1: A DAGGER OF THE MIND

SUMMARY

- On his way to bed, Banquo has a premonition something is wrong, and then encounters Macbeth.
- Banquo presents him with a gift from the king: a diamond for Lady Macbeth.
- Banquo tells Macbeth that he dreamt of the witches. Macbeth says he does not think of them, but asks that he and Banquo speak about the matter another time.
- Macbeth is left alone and imagines he sees a dagger in front of him – a dagger that guides him towards his goal of killing Duncan.
- As the bell rings, he determines to go ahead and murder the king.

WHY IS THIS SCENE IMPORTANT?

- A Shakespeare **intensifies** the **atmosphere** of darkness and evil.
- B The **contrast** of Macbeth's thoughts with Banquo's integrity is made clear.
- C Shakespeare shows us the **lasting effect** the witches have on Banquo – they disturb his dreams.
- D Macbeth's **disloyalty** is highlighted by the king's gift, while his struggle with his **conscience** is decisively resolved.

CHECKPOINT 5

A01

How does Shakespeare portray Banquo as appearing more open than Macbeth?

KEY CHARACTER: BANQUO

A02

Shakespeare introduces Banquo at this point as another point of contrast with Macbeth. We see the witches have affected him – but whereas Macbeth has surrendered his will to them, only Banquo's dreams have been invaded.

Macbeth requests that they talk of the witches later with a promise to '**make honour for you**' (line 26). This is an attempt to sound Banquo out – how will he react should Macbeth become king? Banquo's answer, which insists upon maintaining integrity, is hardly likely to please Macbeth. Shakespeare shows Banquo cannot be bought. It is not surprising that later Shakespeare has Macbeth comment that he feels '**rebuked**' (III.1.55) by Banquo.

KEY SETTING: DARKNESS

A02

Shakespeare depicts the scene as dark – torches are necessary to light the way. Banquo senses something is wrong. He notes that the stars' '**candles are all out**' (line 5) – a **metaphor** suggesting that the physical darkness is also a moral darkness. He uses a **simile** to describe the effect on him: '**A heavy summons lies like lead upon me**' (line 6). This adds to the weight of the atmosphere.

Later, when Macbeth is on his own, he sees a dagger in the dark. He is unsure whether this is real or a '**false creation / Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain**' (lines 39–40)? The witches were real enough, but now Macbeth has embarked on evil he begins to see things that others cannot. Shakespeare shows that this image terrifies Macbeth, and this intensifies the atmosphere of evil.

ACT II SCENE 2: MACBETH MURDERS KING DUNCAN

SUMMARY

- Lady Macbeth's nerves are on edge as she waits for Macbeth to return from committing the murder. Her mood is bold, and she boasts about how she has drugged the guards.
- Macbeth enters, carrying two bloodstained daggers. He is obsessed by the noises of laughter and crying that he has heard.
- Macbeth's guilt torments him. Lady Macbeth attempts to lessen and rationalise his fears.
- She then criticises Macbeth for failing to leave the daggers on the guards. She has to go back herself and plant the weapons on them – Macbeth is too frightened.
- A knocking at the gate means they must quickly go to bed and pretend to be surprised when Duncan's body is discovered.

WHY IS THIS SCENE IMPORTANT?

- A Up until this point Macbeth had options – now there is **no going back**.
- B Shakespeare demonstrates the scale of the **terrifying guilt** that causes great warrior like Macbeth to be reduced to abject fear.
- C Lady Macbeth's character, by **contrast**, is shown by Shakespeare as steely and determined – where Macbeth flounders, Lady Macbeth perseveres.

KEY CHARACTER: LADY MACBETH

A02

Despite some anxiety early on, Lady Macbeth is entirely in control of herself and of her husband. She planned the execution, and now it is her readiness of mind and strength of purpose that compensate for Macbeth's failure to act decisively once the murder is committed.

Shakespeare shows Lady Macbeth focused on the need to keep to the plan of action – ordering Macbeth to go back and place the daggers beside the guards, so as to incriminate them. Macbeth, however, is too terrified to return. He is much more concerned with the spiritual and moral implications of what he has done: the deep damnation, in fact, that he has brought upon himself.

KEY QUOTATION: OCEANS OF GUILT

A02

In Macbeth's 'Will all great Neptune's ocean' (lines 57–60) speech, Shakespeare expands the language into the grandiose 'multitudinous seas incarnadine', and then just as suddenly deflates it into the simple 'green one, red'. Shakespeare uses sophisticated **vocabulary** to show that Macbeth is clouding his actions. The return to simple vocabulary brings Macbeth (and the audience) more immediately to the truth – he has killed the innocent King Duncan. Look for other places where the kind of language used gives us insights into a character or situation.

TOP TIP

A02

Think creatively about Shakespeare's language. For example, the need for an 'Amen' (line 29), which Macbeth cannot speak, and the fact that even the ocean cannot clean him (lines 57–60), suggest that there is little hope for Macbeth.

ACT II SCENE 3: DUNCAN IS DISCOVERED

SUMMARY

- The knocking from the previous scene continues and the Porter goes to open the gate. He imagines he is the porter of Hell. He lets Macduff and Lennox in.
- Pretending to be awoken by the knocking, Macbeth arrives to greet them. Macduff asks to be led to the king.
- Macduff discovers the murder and returns, proclaiming treason. As Macduff calls the alarm, Macbeth and Lennox rush in to see Duncan.
- Lady Macbeth appears, then Banquo. Both are informed of the murder.
- Macbeth returns and bemoans the dreadful deed. Lennox suggests the guards may have been responsible and Macbeth confesses that he killed them.
- Macduff questions this action and Macbeth proclaims his love for Duncan. Lady Macbeth faints, distracting attention.
- Banquo says they must question the murder. Malcolm and Donalbain decide to flee, suspecting treachery from someone closely related.

KEY CONTEXT

A03

The murder of Duncan is not physically shown on stage in the text of the play. However, it is included in the 1971 Roman Polanski film version of *Macbeth*. What does this reveal about changing attitudes to the dignity and role of royalty over time?

WHY IS THIS SCENE IMPORTANT?

- A Shakespeare **anticipates** the horror of Macbeth's reign: the 'hell' the Porter mentions (lines 1, 17) later becomes a **reality**.
- B The **audience** already know that the murder has been committed so this delay in its discovery heightens the tension.
- C The themes of **murder** and **deception** are developed: the innocent guards are murdered to cover up the first crime.
- D Malcolm and Donalbain's escape will provide **justification** for Macbeth's coronation. However, it also means that he wears the crown uneasily, knowing they are alive and plotting against him. He will '**sleep no more**' (II.2.40).



KEY STRUCTURE: COMIC RELIEF

A02

The bleak intensity of the previous scene gives way to a brief comic interlude. The Porter is crude and rough and Shakespeare introduces him to make us laugh. However, his role also performs other key functions. The continued knocking reminds us that we are still in the world where the Macbeths commit murder.

CHECKPOINT 6

A01

Why does Macbeth kill the guards?

KEY LANGUAGE: HELL

A02

Much of the language in this scene is linked to ideas of hell, implying that the murder of the king has turned the castle into an underworld. The Porter refers to 'hell-gate' (line 2) and asks 'Who's there I'the name of / Belzebub?' (a name given to the devil) (lines 3–4). Lennox describes an 'unruly' (line 51) night in which the 'lamentings' and 'strange screams of death' (line 53) seem hellish.

Earlier references to a 'serpent' (I.5.65) and a 'chalice' (I.7.11) could suggest that the devil has entered into Macbeth. Later, Macduff will refer to Macbeth as a 'devil' (IV.3.56). Shakespeare seems to suggest there is a hell wherever Macbeth is.

TOP TIP

A01

Notice that the following themes are all present in this scene: deception, murder, distrust, fear and flight. Find evidence for each of them.

EXAM FOCUS: WRITING ABOUT HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A03



In your essays it is essential to talk about the historical context linked to key moments in the play. Read this example of a student writing about historical context:

Shows specific knowledge of historical context

Some critics link the Porter's speeches to contemporary events: namely, the treasonous Gunpowder Plot of 1605. A Jesuit priest, Father Henry Garnet was hanged for lying about his knowledge of the Gunpowder conspiracy and pleaded that he did so for God's sake. Shakespeare uses this detail in the Porter's opening speech where he says 'here's an equivocator...who committed treason enough for God's sake'. A modern day audience might miss this allusion, but when the play was first performed the audience would understand the reference. The effect is to show that 'Hell' is not only on the stage in Macbeth's castle, but present in the society for which Shakespeare was writing.

Uses appropriate quotation to illustrate point

Describes effects on audience

Now you try it:

Expand on this paragraph by exploring other examples of traitorous behaviour in this play. You might refer to the Thane of Cawdor and the Macbeths' plot to kill their king.

ACT II SCENE 4: MACBETH BECOMES KING

SUMMARY

- Ross and an old man recall the dreadful night of the murder.
- Macduff enters and tells them that Duncan's two sons are suspected of paying the guards to commit the murder, because they have now fled.
- Macbeth has been nominated king and has gone to Scone to be crowned.
- Ross asks Macduff whether he will go to the crowning. Macduff says he will not, but will return home to Fife. Ross intends to go.

CHECKPOINT 7

A01

How key is the character of Macduff to the play?

WHY IS THIS SCENE IMPORTANT?

- A Shakespeare uses this scene as a **buffer** between the high drama of the previous scene and the next when we meet the new king, Macbeth.
- B The scene also acts as a **commentary** on all that has happened.
- C The old man is important because he **represents the people**. In his memory these crimes are unparalleled.
- D Shakespeare implies that Macduff is **suspicious** of Macbeth: he observes that the murderers were '*Those that Macbeth hath slain*' (line 23) – and so could not be questioned – and that he will not go to Scone for the coronation.

KEY STRUCTURE: NARRATIVE PACE

A02

Act II is action-packed. In it we see the culmination of Macbeth's temptation. Where Act I is about Macbeth's desire for kingship, Act II delivers his treachery and murder: in Scene 1 we see Macbeth following the dagger; in Scene 2 we hear the two conspirators after the murder is done and witness Macbeth's fear and terror; in Scene 3 the Porter opens hell's gate and the murdered body is discovered, causing frantic commotion.

Now in Scene 4 Shakespeare allows us to pause, to reflect on the actions and events, yet at the same time provides further insights into the characters. Shakespeare subtly paints essential difference between Ross and Macduff – Macduff will avoid the coronation whereas Ross plans to attend. The old man, a minor character, provides an unbiased commentary on the unnatural events that have occurred. In this way Shakespeare prepares us for the next round of monstrous murders that Macbeth will initiate.

KEY QUOTATION: MOUSING OWL

A01

Shakespeare's use of **imagery** reminds us of how the natural order has been turned upside down. The old man emphasises how '*strange*' (line 3) and '*unnatural*' (line 10) the world has seemed since Duncan was murdered. He describes how a '*falcon towering in her pride of place/ Was by a mousing owl hawked at and killed.*' (lines 12–13) There is a parallel between the falcon and King Duncan, whose life also comes to an unnatural end.



ACT III SCENE 1: MURDEROUS MACBETH

SUMMARY

- Banquo reflects on the witches' prophecies. He suspects that Macbeth obtained the crown through treachery.
- Macbeth and Lady Macbeth arrive.
- Macbeth pretends that he needs Banquo's advice on how to deal with Malcolm and Donalbain, who are abroad and spreading rumours.
- He learns details of Banquo's planned journey with his son, Fleance.
- Alone, Macbeth reveals that he fears Banquo. The thought of Banquo's offspring becoming kings is unacceptable to him.
- Two murderers are brought in. Macbeth outlines to them the reasons why Banquo is their mutual enemy. They agree to murder him and Fleance.

WHY IS THIS SCENE IMPORTANT?

- A Shakespeare shows us more about the **character** of **Banquo**. Unlike Macbeth, who is obsessed by the witches' prophecies, Banquo fears foul play.
- B Shakespeare reveals the **kind of rule** Macbeth offers: brutal and treacherous. Pretending to honour and value Banquo, his former comrade-in-arms, Macbeth casually works out his movements to entrap and murder him and his son.
- C We see Macbeth **persuading** others to commit crimes with the same key argument by which he himself was tempted: namely, to prove their manhood.
- D Lady Macbeth is **not** part of this plot.

KEY CHARACTER: MACBETH

A02

Shakespeare demonstrates the depths to which Macbeth has sunk through his conversation with the murderers: here is a great warrior-hero who now has to meet the most vicious and corrupt kind of men in secret in order both to disguise and achieve his ends. The fact that he despises these men is shown in the way he addresses them. He interrupts the first murderer's solemn declaration of loyalty with the **ironic** 'Your spirits shine through you' (line 127). This suggests his contempt for the men.



In Act III Scene 3 we learn that Macbeth has employed a third murderer, showing how little he actually trusts the first two. But, then, trust is no longer something Macbeth believes in. Crucially, Lady Macbeth is no longer involved in his plans.

TOP TIP

A01

Sometimes characters, like real people, are contradictory! Think about how on the one hand, Macbeth believes the prophecies must come true, and on the other, he seeks to prevent them happening. He commits murder so that he becomes king and then murders again to stop Banquo's offspring from attaining the crown.

CHECKPOINT 8

A01

Lady Macbeth is not involved in Macbeth's plan to kill Banquo. What does this suggest about Macbeth?

ACT III SCENE 2: SNAKES AND SCORPIONS

SUMMARY

- Lady Macbeth wants to speak to her husband before the feast. She is on edge – uncertainty and insecurity trouble them both.
- Macbeth appears and she scolds him both for staying alone and for his continued dwelling on their actions.
- They discuss the feast ahead, resolve to praise Banquo at it, and then Macbeth reveals his fear of Banquo and Fleance.
- He reveals that he intends to commit another dreadful crime. He will not tell Lady Macbeth what it is, but asks her to praise it when it is achieved.

WHY IS THIS SCENE IMPORTANT?

- A We see Macbeth growing in evil, and **hardening himself** to commit **more crimes**.
- B Duncan's peace of mind – being dead – is now a source of **envy** to Macbeth, who is in **torment** and has dreadful nightmares.
- C Lady Macbeth is no longer controlling and driving the action of her husband, but trying to **calm** his troubled mind.
- D The initial hope that they would enjoy their reign together is now exposed as **hollow**.

KEY CONTEXT

A03

The Divine Right of Kings meant that because God appointed the king, he was not answerable to the people or to Parliament. Notice how differently Duncan and Macbeth are presented as rulers.

KEY CHARACTER: MACBETH

A02

The third Act marks the turning point for our **tragic hero**. In the first part of the play we have seen Macbeth rise to power. Now he is king, he is hardening and becoming more brutal, and Shakespeare shows the situation changing. Macbeth keeps himself to himself and broods on the crimes committed, and on the crimes he intends to commit – notice the dark **imagery**: 'O, full of scorpions is my mind' (line 36). Just as scorpions bring death, so does the tormented Macbeth. He no longer shares his thoughts with his wife (in contrast to I.5.9–10) and so she feels isolated. The affectionate term, '**dearest chuck**' (line 45) that Macbeth uses for her, seems to imply a shift in power.



For Lady Macbeth this scene marks the start of her breakdown – she will take control one more time, at the banquet (Act III Scene 4), after which she will be overwhelmed by remorse for the tide of evil she has helped unleash. Their roles are reversing.

ACT III SCENE 3: BANQUO IS MURDERED

SUMMARY

- The two murderers are joined by a third.
- They wait for Banquo and Fleance then spring out on them.
- They manage to kill Banquo, but in the confusion Fleance escapes.
- The murderers resolve to inform Macbeth of what has happened.

WHY IS THIS SCENE IMPORTANT?

- A** Despite the precaution of adding a third murderer, Fleance **escapes** – the witches' **prophecy** is not easily avoided for all Macbeth's efforts.
- B** The need to recruit a third murderer indicates Macbeth's **distrust** of the first two.
- C** Where we did not see the actual murder of Duncan, but felt its horror, here Shakespeare makes us witness what is to become routine **assassination**.

KEY CHARACTER: MACBETH

A02

The addition of a third murderer exposes the kind of world Macbeth now inhabits. He trusts no one, not even the accomplices he has commissioned. In the next scene (Act III Scene 4) we learn he has spies everywhere – everyone is being checked.

TOP TIP

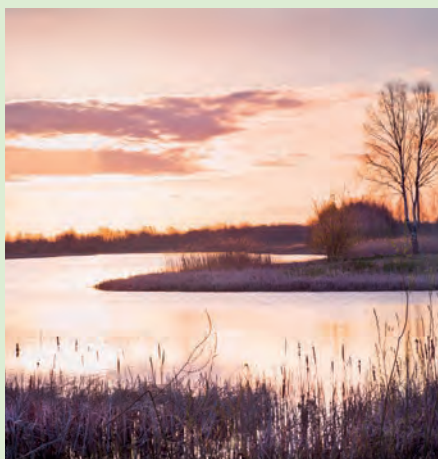
A01

The identity of the third murderer has caused much debate. Some have even suggested it is Macbeth in disguise! In the Polanski film version of the play Ross is depicted as the third murderer. Consider how key this character is to our further understanding of Macbeth.

AIMING HIGH: LIGHT AND DARK



Notice how the theme of light and dark runs through the play, with Macbeth increasingly associated with darkness as his rule becomes more brutal. When the first murderer says 'The west yet glimmers with some streaks of day' (line 5) we can interpret the line as a **metaphor** showing that there is still some evidence of hope in the world. It also **foreshadows** the loss of life in the scene. When the third murderer asks 'Who did strike out the light?' (line 19) we can understand this to literally mean that the torch has been extinguished and also as a reference to the ending of Banquo's life.



In the previous scene, Macbeth noticed that 'Light thickens' (III.2.50). Arranging the murder of his friend is the final straw and brings an end to any chance of 'light' in Macbeth's future.

ACT III SCENE 4: BANQUO'S GHOST

SUMMARY

- Macbeth welcomes various guests to his banquet.
- The first murderer appears and Macbeth steps aside to speak with him. The murderer tells Macbeth that Banquo is dead, but that Fleance escaped.
- Macbeth is disturbed. He returns to the feast and is gently reprimanded by his wife for his absence.
- He stands to raise a toast in praise of Banquo. As he does so, Banquo's ghost enters and sits in his place.
- Only Macbeth can see the ghost and Macbeth is terrified. Lady Macbeth says her husband often has these fits. Her quick thinking covers up for Macbeth as he begins to reveal his guilt.
- The ghost disappears and Macbeth regains his composure. Once more he tries to seem cheerful and praises 'our dear friend Banquo' (line 89). Then the ghost reappears and Macbeth loses his nerve altogether.
- He recovers when the ghost disappears again, but too late for the banquet to continue. Lady Macbeth dismisses everyone.
- Alone with his wife, Macbeth says that he thinks Macduff is against him. He reveals that he has spies in his lords' houses. He tells her that intends to revisit the witches.

CHECKPOINT 9

A01

What do you think the thanes would be thinking after the banquet?

WHY IS THIS SCENE IMPORTANT?

- A Shakespeare shows the Macbeths at the **high point** of their careers – on their thrones, entertaining their subjects, all of whom (except Macduff) are prepared to accept them.
- B It ironically **foreshadows** the future: Banquo's ghost occupies Macbeth's seat, as his descendants will occupy his throne – and 'push us from our stools' (line 82).
- C It marks the beginning of the **decline** of Macbeth's rule and power: he cannot keep calm on this important occasion of state, and almost reveals his guilt.
- D The **supernatural** theme is evident.
- E It exploits **dramatic tension**. The audience see the murdered man appearing at a State banquet – will he be seen by others? Macbeth almost blurts out the truth of his **guilt** – will he be exposed?
- F We see that the **close bond** between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth is beginning to **dissolve**: she covers for him, but it is a strain on her. Macbeth no longer talks of 'we' but of himself.





KEY CHARACTERS: MACBETH AND LADY MACBETH **A02**

The strain on Lady Macbeth is evident. By the end of the scene, although he has been terrified, Macbeth seems casual in his attitude to what has happened. His comment, '**We are yet but young in deed**' (line 144) suggests that this is a blip that will soon pass. Lady Macbeth, however, as Shakespeare shows, has had to use all her resources and wit to contain the potential damage of exposure.

Earlier she said '**Nought's had, all's spent**' (III.2.4) and we see this particularly here: she wanted to be queen and the scene begins with her keeping '**her state**' (line 5), in other words, remaining on her throne. If there was anywhere in the play where Lady Macbeth could enjoy being queen to the full, it is here: on her throne, surrounded by subjects. Yet, because of Macbeth's actions, this becomes a hollow and empty event, lacking any dignity or regal significance.

TOP TIP

A02

Consider that Shakespeare has structured the play so that this is the middle point: Act I is about plans against King Duncan, Act II show actions against King Duncan, Act III is the reign of Macbeth before Act IV, where plans against King Macbeth start, and finally, to complete the structure, Shakespeare shows the actions against King Macbeth in Act V.

TOP TIP: WRITING ABOUT WITCHCRAFT AND PSYCHOLOGY **A02**

This scene raises the key question of witchcraft and psychology. Shakespeare develops the supernatural **motif** throughout the play: we have had the witches, their prophecies, the dagger that led Macbeth to Duncan, and now we have the ghost of Banquo. But whereas Banquo saw and heard the witches alongside Macbeth, here only Macbeth sees the vision. As Lady Macbeth says, '**When all's done, / You look but on a stool**' (lines 67–8).

This has practical implications for any production of the play – is the ghost just in Macbeth's mind (and so is not shown on stage), or does a ghost really appear? Perhaps because of its sheer dramatic impact, most versions of the play tend to want to include it. When writing about the play it is important to decide whether you think Shakespeare intended us to believe in Banquo's ghost or to see it as a symptom of Macbeth's psychological distress.

KEY CONTEXT

A03

The word 'weird' originally meant 'destiny' or 'fate'. The three Weird Sisters remind us of the three Fates of Greek mythology (Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos) who were thought to be more powerful than the gods and controlled the lives of mortals.

ACT III SCENE 5: THE WITCHES, HECAT AND MACBETH

SUMMARY

- The three witches and the goddess of witchcraft, Hecat, prepare a strong spell for deluding Macbeth.

WHY IS THIS SCENE IMPORTANT?

- A Shakespeare shows the **layers of evil**, revealing there are still depths that Macbeth can sink to.
- B Hecat refers to a '**dismal and a fatal end**' (line 21) **foreshadowing** Macbeth's downfall.
- C Shakespeare links Macbeth to the **witches**, when Hecat refers to him as a '**wayward son**' (line 11), implying that he has become fully evil in nature.

KEY THEME: EVIL

A02

Hecat suggests that Macbeth is a '**son**' (line 11), although '**wayward**', and this enables Shakespeare to indicate that Macbeth is no longer a victim of the witches' evil, but more a master – one of them – in their art. However, there can be no doubt – master or not – that by the end of the play he has so fully embraced evil, he has destroyed himself.

CHECKPOINT 10

A01

How is security Macbeth's '**chiefest enemy**' (line 33)?

AIMING HIGH: LANGUAGE CHANGE



Understanding how language and meanings change over time is particularly useful when writing about Shakespeare. For example in this scene, Hecat refers to '**security**' as an enemy of human beings (lines 32–3). This goes back to medieval **Morality plays** and is how Satan, the devil, tempts mankind by playing on their fears of future loss.

Nowadays, the word 'evil' tends to be reserved for extreme cases. People might refer to immoral actions as 'unacceptable' rather than evil. In the world of *Macbeth*, evil is an absolute that leads to a literal hell – as Macbeth himself is only too aware.



ACT III SCENE 6: LENNOX AND A LORD

SUMMARY

- Lennox outlines to another lord in deeply **ironic** terms his understanding of what has been happening in Scotland: that is, that Macbeth is responsible for all the murders that have plagued the state.
- Malcolm is in the English court attempting to raise military support to reclaim his throne. Lennox supports this.
- Macduff is in disgrace for refusing to attend Macbeth's banquet and is attempting to join Malcolm.

WHY IS THIS SCENE IMPORTANT?

- A It shows the **direct consequence** of Macbeth's failure to control himself at his banquet: his lords have turned against him.
- B It reveals that Macduff kept his **integrity** and went to Fife, not Macbeth's coronation.
- C It outlines further the **deficiencies** in Macbeth's running of the state: not only the murders committed, but the lack of fairness and honour – in short, the corruption that blights everybody's life.
- D We learn of hope in England, of Malcolm's welcome and of another kind of king – '**the most pious Edward**' (line 27) – whom Shakespeare provides as another **contrast** with Macbeth.

KEY CHARACTER: MACDUFF

A01

In Act III Scene 4, Macbeth says that he intends to '**send**' (line 129) for Macduff. Act III Scene 6 confirms that he has sent for him and that Macduff has refused to attend. As Banquo is no longer a threat to Macbeth, Shakespeare provides another enemy, Macduff, who is beginning to challenge Macbeth's power.

It is Macduff who first questions Macbeth's behaviour after he kills the guards in Act II. Macduff asks '**Wherefore did you so?**' (II.3.103), showing that he is suspicious of such rash behaviour. Shakespeare shows that Macbeth bitterly resents people, such as Banquo and Macduff, who have independent thoughts and ideas that might threaten his position of power, or reveal the truth about what he has done.

KEY QUOTATION: MACBETH IS UNPOPULAR

A02

In this scene we learn that Macbeth's lords consider him to be a tyrant. A section of the lord's speech to Lennox reminds us of a prayer: '**Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights.**' (line 34) In his petitions for peace and food, the lord highlights the lack in their current lives. His request that they may '**Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives**' (line 35) shows the brutality of Macbeth's regime. The **alliteration** of 'banquets bloody' emphasises the lord's sense of anger at the tyranny.

KEY CONTEXT

A03

The Lord's Prayer is a Christian prayer that is recorded in the New Testament of the Bible. In it there is an entreaty to God to 'Give us this day our daily bread'. The form of this prayer is echoed in this scene when the lord speaks to Lennox.