Whether you’re looking at this at home, or are back in school, this pack is a
great way to get to grips with one of your key GCSE English Literature texts.
Put together by the English Literature experts at York Notes, it will really
kickstart your studies!

So – what’s in the pack?

1. Find out about Shakespeare, his times and the plot of *Macbeth*.
2. Explore the settings of the play – who lives where, and what key events are
   linked to these places.
3. Have a go at some warm-up tasks and activities to keep your brain active,
   and get a head start on your studies.
4. Follow up with our suggested links and ideas: websites, videos, and so on.

We hope you enjoy your introduction to this great play!
Who was William Shakespeare?

Five key things about William Shakespeare

- He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in April 1564, probably around St George’s Day (23rd).
- He married Anne Hathaway in November 1582 when he was just 18 and she was 26.
- He went to London in the late 1580s, and from there began his work as a poet and playwright, eventually writing around 37 plays, though there may have been even more.
- Macbeth was first performed in 1606, towards the end of Shakespeare’s career, after James I had come to the throne.
- Shakespeare returned to Stratford for good in 1614, and died there on April 23rd 1616.

What was his life like?

- Although not much is known for certain about his youth, it is likely he attended the Kings’ New School, and would have studied the classics (Latin and Greek) as well as religious studies.
- Shakespeare was an actor and a writer, and was part of acting companies such as the Chamberlain’s Men.
- This company performed in different theatres before being forced to move to a new theatre, which they built in Southwark, called The Globe.
- When James I succeeded Elizabeth I to the throne in 1603, he renamed the Chamberlain’s Men the King’s Men and became their patron.

What was life like in England at this time?

- Mortality rates were high with disease ever present, but London was also a vibrant place of trade and a centre for the exchange of ideas.
- Religious and civil conflicts were never far from the surface, and both Elizabeth and James faced rebellion and possible invasion.
- Theatres and entertainment of all kinds were always under scrutiny by the authorities, so acting and writing was a precarious business.
Macbeth - the plot

Macbeth is based on historical events set in Scotland around the middle of the 11th century (probably just before the Battle of Hastings in 1066).

Act I

- Three strange witches meet on a heath, mentioning ‘Macbeth’ and a ‘battle’.
- King Duncan is told of the bravery of two lords (‘Thanes’) called Macbeth and Banquo who have defeated Irish invaders and Norway.
- The witches meet Macbeth and Banquo and prophesy that Macbeth will become ‘Thane of Cawdor’ and later, king of Scotland.
- Macbeth finds out he is to be rewarded with the title of Thane of Cawdor and we learn that the previous Thane has been executed for betraying King Duncan’s trust. Macbeth starts to dream of being king himself.
- Lady Macbeth, Macbeth’s wife, begins to plan the murder of Duncan.
- Duncan arrives at Macbeth’s castle at Inverness, where he is welcomed, not knowing his fate.

Act II

- Macbeth is reluctant to go through with the murder but is egged on by his wife.
- On the way to kill the king, he sees a ghostly vision of a dagger, but he goes through with the murder anyway.
- Macduff, another Thane, finds Duncan dead the next day. Macbeth rushes in and murders the two servants, whom he and Lady Macbeth blame for the crime.
- Duncan’s sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, slip away fearing for their own safety.
- Macbeth becomes king. Macduff refuses to go to the coronation, suspecting Macbeth.

Act III

- Banquo, Macbeth’s old friend, suspects Macbeth of treachery. Macbeth orders Banquo and his son’s murder. Banquo is killed but his son Fleance escapes.
- Banquo’s ghost appears at a banquet to honour Macbeth, terrifying him. Lady Macbeth is forced to cover up his actions but the banquet ends in confusion.
- Macbeth begins to act independently, stating he will seek out the witches again.
Act IV

- Macbeth visits the witches who tell him he should fear Macduff, but that he cannot be harmed by anyone ‘born of woman’. He also learns he will be safe until Birnam Wood moves to his castle!
- He orders the murder of Macduff’s wife and children.
- In England, at the King’s palace Malcolm is gathering forces. He tests Macduff’s loyalty when he joins him. Macduff learns of the slaughter of his family and vows revenge.

Act V

- The English army marches on Macbeth in his castle at Dunsinane disguised with branches taken from Birnam Wood – so one of the prophecies is fulfilled.
- Lady Macbeth is wracked with guilt, and apparently commits suicide.
- Macbeth takes on the enemy bravely and at first no one seems able to kill him, until he meets Macduff. Macduff reveals he was born by caesarean section (not ‘of woman’) and kills Macbeth.
- Malcolm becomes the King of Scotland.
The settings of *Macbeth*

Look at these pictures of some key settings in *Macbeth*. Can you label each setting with any of the important events or characters linked to it?

- **Inverness**
- **Dunsinane**
- **The heath**
- **King’s Palace in England**
- **Birnam Wood**
You’ve read the plot, now experience the beginning properly. The opening scene of *Macbeth* may be short, but it packs a punch.

### Act I Scene 1
*A desert place*

*[Thunder and lightning. Enter three Witches]*

**FIRST WITCH**
When shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

**SECOND WITCH**
When the hurlyburly’s done,
When the battle’s lost and won.

**THIRD WITCH**
That will be *ere* the set of sun.

**FIRST WITCH**
Where the place?

**SECOND WITCH**
Upon the heath.

**THIRD WITCH**
There to meet with Macbeth.

**FIRST WITCH**
I come, *Graymalkin*!

**SECOND WITCH**
Paddock calls.

**THIRD WITCH**
Anon.

**ALL**
Fair is foul, and foul is fair:
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

*[Exeunt]*
Activities

Getting ‘into’ the scene

- Try reading it aloud either on your own or with your family. You could do different voices for the different witches (one could be very old, one child-like, etc.).
- What words, phrases or lines stand out? Tip out your pencil case, or use different font colours or typefaces if working online.
- What do you notice about the sound and structure of the scene? Using your colours or sticky labels, you could highlight any rhymes or patterns you notice.
- Now that you’ve done this, reread the scene, applying anything you have learned.

Exploring its meaning

- Imagine you were directing the scene in a film or play. What sort of atmosphere or mood would you hope to create?
- How would you stage it? How would the witches be dressed? (You don’t have to make them look like ‘typical’ witches.) What props or music would you add (if any)?
- Write up your ideas with drawings or diagrams.

Follow-up

- Check out the opening as it was interpreted by Roman Polanski in his 1971 film version. What does it add or leave out from Shakespeare’s original?
- How does it compare with your ideas?
You are Macbeth. You’ve agreed to go through with the murder, but are still very troubled by the thought of it. Suddenly a ghostly dagger appears before your eyes, floating in the air. It seems to be leading you towards the king’s bedchamber.

How do you react? How do you feel? Imagine you are Macbeth and write your thoughts in this box.

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Now, check out the actual scene – Act II Scene 1. Read it aloud from around line 31 (‘Is this a dagger that I see before me?’) to the end of the scene and think about how you could perform these lines.

- What key words or phrases could you stress or emphasise to show Macbeth’s indecision?
- What actions would he make? Are there any words or phrases which suggest he is moving or gesturing in a particular way?
- Where would he stand or move on the stage? Would he spend the whole speech at the front talking to the audience – or somewhere else?
3. Updating Macbeth

*Macbeth* has been updated in several stories and films – there’s a famous gangster film, *Joe Macbeth*, and the BBC produced a version in which he was an ambitious and murderous chef!

In fact, the themes of *Macbeth* – **betrayal, ambition, murder, guilt** – are present in many popular television series such as *Line of Duty* or *Top Boy*.

Can you think of any ways of updating the story? Come up with your very best idea!

Here are some possible scenarios:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Police force</th>
<th>Army</th>
<th>Fishermen out at sea</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ballet school</td>
<td>Law firm</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Football or other sports team</td>
<td>Music business</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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My idea:

*I would set Macbeth in…*
If you are reading or studying *Macbeth* for the first time, here are some really useful and interesting resources you could check out.

**Background to the play and Shakespeare himself**

1. If you want to check out the real history behind the play, the British Library has lots of interesting stuff! There is a section, ‘Holinshed as a source for Macbeth’, on how Shakespeare took historical events and adapted them to his needs.
   Go to: [www.bl.uk](http://www.bl.uk), search for ‘Holinshed Chronicles’ and click ‘View Online’

2. What was Shakespeare’s relationship with King James I like? Check out the section on Macbeth which explores why Shakespeare might have tailored the play for the king.
   Go to: [www.bl.uk](http://www.bl.uk), search for ‘Royal Shakespeare: a playwright and his king’ and click ‘View Online’

3. The play begins with supernatural beings – the three Witches. But why would this have interested contemporary audiences? And how were witches seen in Shakespeare’s day?
   Go to: [www.bl.uk](http://www.bl.uk), search for ‘Witches in Macbeth’ and click ‘View Online’

4. The BBC Teach site has a whole section dedicated to Shakespeare’s life and works.
   Go to: [www.bbc.co.uk/teach](http://www.bbc.co.uk/teach) and search for ‘Shakespeare’s life, work and legacy’

**Finding out more about the plot, theme and characters**

1. There is a useful animated version of the play on BBC Teach. It doesn’t go into lots of depth, and mixes the original language with modern narration, but it could help bring the key events to life for you.
   Go to: [www.bbc.co.uk/teach](http://www.bbc.co.uk/teach) and search for ‘Macbeth KS2’ to find the whole series

2. If you want to delve deeper into characters and themes, take a look at the Shakespeare Unlocked series of films on BBC Teach. Here you can find clips of actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company interpreting different scenes.
   Go to: [www.bbc.co.uk/teach](http://www.bbc.co.uk/teach), click ‘Secondary’ then ‘Drama 14–16’ and find ‘Shakespeare Unlocked – Macbeth’
We understand that during this time, parents may be asking which books should they be buying to support their children’s study.

If you’d like to recommend any York Notes titles, please direct them to our new Amazon store for great prices and fast delivery options.