

Exploring and enjoying *Macbeth*

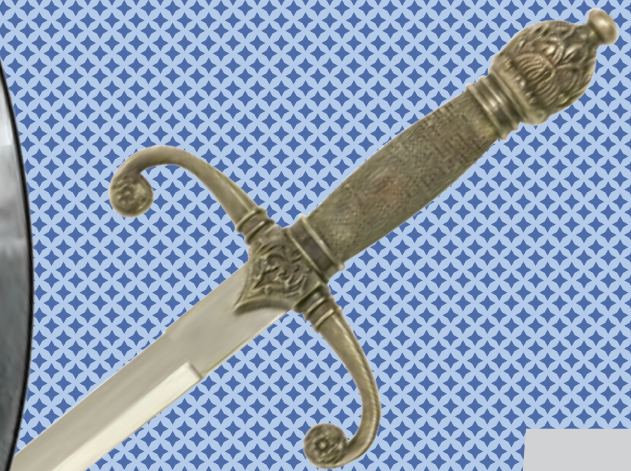
Chapter overview

The study of Shakespeare's shortest, and some might argue, darkest play provides students, teachers and theatre lovers with an exciting challenge. The drama is fast-paced, thrilling and action-

filled. Shakespeare's visual imagery and tense exchanges appeal to the imagination of a modern audience, familiar with political corruption, violence and the desire for power.

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

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (Act I, Scene i)



Macbeth

Macbeth and tragedy

Shakespeare's early plays, written largely in the 1590s were generally, but not all, comedies and histories. By the start of the seventeenth century Shakespeare had moved on to writing plays such as *All's Well That Ends Well* and his four great tragedies: *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Othello*.

Background to Macbeth

Macbeth was written and performed for the first time at the Globe Theatre in 1606 when Shakespeare was forty-two, during the most productive period of his creative life.

In all probability, the play was written as a tribute to the recently crowned King James I (James VI of

Scotland), who was a patron of Shakespeare's company of actors. Banquo is said to have been an ancestor of James I. The play makes allusions to the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, a plot by Catholic rebels led by Sir Guy Fawkes to blow up Parliament, killing the King, the Queen and their two sons. This plot was discovered and the conspirators arrested and executed.

King James I had a well-recorded interest in witchcraft and Shakespeare chose to appeal to this interest by using witches in his play.



Gunpowder Plot conspirators

❓ DID YOU KNOW...

On Guy Fawkes' Day on 5 November, it was customary to burn a ragged effigy of this famous conspirator on a bonfire. This custom began in England and celebrated the overthrow of the Gunpowder Plot. Australia also followed this tradition with bonfires and firecrackers on that day.

Shakespeare used the historical *Chronicles* of Raphael Holinshed (published in 1587) as his source for the story of *Macbeth*. In this version of events, King Duncan is a weak and gentle monarch who is facing rebellion from all sides. Two Scottish lords, Macbeth and Banquo defeat these rebels and, on the way home from battle, encounter the three 'weird women' who predict great advancement and the kingship for Macbeth. Some time later, persuaded by his wife, Macbeth decides to take over the kingdom by force. He enlists the help of his friend Banquo in this politically motivated act and kills King Duncan in battle. Further assassinations follow, including that of Banquo. Another lord, Macduff, raises an army in England and eventually defeats Macbeth.

DID YOU KNOW...

The play, *Macbeth*, is believed to have a curse on it. Actors, directors and stage hands refer superstitiously to it as 'The Scottish Play' in order to prevent bad luck. A production in 1947 had an unlucky conclusion. The fight scene between Macduff and Macbeth in the final Act seemed to the audience to be more realistic than usual. As the curtain fell, they found out why. The actor playing Macbeth had been stabbed in the chest and later died.

Macbeth and Banquo meet the three witches. 'Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear' (I, iii, 49)

Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 Name Shakespeare's four great tragedies.
- 2 For whom was *Macbeth* written and why?
- 3 What was the Gunpowder Plot?
- 4 Why did Shakespeare include witches in *Macbeth*?
- 5 Upon what source did Shakespeare base his play?

Applying

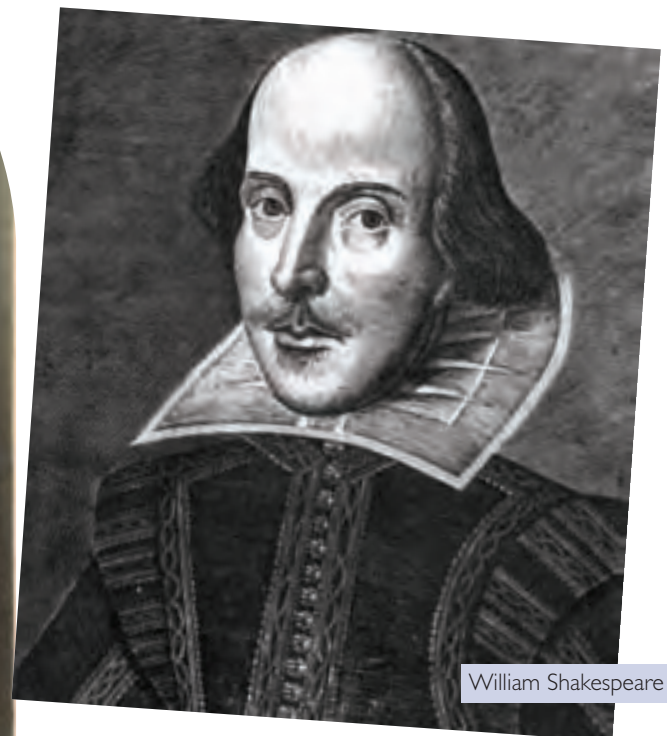
- 6 Use a flow chart to outline the plot of the original story of King Duncan and Macbeth.

Analysing

- 7 Conduct some research to find out more about the curse on the play. Report your findings in a slide presentation.
- 8 Conduct research to find out more about the reign of King James I and the Gunpowder Plot. Report your findings in a slide presentation.

Creating

- 9 What other reasons could there be for the play to be cursed? Write your own short account about why actors feel the play is cursed. Be as creative as you like.



William Shakespeare



What is tragedy?

Almost 2000 years ago, Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, wrote in his book, *Poetics*, an outline of the elements of tragedy. Although Aristotle's definition related specifically to Greek tragedy, using as its model, Sophocles' tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*, Shakespeare adopts Aristotle's definition of tragedy and makes it his own.



Statue of Aristotle
(384–322 BCE)

Aristotle's definition of tragedy

Aristotle identified these elements as essential for tragedy. The plot always included:

- a special turn in the action, more commonly known as the 'climax'
- a recognition of this turn of events
- a 'catharsis' for the audience (a release of pity and fear at the tragic outcome)
- the fall of a noble man caused not by vice or depravity but by 'hamartia', a frailty or error in his character, often referred to as the 'tragic flaw'.

Shakespearean tragedy

Shakespearean tragedy is the story of a hero, a person of noble or admirable character, whose suffering and calamity leads to his death. The hero contributes to this death because of his own tragic flaw. He is not destroyed by outside forces or chance, but by his own particular obsession or weakness. For example, Othello's fatal flaw is jealousy and pride; Hamlet's is thinking too much and not being able to act; King Lear's is pride and egotism.

Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 Whose definition of tragedy does Shakespeare base his tragic plays upon?
- 2 What are the four elements required for a tragedy?

Understanding

- 3 What is 'hamartia'?
- 4 How is the concept of a hero's tragic flaw used by Shakespeare in his plays?

Analysing

- 5 Consider the following extract in a newspaper report:

Family of four die in tragic car accident

A family of four tragically died on the Princes Highway north of Sydney yesterday. Authorities report that the car accident was due to brake failure ...

- a What is the definition of 'tragedy' as suggested in this extract?
- b How does this compare with Aristotle's definition of tragedy? Explain.
- c Write a modern definition of tragedy.

Creating

- 6 Imagine you are Shakespeare using the newspaper extract as a prompt. Write an extended scenario in which the car accident is due to the tragic flaw of the hero of your piece. Aim for about 500 words.

Strands in action

Core tasks

- 1 Use one of the many Shakespeare-related and history websites to research one of the following topics. Use search engines and type in key words.
 - The life of Shakespeare
 - Witches in Shakespeare's times
 - The history of the Globe Theatre
 - Glamis Castle—history and legend
 - Scone and the coronation of Scottish kings
- 2 Record your research in a set of detailed notes on your chosen topic.
- 3 Prepare a report on your topic using a multimedia format, a speech, or an interview format.
- 4 Present your report to the class. If you are using a slide presentation, make sure you engage your audience with visuals as well as text. Do not read from the screen. You might choose to role-play the interview, for example by having one partner acting as a descendant of Shakespeare and the other as a historian researching Shakespeare's life. If you deliver a speech, use cue cards and keep eye contact with your audience.



Glamis Castle



The Globe Theatre

Extra tasks

- 1 Conduct further research on the different genres of Shakespeare's plays. Use a graphic organiser to outline the characteristics of each genre.
- 2 Conduct further research on two of Shakespeare's other tragedies, such as *Hamlet*, *King Lear* or *Othello*. Compare each one with *Macbeth*. What similarities and differences can you find? In your answer, consider plot, character and theme. Use a graphic organiser to help you set out your findings.
- 3 Research Aristotle's definition of tragedy and write a short guide for other students explaining it fully and how it relates to *Macbeth*.

Macbeth: the story and structure of the play

Macbeth, like other Shakespearean plays, is constructed in five Acts. Each Act is then divided into scenes. Some Acts may only have one or two scenes, while others comprise many more scenes. Each Act focuses upon key plot points and key development of the characters; the different scenes within each Act show the varying action and characters at these key points.



Act I

The play begins in thunder and lightning, with the three witches plotting to meet with Macbeth. News comes to King Duncan of the rebellion in his kingdom and the outcome of the battle. Macdonwald, aided by Norwegian troops and the traitor, Thane of Cawdor, has been defeated by brave Macbeth and his fellow general, Banquo. Returning from battle, Macbeth and Banquo encounter the three witches who prophesy that Macbeth will be named Thane of Cawdor and will one day become king. (He is already Thane of Glamis.) The witches tell Banquo that his descendants will be kings though he will not be king. Shortly afterwards, messengers arrive to announce that Macbeth has, as predicted, been given the title of Thane of Cawdor. Duncan meets the victorious generals, Macbeth and Banquo, praises them for their bravery and names his elder son Malcolm as his successor. Shaken and

excited by this promotion and the promise of future greatness, Macbeth writes to his wife Lady Macbeth who resolves to give him the encouragement he needs to get him the throne. When he arrives with news that Duncan is coming to stay at their castle, Lady Macbeth is determined to take the opportunity to kill him. At first Macbeth is in two minds, attracted by the idea of power, but wary of the consequences of murder. Lady Macbeth chides him for his cowardice and the two agree to carry out the murder of their King.

? DID YOU KNOW...

A thane is a Scottish lord, usually someone of noble birth, who owns land and who owes allegiance to the King.

Kingship in eleventh century Scotland

The story of Macbeth is thought to be loosely based upon a real King Macbeth of Scotland who reigned in the eleventh century AD. In those times, in Scotland, kingship was not hereditary; that is, it did not pass automatically from father to son or the closest blood relative as was the case in Shakespeare's time. For example, James I gained the English throne as the nearest relative to the childless Queen Elizabeth I. In contrast, kings were elected from powerful, noble families with consideration of not only bloodline but also fitness to rule often based upon prowess on the battlefield. Furthermore, if an elected king proved to be incompetent or was considered unfit to rule by his nobles they had the right to call for a new election to select a new king from among their number.

Use this table to help you understand Shakespeare's language.

Lines from Shakespeare's <i>Macbeth</i>	Explanation
'The instruments of darkness tell us truths; win us with honest trifles, to betray us in deepest consequence' (I, iii, 124–126)	Banquo warns Macbeth that the forces of evil, in this case, the witches, often trick us by initially telling us the truth about a small matter, only to deceive us later in a much more important matter.
'Look like the innocent flower; but be the serpent under't' (I, v, 63–4)	Lady Macbeth tells her husband to show a pleasant outward appearance, but be an evil snake on the inside.
'No, this my hand will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green one red.' (II, ii, 60–2)	Macbeth feels that his bloody hands will stain the many green oceans of the world totally red.
'I am in blood stepp'd in so far, that should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er' (III, iv, 136–8)	Macbeth feels that he has waded so far into a stream of blood, that to turn around and go back would be as hard as to go further into the blood.
'The very firstlings of my heart shall be the firstlings of my hand.' (IV, i, 147–8)	I will immediately act upon my first impulses without thought, says Macbeth.
'Now does he feel his title hang loose upon him like a giant's robe upon a dwarfish thief. (V, ii, 20–2)	Macbeth's kingship no longer fits him; it is like a giant's clothes on a thieving dwarf.

If this is your first experience of reading a Shakespearean play, here are some useful hints.

- Listen to an actor reading the lines. Your teacher may use an audio CD or show some scenes from one of the many film or television versions of *Macbeth*.
- View Roman Polanski's 1971 film of *Macbeth*, the 1983 BBC version of the play or the more recent 2006 BBC film, starring Sam Worthington.
- Use the notes in your text in order to understand unfamiliar words.
- Become familiar with the story, first by reading the summaries of each Act carefully.
- Be aware that the play is divided into five Acts, and each scene is numbered. The lines are also numbered, making it easy for you to find your place.
- References to quotes are expressed in this way—Act I, Scene i, lines 11–12 (or more simply I, i, 11–12 using Roman numerals).

You will need to refer to the actual play itself as well as the summaries as you work through the Breakaway tasks on each Act.



Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 Where and when do the witches plan to meet Macbeth? (Act I, Scene i)
- 2 Name the two traitors who rebel against King Duncan. (Act I, Scene ii)
- 3 The witches give Macbeth his present title and predict two future titles for him. What are these two predictions? (Act I, Scene iii)
- 4 Which of Duncan's sons is named 'Prince of Cumberland'? (Act I, Scene iv)

Understanding

- 5 In pairs, discuss why Macbeth sends Lady Macbeth the letter at the beginning of Act I, Scene v. Share one reason with the rest of the class.

Applying

- 6 What are Macbeth's first words in the play? Explain these words. Compare what he says with the witches' rhyme at the end of the first scene.
- 7 What three questions would you ask of Macbeth after he has been persuaded to go ahead with the murder?

Analysing

- 8 Macbeth has two major soliloquies in this Act: 'This supernatural soliciting ...' (I, iii, 120–141) and 'If it were done, when 'tis done ...' (I, vii, 1–28).
 - a Choose three words or phrases from the following list which best sum up Macbeth's state of mind in each of these soliloquies:
 - confused
 - determined
 - excited
 - reluctant
 - horrified
 - scared
 - loyal
 - ambitious
 - on edge
 - ambivalent
 - attracted to the idea of power
 - appalled at the idea of murder
 - b Choose two quotes from each soliloquy which support your choice.



A **soliloquy** is a speech in which a character expresses his inner thoughts aloud to the audience. Usually, the character is alone on stage. The word 'soliloquy' comes from the Latin *solus* meaning 'alone' and *loqui* meaning 'to speak'.

- 9 What two major arguments does Lady Macbeth use to persuade her husband to commit the murder? (Act I, Scene vii)

Evaluating

- 10 Debate one of the following statements. Firstly, draw up two columns and write down arguments for and against. Once this is completed, discuss the statement with a partner and reach an agreement. All agreements should be shared with the class.
 - a Macbeth is a puppet of both the witches and his wife Lady Macbeth.
 - b Lady Macbeth is a stronger character than her husband.

Creating

- 11 Imagine Lady Macbeth writes a letter in reply to her husband after she reads his. Write the letter.

Act II

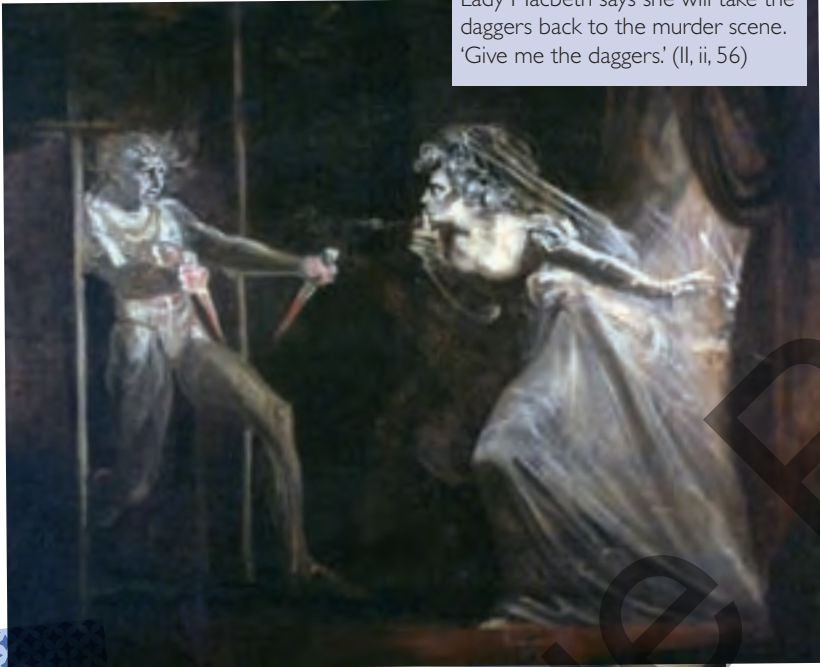


It is a starless night. Banquo is feeling a little uneasy and has dreamt of the three witches. Macbeth's imagination creates a vision of a dagger pointing towards Duncan's room where he was heading. Lady Macbeth has taken a drink to give her courage and has drugged the drinks of the two guards. While they sleep, Macbeth kills the king. The murder takes place off stage.

Macbeth returns to his wife, the daggers in his hands, and she takes them back to the murder scene in order to make the guards appear guilty. In the early morning, Macduff and the other Scottish thanes,

as well as the two sons of Duncan, Malcolm and Donalbain, arrive at the castle. The porter takes his time answering the door. Macduff discovers the body of his king. Horrified, he announces the regicide to all. Macbeth, pretending grief and rage, admits he killed the two guards. At this news Lady Macbeth faints. Fearing for their own lives, Malcolm and Donalbain flee. Suspicion falls on them as having used the guards to carry out the murder. Macduff, uneasy, decides not to go to Scone to see Macbeth crowned.

Lady Macbeth says she will take the daggers back to the murder scene. 'Give me the daggers.' (II, ii, 56)



'This is a sorry sight.' (II, ii, 23)

Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 What does Macbeth imagine he sees on the way to Duncan's chamber?
- 2 Who drugs the guards' wine? Who takes back the daggers?
- 3 Who discovers the murder?

Understanding

- 4 Why is Lady Macbeth unable to carry out the actual murder?
- 5 Why does the porter take such a long time to answer the knocking on the door of the castle in Scene iii?
- 6 Why does Macbeth kill the two guards?

Applying

- 7 Draw a storyboard of six frames that illustrates the sequence of events from Macbeth's vision of the dagger to the discovery of the murdered Duncan.
- 8 Identify who says each of these lines and to whom they say the words. Explain the importance of the words.
 - a Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done't. (II, ii, 12–13)
 - b A foolish thought to say a sorry sight. (II, ii, 21)
 - c To know my deed 'twere best not know myself. (II, ii, 73)
 - d Faith, sir; we were carousing till the second cock; and drink, sir, is a provoker of three things. (II, iii, 22–23)
 - e O horror, horror, horror! Tongue nor heart cannot conceive nor name thee! (II, iii, 60–61)

Analysing

- 9 Compare the reactions of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to the sight of Duncan's blood on their hands in the murder scene (II, ii). Find two quotes, one for each of these characters.
- 10 Explain why you think Lady Macbeth faints.

Creating

- 11 Macduff begins an investigation of the murder of Duncan. He interviews the porter in an attempt to find out what happened. With a partner, role-play the interview.

Act III

Banquo is uneasy about Macbeth's succession to the throne and suspects that foul play may have occurred. He is, however, hopeful that the promises made by the witches to him will come true. Macbeth requests his presence at the banquet to celebrate his coronation and asks him where he will be riding that afternoon and whether his son Fleance will accompany him. He meets with the murderers and arranges for them to waylay Banquo and kill him and Fleance. The attempt on Banquo's life is successful though Fleance escapes. That night at the banquet, Macbeth alarms his guests when he refuses to take his seat at the table because he sees Banquo's ghost there. Lady Macbeth tries unsuccessfully to calm her husband, but eventually the dinner party breaks up in disarray. Lennox and another lord discuss their suspicions about Macbeth and how Macduff has gone to England to raise an army against Macbeth.



Macbeth speaks to the ghost of Banquo. 'Avant and quit my sight!' (III, iv, 93)

Analysing

- 6 Why does Macbeth not kill Banquo himself but hires two henchmen instead?

Evaluating

- 7 Discuss as a group the changes in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's relationship since he has become king. Who takes the more dominating role?

Creating

- 8 Lady Macbeth writes in her journal after the guests have departed from the banquet. Write the journal entry.

Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 Who is the 'chief guest' at Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's banquet?
- 2 Answer true or false to the following statements.
 - a Banquo is suspicious of the way in which Macbeth attained the throne.
 - b Lady Macbeth knows about her husband's plan to get rid of Banquo.
 - c Macbeth wants Banquo dead because he is fearful he will tell what he knows about the murder.
 - d Macbeth is the only one to see the ghost of Banquo.
 - e Macduff does not attend the banquet.

Understanding

- 3 Discuss Lady Macbeth's comment to her husband, 'Nought's had, all's spent / 'Where our desire is got without content.' (III, ii, 4–5) and Macbeth's comment, 'We have scorched the snake, not killed it' (III, ii, 13).
- 4 Explain the appearance of the third murderer in Act III, Scene 3 when Macbeth appointed only two.

Applying

- 5 Draw up a comic strip for the banquet at the beginning of Act III, Scene iv. Indicate in your first frame where everyone is seated or standing. Indicate the entrance and exits of all characters, including the ghost of Banquo. Use speech bubbles.

Act IV

Macbeth visits the witches, anxious to find out what fate has in store for him. They show him three apparitions who tell him to beware of Macduff; that he has nothing to fear from any man born of woman; and that he will never be defeated until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane. The final show of eight kings and the bloodied Banquo indicates a line of kings who are his descendants. Lennox tells Macbeth that Macduff has fled to England. Hearing this news, Macbeth orders the death of Macduff's entire family. Macduff hears the news of this massacre in England where he has gone to persuade Malcolm to return to Scotland to defeat Macbeth, and accept the crown. At first, Malcolm is reluctant and tests the integrity and loyalty of Macduff by pretending that he is unfit to be a king. Once convinced of Macduff's honesty, he agrees to bring an army against Macbeth. The grief of Macduff motivates him to confront the murderer of his wife and children in battle and to put him to the sword.

Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 What are the two predictions and one warning about Macbeth's future made by the witches?
- 2 What news does Ross bring to Macduff in Scene iii?

Understanding

- 3 How is this meeting between the witches and Macbeth different from when he first encountered them in Act I? Explain what has changed and why.

Analysing

- 4 Examine the pages from the graphic novel showing the prophecies of the three apparitions.
 - a On the surface at least, the first two prophecies should reassure Macbeth. How does he react?
 - b How do you think the prophecies could be interpreted?
 - c Is Macbeth safe or not, on his throne? Explain your answer.

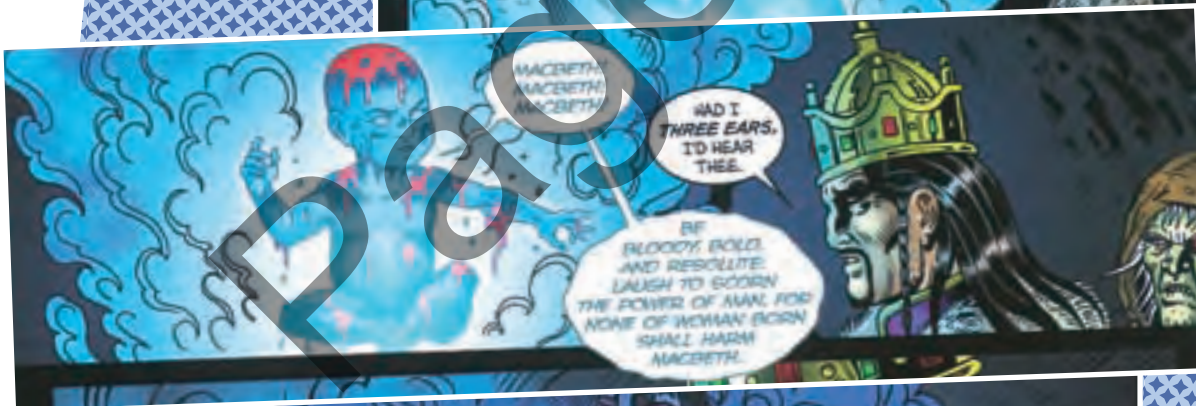
- 5 What makes the murder of Macduff's family a much worse crime than any of the other murders Macbeth has committed?
- 6 How does Shakespeare create great sympathy for Lady Macduff and her son?

Evaluating

- 7 Debate the following statements in small groups.
 - a Macduff should have stayed in Scotland to protect his family.
 - b Malcolm's testing of Macduff shows weakness, not strength.

Creating

- 8 Using the witches' chant as a model, devise a new rhyme for your own spell. Keep the rhythm of, 'Double, double, toil and trouble / Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.'





Lady Macbeth sleepwalking. 'She has light by her constantly, 'tis her command' (V, i, 19–20)

Act V

Lady Macbeth is sleepwalking and rubs her hands, trying to get rid of the blood of Duncan. Her mind is obsessed with the horrors of all Macbeth's murders and she is re-enacting her role in the horror. The English army, led by Malcolm and supported by his uncle Seyward and Macduff, is advancing towards Dunsinane. Macbeth's men are deserting him, but he refuses to give up hope as he clings to the witches' predictions of his invincibility. Lady Macbeth has lost her mind. Malcolm's forces use the branches of Birnam Wood to disguise their numbers as they march towards Glamis Castle.

Macbeth hears news of Lady Macbeth's death, but has no time to mourn her passing. He sees what appears to be Birnam Wood advancing towards the castle. He fights on until he comes face to face with Macduff who tells him he was cut from his mother's womb and thus the final prediction is fulfilled. Macduff slays Macbeth and presents his head to Malcolm who is hailed as the new King of Scotland.



Macduff confronts Macbeth. 'Turn, hell-hound, turn' (V, viii, 4),

Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 Describe Lady Macbeth's actions in the opening scene.
- 2 Who are the key leaders of the English army?

Understanding

- 3 In her speech, which of the murders does Lady Macbeth remember? Write the person murdered and the line that refers to that person.
- 4 What evidence is there in Scene iii that Macbeth is losing his power?

Applying

- 5 Draw a diagram of the battlefield. Include Birnam Wood, Macbeth's castle, the position of Malcolm's army and Macbeth's men.

Analysing

- 6 Explain Macbeth's reaction to the death of his wife in Scene v.
- 7 Macbeth speaks two soliloquies in this final Act of the play: 'I have lived long enough / my way of life is fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf' (iii, 22–28) and 'Tomorrow, tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day' (v, 19–28). How would you describe the mood of both these speeches? Quote lines to support your opinion.

Evaluating

- 8 Malcolm's judgement of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is expressed when he calls them 'this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen' (V, vi, 108). Is his judgement correct? Debate this in small groups. From the discussion, take a class vote.

Creating

- 9 You are the doctor writing his report on the mental health of Lady Macbeth. Write the report.



A **homonym** is a word that sounds the same or similar, but has a different meaning.

A **metaphor** is a figure of speech in which one thing is described in terms of another; for example, 'The burnt-out ends of smoky days' (T. S. Eliot, *Preludes*).

Strands in action

Core tasks

1 Read the following two passages closely.

1

Macbeth: Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more!

Macbeth does murder sleep—the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knots up the raveled sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great Nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast. (II, ii, 35–40)

2

Lady Macbeth: 'Infirm of purpose!
Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead
Are but as pictures. 'Tis the eye of childhood
That fears a painted devil. If he do bleed,
I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal,
For it must seem their guilt. (II, ii, 52–57)

- a** In pairs discuss the differences in the two characters' sense of guilt for their crime. Share your views with the class.
- b** Explain the ideas expressed in the imagery about sleep in the first passage and the meaning of the homonyms 'gild' and 'guilt' in the second passage.

2 Choose one passage and write your own analysis of the language and the feelings expressed.

3 Locate the four soliloquies in Act I. (Hint: Macbeth has two; Lady Macbeth has two.) Form groups of four. Each group will give a performance of one of the soliloquies. First divide the soliloquy into meaningful sections, ending at either a full stop or a pause in the thought being expressed (for example, a dash, comma or colon). Each section is read by one person and then the next person takes over until the soliloquy is concluded. Rehearse this so that there are no unnecessary gaps in the fluency. The group should stand in a circle for the performance. Use sound effects and gestures if appropriate. Use variation in tone, voice and pace (soft and loud, slow and fast).

4 Translate your chosen soliloquy into modern English. Does this change the passage in any way? Explain your answer.

5 Where does your chosen soliloquy occur in the play? What has happened just before the words are spoken? What happens afterwards? Explain the importance of this soliloquy to the action and to the development of character?

Extra tasks

1 Using metaphors like the ones used in passage 1 above, write a descriptive paragraph or poem titled 'Night'.

2 View the concluding scenes of the Polanski film of *Macbeth* in which the character Donalbain returns to the witches' haunt. What is being suggested by the director about the continuing power of evil in the world? How does this conclusion compare with Shakespeare's final lines? Which conclusion do you prefer?

3 There are several key turning points in the play, moments when decisions are made which change the course of action and lead to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's downfalls. Plot these turning points in a chart. Add two quotes for each turning point.

The major and minor characters of *Macbeth*

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are the two protagonists of this play. They appear in more scenes than any other character and, for the first two Acts and the beginning of Act III, appear together on stage for many of these scenes. The separation of the two characters after Act III, Scene i is a clear indication that they no longer function as a team. Macbeth, alone, then dominates the play and captures the audience's imagination as we follow his fall from grace. The minor characters have their own importance as they move in and out of the action.



Macbeth

Before the murder

Initially, the audience sees Macbeth through the eyes of others. He is, first and foremost, a soldier. The Captain describes him as 'brave' and gives a graphic account of how Macbeth disposes of the rebel, Macdonwald, 'unseam[ing] him from the navel to the chops', a bloodthirsty image of disembowelment which shows the extent of Macbeth's ferocity on the battlefield. Ross labels him 'Bellona's bridegroom', the husband of the war goddess. When Duncan hears what Macbeth has done to put down the rebellion against his kingdom, he exclaims, 'O valiant cousin! Worthy gentleman!' (I, ii, 24).

Macbeth's meeting with the 'weird sisters' prompts his inner speculation of murder. Macbeth's reaction to their predictions gives the audience insight into the workings of Macbeth's mind. It is clear he is disturbed by the prediction of the new titles of Thane of Cawdor and King. Where has the idea of murder

come from? The witches did not mention it. However, once Macbeth receives the honour of Thane of Cawdor he is thinking of the next step. He is shaken by this news, but attracted to it at the same time. 'My thought whose murder yet is but fantastical, / Shakes so my single state of man / That function is smothered in surmise, / And nothing is but what is not.' (I, iii, 138–141). Macbeth is in two minds, divided within himself. Because Shakespeare gives us Macbeth's thoughts in his soliloquies, we are sympathetic to the struggle he faces. He speaks of his 'black and deep desires' and we know from this, and the letter he sends to Lady Macbeth, that becoming king is definitely on his mind, and murder is in his thoughts. There is also evidence that he has actually suggested to his wife some action to gain the throne. 'What beast was't then / That made you break this enterprise to me?' (I, vii, 47–48).

He still has to be persuaded into doing the deed and this is the role his wife takes. Macbeth imagines the aftermath, 'If [the deed] were done when 'tis done'. The thought seems to be, 'If only the job could be over

and done with, I'd do it'. Then he tries to talk himself out of it only to have Lady Macbeth talk him back into it. Does this mean he is weak and she is strong? What triggers does she use to persuade him?

After the murder

The psychological effects of the murder of Duncan are immediately obvious. The effects are profound and cumulative. Macbeth is fearful, regretful, guilt-ridden and uncertain of himself. Immediately after the murder, he thinks that the waters of the ocean will not wash the blood from his hands.

Later, his behaviour becomes erratic and he does not even think before he acts. For example, he kills the guards even though this was not part of the plan and with no consultation with his wife. Later, he does briefly confide in her that his mind is 'full of scorpions' and he speaks of 'terrible dreams' (III, ii, 18, 36). However, he ruthlessly enlists cold-blooded assassins to kill Banquo and his son, Fleance. He seems to be getting rid of anyone who may threaten his position: 'Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill' (III, ii, 55).

From the moment when Macbeth seeks out the witches for himself in Act IV, he has unequivocally aligned himself to evil. His motives for murder are now even more difficult to understand, particularly when he commits his most horrendous crime against Macduff's family. He now has no hesitation or moral questioning. He just acts. 'The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand' (IV, i, 146–7).



Macbeth seeks out the witches. 'How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags' (IV, i, 47)

The audience has lost all sympathy for Macbeth by this time. Interestingly, there are few soliloquies to give us insight into Macbeth's mind.

However, in the final Act, when his men desert him and Malcolm and the English troops are coming towards Dunsinane, there are two moments when Macbeth is reflective. One moment occurs when his thanes desert him and the English forces march towards his castle; the second occurs when he is told of the death of Lady Macbeth. These two final soliloquies allow us a glimpse into the mind of our protagonist. There is no meaning any more to the life he is leading, and he recognises the end is near for him.

Breakaway tasks

Understanding

- 1 How much influence does Lady Macbeth have on Macbeth's behaviour? In the beginning? Later?
- 2 How much influence do the witches have on Macbeth's behaviour? In the beginning? Later?

Applying

- 3 Choose five of the following adjectives to describe Macbeth's character at various times during the play. Find one example and one quote for each description.

• ambitious	• imaginative	• courageous
• remorseless	• regretful	• callous
• superstitious	• uncertain	• guilt-ridden
• cynical	• fearful	• deceitful

Analysing

- 4 Draw a flow chart that indicates the murders in the order in which they occur. Add Macbeth's involvement in each murder and his motives for murder to the chart.
- 5 Form groups of four to five. One member of the group takes the 'hot seat' as Macbeth. The other members ask Macbeth two questions each. Make sure that the questions are specific, not vague and that they require more than a yes/no answer. These questions should cover the following aspects of the play:
 - the battle to put down the rebellion against Duncan
 - Macbeth's relationship with Lady Macbeth
 - Macbeth's friendship with Banquo
 - the witches
 - murder and its consequences.
- 6 Once the group is finished with all questions and answers, each person writes a summary of the character of Macbeth, based on what has been said.

Lady Macbeth

Before the murder

The first time we see Lady Macbeth, she is reading a letter from her husband. He calls her his 'dearest partner of greatness' (I, v, 9). The two soliloquies immediately following suggest that Lady Macbeth is the stronger partner. Her first is a reflection on the shortcomings of her husband whom she sees as 'too full o' the milk of human-kindness' and who will need her encouragement and chastisement if he is to 'be what [he is] promised'. She sounds determined and single-minded. The second soliloquy comes immediately after she has heard the news that Duncan is coming to their castle. She prays to the spirits to 'unsex' her, and 'fill [her] from the crown to the toe top-full / of direst cruelty' (I, v, 39-41). We are shocked at her willingness to forgo any female characteristics and at her determined, callous hardness. If Macbeth is indeed 'soft', she is 'hard'.

She takes control when Macbeth arrives, advising him to 'look like the innocent flower / But be the serpent under't' (I, v, 63-64). When Macbeth hesitates and says he does not want to go through with the murder, she becomes sharp-tongued and angrily attacks Macbeth's manliness. Her speech about dashing out her baby's brains shocks us. The fact that he is so easily won over shows her strength (and perhaps his willingness to be persuaded). She is practical in making plans for the murder and does not consider consequences.

However, during the murder, Lady Macbeth is not as cool as she seems. She says that she could not have done the deed herself as Duncan reminded her of her father. She also has taken some drink to fortify herself against the horror of the experience.



Lady Macbeth cannot live with her conscience. 'Out, damned spot!' (V, i, 30)

After the murder

Lady Macbeth sees how Macbeth is disturbed by what he has done and once again takes control of practical matters, for example returning the daggers and smearing the guards with the blood of Duncan. She is quite matter-of-fact about the blood on her hands and says ironically, 'A little water clears us of this deed' (II, ii, 67). However, upon the discovery of the murdered Duncan, and Macbeth's surprise announcement that he has killed the guards, Lady Macbeth faints.

When we next see Macbeth and Lady Macbeth together, in Act III, Scene ii, we get a clearer picture of how she is coping. In a small but revealing aside, she admits that 'Naught's had, all's spent'. Her state of mind is one of 'doubtful joy'. She keeps these fears from Macbeth, however, and comforts him as he reveals his own suffering of 'terrible dreams'. In the banquet scene,



(V, i, 37-41)

once again, but not so confidently, Lady Macbeth takes on the strong, controlling role. She sees no ghost, and chides Macbeth for his lack of manliness. 'When all's done you look but on a stool' (III, iv, 66–67). When things get totally out of hand, she dismisses the guests.

From then, Lady Macbeth fades from the play until the sleepwalking scene when her madness is manifest.

In this scene, Lady Macbeth's actions as well as her words take on a special significance. We are privy to the workings of her mind which for most of the play have been hidden behind a harsh, determined and cold exterior. She is clearly not as strong as we first thought. She keeps light by her continuously, whereas earlier she worked in the dark. She rubs her hands when earlier the blood did not bother her. She remembers all the murders, even those she had no part in, and she is haunted by these memories. The guilt has come to the surface. Shortly afterwards she dies, probably 'by self and violent hands'.

Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 What practical plans does Lady Macbeth make for the murder of Duncan?
- 2 What is Lady Macbeth doing the first time we see her? What is she doing the last time we see her?



(V, i, 42–43)

Understanding

- 3 Explain Lady Macbeth's words. To whom is she speaking?
 - a 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. (I, v, 61–64)
 - b These deeds must not be thought
After these ways; so it will make us mad. (II, ii, 33–34)

Applying

- 4 Choose five of the following adjectives to describe Lady Macbeth's character at various times during the play. Find one example and one quote for each description.

• determined	• practical	• steely
• fearless	• provocative	• persuasive
• deceptive	• mentally fragile	• unimaginative
• agitated	• despairing	• guilt-ridden

Creating

- 5 Imagine that Lady Macbeth's gentlewoman finds a letter that she had left for her husband before she took her life. Write this letter.



(V, i, 52–54)

King Duncan

King Duncan appears in only two scenes and is dead by the end of Act I. The character is based upon a real king, who was considered 'soft and gentle of nature' according to Holinshed. He is important in the play because Macbeth becomes a killer of a king, and kings were seen as having a divine right to rule in England at that time. His death is described as a sin against nature and against God. Macduff describes his killing as breaking open 'the Lord's anointed temple' and '[stealing] the life o' the building' (II, iii, 65–66).



Duncan greeting his 'honour'd hostess', Lady Macbeth (I, vi, 10)

King Duncan is portrayed as an ineffectual ruler. His country is in chaos as the rebels, Macdonwald, and the Thane of Cawdor, together with troops from Norway have joined in an uprising against him. It is only the fierce fighting of Macbeth and Banquo that has saved his kingdom. He also lacks wisdom as he immediately bestows the title of Thane of Cawdor upon Macbeth, commenting ironically that 'he (the former thane) was a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust' (I, iv, 14–15). He is trusting another Thane of Cawdor who is soon to kill him.

Banquo

Banquo and Macbeth are partners in war. They are both present when the witches appear, but it is Banquo who notices them first. He questions them and comments on their strange appearance. They are 'withered and wild' and 'look not like the inhabitants



(I, iv, 27–32)

of the earth' (I, iii, 39–40). Banquo notices his friend's starting at the predictions and then his 'rapt' silence when the first prediction comes true. He is also curious about what may be the future for him. Unlike Macbeth, however, he is wary of the witches and does not fully trust them. He says to Macbeth, 'Oftentimes, to win us to our harm / The instruments of darkness tell us truths / Win us with honest trifles, to betray's / In deepest consequence' (I, iii, 122–125). It is clear that he is troubled by the witches as he has dreamed of them. When Macbeth offers him advancement if he remains on his side, Banquo is cautious. He desires a free conscience and a loyal allegiance to the king. Shakespeare contrasts the morality of these two men.

After the murder of King Duncan Banquo is clearly suspicious of Macbeth's involvement. However, he is not prepared to act on this suspicion as he is still hopeful that the future of royal hope for his family may come true. Shortly after he expresses these suspicions, Banquo is killed by Macbeth's thugs. He does appear again in the play as the ghost at the banquet and as the last king in the show of kings presented by the witches to Macbeth.

Macduff

Macduff discovers the murdered Duncan and reminds us of what it is to kill a king. He is totally loyal to the king and is immediately suspicious of Macbeth when he admits to having killed the guards. 'Wherefore did you so?' he asks. He also does not attend the coronation of Macbeth, commenting to Ross, 'Well, may you see things well done there ... Lest our old robes sit easier than our new' (II, iv, 37–38). He also

does not attend the banquet for the newly crowned king and queen. Macduff is proactive in seeking help from Malcolm in England to overcome Macbeth. In his patriotic love of Scotland and a fierce desire to save it, he neglects his wife and children and suffers the tragedy of their brutal deaths. He blames himself for this ('They were all struck for thee') but we cannot blame him. He is a man of deep feeling and rebukes Malcolm who tactlessly says he should 'let grief convert to anger'. It is fitting that Macduff is the one who faces Macbeth in the final showdown and kills him. He is a man of action and few words, loyal to his country and to Malcolm, whom he hails as the new King of Scotland.

Lady Macduff

Lady Macduff appears only once in the scene of her death. This is the most bloody scene in the play and Shakespeare creates much pathos in the interchange between mother and son. Lady Macduff is feisty, critical of her husband and even suggests that he does not love her and their children. 'Wisdom! To leave his wife, to leave his babes / His mansion and his titles, in a place / From whence himself does fly' (IV, ii, 6–8). She even tells her son that his father is dead but he does not believe her. She bravely stands up to the murderers as does her son. We are positioned to contrast this mother and wife with Lady Macbeth who claims she would be prepared to dash out her child's brains rather than fail to murder Duncan. Lady Macduff's death and that of her son is the climax of all the horror in the play.

Malcolm

Malcolm, the eldest son of King Duncan, is named as his heir, the Prince of Cumberland, after the execution of the traitor, Cawdor. However, after his father's murder both he and his brother Donalbain flee because they fear that they will be the next victims. This leaves the way open for Macbeth to become king. It also strikes the audience as a weak action although perhaps a sensible one. The next time we see Malcolm is in Act IV, Scene iii, the longest scene in the play. Macduff is trying to persuade him to return to Scotland to overthrow the tyrant and take up his rightful position on the throne. In a rather strange test, Malcolm at first pretends not to trust Macduff and then lies about his own qualities as a leader, saying he is so full of vices that he is not fit to be king. Eventually,

his black description of himself convinces Macduff that Scotland would be worse off under his rule. Then he admits that all he said was a lie and that he was just testing Macduff's loyalty and integrity. Macduff finds this pretence difficult to fathom and says, 'Such welcome and unwelcome things at once / 'Tis hard to reconcile' (IV, iii, 138–139). Thus Shakespeare presents to us a character less convincing in his nobility and goodness than we would like. When goodness is restored to Scotland in the death of Macbeth and the acclamation of Malcolm as king, we are left not quite satisfied that Malcolm will prove to be a good king.

The witches

While the three weird sisters do not have individual characteristics, they are a very important aspect of the drama. The introduction of Hecate, the goddess of the witches, is probably not Shakespeare's creation, but introduced by another playwright from Shakespeare's time. An Elizabethan audience would believe in the power of witches and indeed be quite terrified of their appearance. The witches open the play and set the atmosphere of evil and equivocation. They have singled Macbeth out as their target and they are planning to meet him. They speak in riddles and use paradox in their rhymes. 'When the battle's lost and won' and 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair'.



A **paradox** is a statement which appears to be contradictory but which tells a truth.

The witches address Banquo and Macbeth. 'Banquo and Macbeth, all hail!' (I, iii, 67)



Act Three
Scene Five

A Scottish heath...



WHY, HOW
NOW, HE CATIE!
YOU LOOK
ANGERLY.

HAVE I
NOT REASON,
BELDAMS AS YOU ARE,
SAUCY, AND OVERBOLD?
HOW DID YOU DARE
TO TRADE AND TRAFFIC
WITH MACBETH,
IN RIDDLES, AND
AFFAIRS OF DEATH:

WHIMPER!

WHINE!

The witches strike a chord with Macbeth, judging from his reaction to their predictions. As characters, they do not cause any of the action of the play as Macbeth chooses freely to take the path of evil. Even though they predict his future, at no time do they suggest how these truths will come true. Macbeth interprets their prophecies as a 'supernatural soliciting' and recognises the ambiguous nature of this invitation. When next they appear they are stirring up trouble (literally) in their cauldron. The ingredients seem somewhat ghoulish and a modern audience is probably entertained rather than horrified by them, but 'finger of birth-strangled babe' is quite disturbing. When Macbeth arrives, the second witch recognises his wickedness. This time, of course, he has proven to be evil because of his deeds and is seeking them out rather than the other way around. Finally, when all their predictions come true, and Macbeth is facing his fate at the hands of Macduff, he describes them as 'these juggling fiends ... that palter with us in a double sense' (V, vi, 58–59).

Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 What is the title given to Macbeth by King Duncan?
- 2 What is the title he gives to his eldest son, Malcolm?

Understanding

- 3 Why is the murder of King Duncan considered to be a sin against nature and God?

Analysing

- 4 Macduff, Banquo and Malcolm are all loyal subjects of King Duncan. Compare the differing responses of these three men to the death of their king. Which do you judge to be the most loyal? Give reasons for your choice.
- 5 Draw a table of contrasting adjectives to describe Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff. Give examples to justify your choices. Choose from the following list. Use additional descriptors if you wish.

- | | | |
|--------------|--------------|--------------------|
| • feisty | • ruthless | • mentally fragile |
| • determined | • brave | • critical |
| • clever | • remorseful | • strong |
| • persuasive | • sarcastic | • delusional |
| • motherly | | |

Strands in action

Core tasks

- 1 In pairs, role-play one of these situations.
 - Lady Macduff attempts to persuade her husband not to leave her and her family, unprotected.
 - Malcolm meets his brother Donalbain in Ireland and persuades him to return to Scotland with him.
 - Lennox and Ross discuss the murders of Macduff's family.
- 2 Create a mind map for either Macbeth or Lady Macbeth. Include detailed links between the major and minor characters in the play.
- 3 Examine the page from the graphic novel depicting Hecate, the goddess of the witches. She is angry that the three witches, without her permission, have 'trade[d] and traffic[ked] with Macbeth'. Design three to five subsequent frames in which Hecate devises suitable punishments for her disobedient witches. Include images and speech bubbles.

Extra tasks

- 1 Design a poster depicting one of the characters in the play. You could use multimedia technology. You may include graphic representations, symbols, drawings or a collage of pictures, actual images from Polanski's film or publicity shots from any drama production. Include descriptive adjectives and key quotes.
- 2 Write a short essay in response to the following statement: 'The minor characters are as important in the play *Macbeth* as Macbeth himself'. Discuss.
- 3 Who is your favourite character? Give reasons for your choice.

The power of the play

Shakespeare's works are still studied 400 years after they were written because of the power of his writing and his deep understanding of human nature. His themes are universal, that is they are still relevant today. Shakespeare was a consummate writer in his use of language to express ideas and feelings.

Themes

Themes are the central ideas of the work. In drama, these are the messages that the dramatist is conveying to us. Because drama is live and the action takes place in front of an audience, the major aim of the dramatist is generally not to present themes to us in explicit ways, but rather to entertain, enlighten and shock. However, themes do emerge from the story, the characters and the language, and often essay topics are based on the themes of the text.

Equivocation

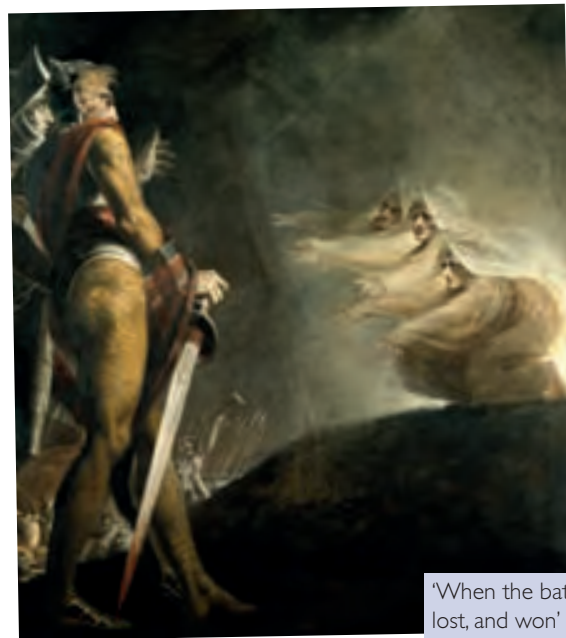
This major theme has several minor threads. It concerns deception, duplicity and treachery. Outside appearances conceal the evil within. Equivocation uses double-talk, epitomised in the way the witches speak in the opening scene and later in their riddling prophecies. The word 'equivocation' is first used by the porter who refers to 'an equivocator that would swear in both the scales against either scale' (II, iii, 8–9).

? DID YOU KNOW...

One of the conspirators of the Gunpowder Plot, the Jesuit priest, Henry Garnet, when interrogated by the authorities, employed the technique of 'equivocation', which meant you could swear a lie under oath and still keep your conscience clear. These 'lies' did not help him as he was executed anyway.



The theme of equivocation is set by the witches when they chant in the opening scene, 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair'. Macbeth's first words echo theirs, 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen'. The opposites seem to be contradictory, but they reflect the idea that evil (foulness) hides behind an honest and good exterior (fairness). Similarly, the 'battle's lost and won' according to the witches.



'When the battle's lost, and won' (I, i, 4)



Equivocation means using ambiguity to conceal the truth.

Appearances and deception

Deceit abounds in this play, because the perfect murder has to be founded on deception. Lady Macbeth recognises this when she warns her husband to 'look like the innocent flower / But be the serpent under't' (I, v, 63–64).

Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth pray for darkness to hide their evil intentions. They pretend allegiance and loyalty to King Duncan while all the time plotting to kill him.

When Macbeth seeks out the witches in order to 'know by the worst means the worst', the prophecies he hears and the apparitions he is shown are ambiguous in their meaning. Because he is susceptible to the double-speak of the witches and they appear to offer him security, he hears what he wants to hear. He is first warned to beware Macduff, then reassured that 'none of woman can harm Macbeth'. He is told that he 'shall never vanquished be, until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him' (IV, i, 79–80). Their equivocation only becomes clear to Macbeth when he is face to face with Macduff in the final Act. (Macduff 'was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped'.)

Thus, equivocation brings Macbeth down. This is fitting since he has used equivocation to hide his own evil intentions, his outward 'fairness' concealing the 'foulness' within.

Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 What is equivocation?

Understanding

- 2 How is Macbeth deceived by the witches' equivocation?

Analysing

- 3 According to the witches the 'battle's lost and won.'
 - a How can it be both 'won' and 'lost'?
 - b Explain how this is an example of equivocation.
- 4 Find five examples of equivocation in the play. Quote the lines and explain the ambiguity.
- 5 Who says the following lines? Explain the double meaning.
 - a What he has lost, noble Macbeth has won. (I, ii, 70)
 - b False face must hide what the false heart doth know. (I, vii, 82)



The three witches represent darkness, chaos and equivocation.

Disorder and chaos

The play begins in disorder, with witches, thunder and lightning, and the 'hurly-burly' of war and rebellion. Order seems to be restored when Macbeth and Banquo defeat the rebels. At least Duncan naively thinks that this is so and he quickly gives the title of the traitor, Thane of Cawdor, to another traitor-in-waiting, Macbeth.

Once Macbeth commits murder, he upsets the spiritual and natural order of the world. The crime of regicide goes against the very fabric of Scottish society where the king is seen as God's representative. Macbeth, himself, knows that he will turn the world upside down by killing Duncan and that Duncan's virtues will 'plead like angels' if he is killed. Lady Macbeth prays to the spirits to 'unsex' her as she is aware that she needs to suppress her naturally feminine and compassionate side in order to participate in murder. This unnatural behaviour is reflected in the strange disorder that occurs the night of Duncan's murder, such as the owl crying throughout the night, the earth shaking and even, as described by Ross and the old man, Duncan's horses eating each other.

Of course the chaos that is created by Macbeth spreads to the point where Scotland itself seems 'almost afraid to know itself' according to Ross, who brings the news of the heinous murder of Macduff's family to him. Order cannot be restored until the tyrant is killed and Macduff salutes Malcolm as the new King.

Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 List the examples of unnatural events that occur on the night of Duncan's death (II, iii and iv).

Understanding

- 2 What is the significance of the occurrence of these unnatural events?

Evaluating

- 3 As a class, discuss the following question.

Does Shakespeare leave us confident that an orderly peace will now be restored with the coronation of Malcolm?

Creating

- 4 Design a multimedia presentation of the chaos that occurs on the night King Duncan is murdered. Include at least one of the unnatural events listed in Question 1. Use an appropriate selection of music and sound effects as background to your presentation.



Lady Macbeth overcome by remorse. 'What, will these hands never be clean?' (V, i, 37)

to turn back by saying he 'is in blood / Stepped so far, that, should [he] wade no more / Returning were as tedious as go o'er' (III, iv, 135–137).

When he finally faces Macduff, he does not want to fight him as his 'soul is too much charged / With blood of [his] already' (V, vi, 44–45). So even though he appears to have grown into a hardened man immune to guilt, his conscience cannot be ignored. Finally, in the last Act, Macbeth recognises that his life is meaningless, 'a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing' (V, v, 26–28). It is as if the conscience he has ignored has stripped him of any hope of redemption.

Conscience and guilt

The play is a study of the guilt that haunts both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. While it is clear that before the murder Lady Macbeth experiences few qualms, Macbeth is full of doubt. Nevertheless, he seems to argue that he would do the deed if he could be assured it would be over and done with.

Immediately after the murder, guilt plagues Macbeth, but his wife still feels no regret. Contrast the way they talk about the blood on their hands. Macbeth imagines that were he to plunge his hands into the ocean, the green of the ocean would become completely red. In contrast, Lady Macbeth believes, 'a little water cleans us of this deed' (II, ii, 67). Macbeth also sees his killing of conscience as a murdering of sleep which is reflected in the 'terrible dreams' he suffers later on. This notion of sleep, 'the season of all natures', also haunts Lady Macbeth who goes mad because of her conscience and expresses this guilt in the sleepwalking scene. She even feels guilt for the crimes she did not commit. Macbeth goes from crime to crime in an attempt to defend his position and push aside the pangs of conscience. However, he finds they cannot be ignored as the apparition of the ghost of Banquo demonstrates. He tries to explain his inability

Breakaway tasks

Understanding

- 1 Find two quotes that illustrate the idea of conscience being washed clear. Who says the words? Explain the significance.
- 2 Find two quotes that illustrate the way a guilty conscience can destroy the peacefulness of sleep. Who says the words? Explain the significance.
- 3 Name at least two characters, apart from Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, who feel guilt for their actions. Why do they feel guilty?
- 4 Why is Lady Macbeth destroyed by guilt?
- 5 Why does Macbeth continue on his path of crime in spite of the guilt he feels?

Evil

The theme of evil is symbolised by two motifs—darkness and blood. Both images abound in the play. This is a play of the night and of blood. Everything evil occurs in darkness. Once evil occurs it spreads and consumes the country. At times it seems that there is no way of overcoming this evil. The opening two scenes

illustrate this idea of evil even before the murder of Duncan takes place. First we have the 'instruments of darkness'. Then we have the bloody images of war.

Once Macbeth encounters the witches he recognises the evil that is tempting him. There is a struggle between his desire to remain true and good and the horrible images of the 'fantastical' murder which come to his mind. After the murder of Duncan, Macbeth embarks on a bloody path of evil where he does not even think before he commits his evil deeds.



In literary works a **motif** is a recurring symbol that is used to reflect or emphasise a theme or idea in the play or narrative. For example, darkness and blood are motifs for evil. Shakespeare was a master at using motifs to signify his themes and ideas.



'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?' (II, ii, 63)

QUESTION DID YOU KNOW...

The motif of darkness

There are very few scenes that are bathed in light. On the night of Duncan's murder Banquo notices that it is a starless night. Macbeth asks for this darkness to hide his evil, 'Stars hide your fires / Let not light see my black and deep desires' (I, iv, 51–52). Lady Macbeth also prays for 'thick night' and 'the blanket of the dark' to hide her deeds. Macbeth calls the witches 'secret, black and midnight hags' (IV, i, 47).

The motif of blood

The wounded Captain who tells the story of the battle in the second scene is covered in blood. He describes in bloody detail how Macbeth kills the rebel Macdonwald. His sword 'smoked with bloody execution'. As Macbeth makes his way to Duncan's chamber, he imagines a blood-stained dagger before his eyes pointing the way to the murder scene. Even though the death of Duncan takes place off stage, his blood is clearly evident on the hands of both Macbeth who killed him and Lady Macbeth who took the daggers back. Blood runs freely and cannot be removed even with the waters of the oceans, nor can the smell be removed by 'all the perfumes of Arabia'. The most vivid image of blood as a symbol of evil is expressed by Macbeth when he admits he is immersed in a river of it and cannot turn back. 'I am in blood / Stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more / Returning were as tedious as go o'er' (III, v, 135–137).

Roman Polanski's film, *Macbeth* was criticised for its excessively bloody violence when it was released in 1971. Images of blood abound in the murder scenes, reflecting Shakespeare's imagery. Critics explained the focus on violence by linking the film to Polanski's personal life. Two years before the film was released, Polanski's pregnant wife Sharon Tate and a group of friends were murdered by Charles Manson and other members of the 'Manson family'.

Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 What is a motif?
- 2 Find three quotes which show how darkness is used as a motif for evil.
- 3 Find three quotes which show how blood is used as a motif for evil.

Analysing

- 4 How is evil finally defeated in the play?

Creating

- 5 Create a poster advertising a production of *Macbeth* in which you use the image of blood and/or the image of darkness to represent the theme of evil in the play.

Language

While the play by its nature is full of dramatic action and suspense, it is also a text created in words. Shakespeare was an actor who played significant roles in his own plays, but above all, he was a poet who wrote plays. His lasting success as a writer is due largely to his skill with language. *Macbeth* is written in iambic pentameter with two scenes in prose, the porter's scene and the sleepwalking scene. The first of these involves a character of a lower class and his speech is full of bawdy humour; the second is the rambling thoughts of a woman who has lost her mind.

! DID YOU KNOW...

The play is written in blank verse using iambic pentameter: iambic pentameter is simply a line of verse with five stresses or beats—'de *dum*, de *dum*, de *dum*, de *dum*, de *dum*'. An example of this is Macbeth's first line in the play, 'So *foul* and *fair* a day I have not seen'.

Shakespeare's language abounds with vivid imagery (metaphors and similes), quick and tense dialogue, thought-provoking soliloquies and asides, and dramatic irony. He engages his audience and his readers with his extraordinary skill as a writer.

Because Shakespeare uses blank verse with usually ten syllables a line, he often uses contractions or abbreviations to fit the rhythm. For example, 'Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't' (II, ii, 12–13). The contraction is 'done't' for 'done it'. Another example is in Macbeth's second soliloquy, 'If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly' (I, vii, 1–2). The contraction here is 'tis' for 'it is' and 'twere' for 'it were'.

Structure and suspense

Shakespeare constructs suspense using vivid language in order to engage his audience. In particular, he opens the play with the witches against a scary background of a foggy heath with thunder and lightning. This opening uses quick and tense exchanges, questions and repetition to create an atmosphere of tension and intrigue. 'When shall we three meet again?' The scene immediately following involves a bleeding Captain who tells a gory tale of Macbeth's success in the recent battle. This scene also begins with a question, 'What bloody man is this?' In fact, the first four scenes begin



Polanski creates an eerie atmosphere in his version of *Macbeth*.

with a question. By using this language, Shakespeare creates mystery and encourages the audience to keep watching as the drama unfolds. The final scene of *Macbeth* concludes the violence we have witnessed on stage with a resolution, but the image we are left with is the severed head of Macbeth which Macduff raises for all to see. This final bloody image closes the circle of the violence in the play, reminding the audience of the journey of evil that we have been following.

Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 Quote the opening lines of the first four scenes of the play.

Understanding

- 2 Explain the purpose of each of these questions.
- 3 Why do you think Shakespeare sets his opening scene on a foggy heath with thunder and lightning?

Analysing

- 4 What do you imagine would be the effect on an audience if the first two scenes were reversed? Which order do you prefer? Explain your preference.
- 5 Examine the opening scene of a popular film, such as one of the Harry Potter films or another film of your choice. How is suspense created? Examine the final scene of your chosen film. How does the director leave the audience feeling?



Imagery

Imagery is the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings and thoughts. When we read language expressed imaginatively, the meaning comes from what the images suggest to us, rather than their literal or exact meaning. For example, when Macbeth says his 'seated heart' is 'knock[ing] at his ribs', we know this is physiologically impossible, but the image certainly expresses the degree of terror he feels.

There are many different kinds of imagery, the most familiar being metaphors, similes and personification. Both metaphors and similes are poetic devices which compare two things. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing is described in terms of another, for example, 'Life's but a walking shadow' (V, v, 24). A simile describes two things as 'like' one another; for example, '[Duncan's] gashed stabs looked like a breach in nature' (II, iii, 110). Personification is attributing human qualities to things that are not human. For example, Scotland is described as a person when Macduff says, 'our country ... weeps, it bleeds, and each new day / A gash is added to her wounds' (IV, iii, 40–41).

Other types of imagery are alliteration and assonance. These poetic devices repeat sounds to achieve particular effects. Alliteration repeats consonants (for example, 'fair is foul') and assonance repeats vowel sounds (for example, 'Double, double, toil and trouble'). Sometimes, imagery appeals to our sense of sight, sometimes to our sense of hearing and sometimes to our sense of touch or smell.

The metaphor of clothing

The metaphor of clothing and how it suits the person is used extensively to show how Macbeth has wrongfully become king and abuses this role once he is king.

'Now does he feel his title hang loose about him' (V, iii, 20–21)



When first he is honoured with the new title of Thane of Cawdor, he asks 'Why do you dress me in borrowed robes?' (I, iii, 106–107). After the murder of Duncan, Macduff expresses his misgivings about Macbeth assuming the title of King of Scotland, saying 'Lest our old robes sit easier than our new' (II, iv, 39). Later, when the tyrant is facing defeat and has lost control over his followers who are deserting him, Caithness and Angus, two Scottish lords, discuss Macbeth's decline in authority. Caithness: 'He cannot buckle his distempered cause / Within the belt of rule' (V, ii, 15–16). Angus: 'Now does he feel his title / Hang loose about him like a giant's robe / Upon a dwarfish thief' (V, ii 20–22). This extended metaphor of clothing serves to remind the audience of the importance of the position of a king, and that a tyrant such as Macbeth does not deserve the title or the position.

Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 What is a simile?
- 2 What is a metaphor?

Understanding

- 3 Find one example of a simile in *Macbeth* and explain it.
- 4 Find one example of a metaphor in *Macbeth* and explain it.

Analysing

- 5 After the murder of Duncan, Macbeth uses the imagery of sleep to describe his feelings, 'Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care, / The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath' (II, ii, 36–37). To what three things is sleep being compared? Explain the comparison.

Creating

- 6 Choose two of the following images and design a visual representation of each image. You may use computer technology to create your image, or you may draw, paint or sketch your image.

Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under't (I, v, 63–4)

Come seeing night / Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day. (III, ii, 46–47)

I am in blood / Stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more / Returning were as tedious as go o'er. (III, iv, 135–137)

Out out brief candle! (V, v, 23)

Soliloquies

The use of soliloquies in Shakespearean drama is effective in creating an inner life for the character. In tragedy, it is especially important as often the hero or anti-hero is plotting evil and therefore does not want the other characters to know his plans. In *Macbeth*, we also learn of the internal struggle the protagonist has with his soul when he is debating whether or not to kill Duncan. Macbeth has two soliloquies in Act I, one in Act II, one in Act III, and then no more until the final Act. Each time Macbeth speaks in this way, he is speaking his thoughts directly to the audience and this helps to establish some sympathy for him. It is interesting to note that in Act IV, when he is acting brutally and callously with no thought or hesitation, Macbeth has no soliloquies and the audience loses sympathy for him.

Macbeth's soliloquies reveal his intense imagination—the language and rhythms are compelling and follow the see-saw nature of his thoughts. For example, Macbeth's opening soliloquy, 'This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good' (I, iii, 129–130), swings from one idea to another, using antitheses (opposites) to show how Macbeth cannot decide if the witches' news is good or bad. It gives us vivid images of the fear and horror created by Macbeth's imagined murder of his king. 'If good, why do I yield to that suggestion / Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair / And make my seated heart knock at my ribs / Against the use of nature?' (133–136).

This prevarication and doubt is expressed further in the second soliloquy, when he debates, 'If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly' (I, vii, 1–2).

This soliloquy relies cleverly on the repetition of the past participle 'done' in order to highlight Macbeth's desire for the deed to be 'over and done with'.

Macbeth speaks again in soliloquy when he hallucinates and sees a blood-spattered dagger pointing the way to Duncan's chamber. This soliloquy shows Macbeth's heightened imagination as he treads the path towards evil. Macbeth's final soliloquies occur in the last act of the play. The first is full of despair and a longing for death, 'I have lived long enough: my way of life / is fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf' (V, iii, 22–23). The second is prompted by his wife's death, 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow / Creeps in his petty pace from day to day' (V, v, 19–20).

The only other characters who speak a soliloquy are Banquo at the beginning of Act III, and Lady Macbeth after she receives her husband's letter and again shortly afterwards when she knows Duncan is coming to their castle. Banquo is revealing his suspicions of Macbeth. In the first of Lady Macbeth's soliloquies, she expresses her awareness of her husband's failings whom she says is 'too full o' the milk of human kindness' (I, v, 15). In the second soliloquy, she is praying to the spirits to 'unsex [her] here' so that she can steel herself to the murder and remain unfeeling and callous.

Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 What is a soliloquy?

Understanding

- 2 Why are soliloquies important in the development of a character in the play?

Applying

- 3 Identify each of the soliloquies in the play. Create a table which outlines who said each one and when, the important idea or theme being expressed, and its significance for both the character and the play as a whole.

Analysing

- 4 Examine Macbeth's first soliloquy, 'This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good' (I, iii, 129–130). In this soliloquy, Macbeth is debating whether the witches' news is good or bad.
 - a Quote the images which suggest that the witches promise good things and quote the images that suggest evil things.
 - b How is Macbeth feeling at this time?
- 5 Examine Lady Macbeth's first soliloquy, 'Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be / What thou art promised' (I, v, 12–28).
 - a What criticisms does she make about her husband's character? Quote examples.
 - b Why is she anxious for her husband to arrive at the castle?

Dramatic irony

Dramatic irony occurs when a character says something that has one meaning for the character and another for the audience. Irony is used for dramatic effect in Shakespearean plays and to create tension. Because Duncan is naïve and unaware that he is doomed, his comments about the traitor, the Thane of Cawdor seem ironic, particularly as we know that Macbeth is planning to betray him. He says of Cawdor, the traitor, 'There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face / He was a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust' (I, iv, 12–15).



Immediately after this Macbeth enters and Duncan greets him warmly, 'O worthiest cousin'. This entry and Duncan's words create irony. Later, when Lady Macbeth speaks of the preparations for the arrival of the King at Glamis Castle, she says ironically to her husband, 'He that's coming / Must be provided for' (I, v, 64–65). In the following scene, when she welcomes Duncan under her roof, her speech is full of irony.

When Duncan and Banquo arrive at Glamis Castle, both comment on the beauty and peace that

surrounds the castle, unaware of the evil plans taking place inside. 'This castle has a pleasant seat' (I, vi, 1) notes Duncan. Banquo speaks of the 'temple-haunting martlet' (I, vi, 4) a bird, which makes its nest in places where 'the air is delicate' (I, vi, 10). The irony is that the castle, of course, is not a pleasant place for either of them.



'This castle has a pleasant seat' (I, vi, 1)

Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 What is dramatic irony?

Understanding

- 2 Explain how Duncan's comments about the traitorous Thane of Cawdor and then his greeting to Macbeth is an example of the use of dramatic irony by Shakespeare.
- 3 Why is irony an effective technique for Shakespeare to use in *Macbeth*?

Analysing

- 4 Find three other examples of the use of dramatic irony in the play. Explain the irony of each example and why it has been used.

A guide to writing a text response

Responding to a text as rich as *Macbeth* requires careful thought and planning. When faced with a text response question, use the following guide to help you to present your ideas in a clearly structured and cohesive response.

To begin any text response, first consider the topic. For example:

'Macbeth and Lady Macbeth commit monstrous acts, but they are not monsters. Discuss.'

- 1 Highlight or underline the key words of the topic, and define them, for example 'monstrous acts' and 'monsters'.
- 2 Reword the topic. For example, 'Macbeth and Lady Macbeth commit outrageous crimes against humanity. However, they are not themselves totally inhuman.'
- 3 Tease out the implications of the topic. Unpack all the possible interpretations.
- 4 Form your opinion. You do not have to wholly agree or wholly disagree. The word 'discuss' means to consider all sides.

- 5 Brainstorm all the examples and quotes you may need.
- 6 Compose your introduction carefully. It should include Shakespeare's name, the title of the play, a clear statement of your opinion and an indication of the aspects you will cover. Do not, however, say, 'In this essay I will cover this and this and this'.



When writing a text response use **formal language** and **present tense**. Do not use the personal pronoun 'I'. Quote short phrases and embed the phrase into your sentence or quote no more than two lines at a time.

- 7 Write topic sentences for each of the subsequent paragraphs. There should be three to four body paragraphs (more if you like).
- 8 The conclusion should sum up your argument sharply and concisely. Do not just repeat everything you have written in the body of the essay. It is a good idea to end with an appropriate quote.

Here is a sample outline of a text response.

Sample introduction

Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* presents his audience with two protagonists who early in the play commit the most heinous of crimes, the murder of a king. This act and the callous acts that follow stamp these two characters as monsters, that is inhuman and wicked creatures. Of course, Lady Macbeth's monstrosities are confined to the first murder. Macbeth, on the other hand, sweeps from one vicious killing to another. At the end of the play, Malcolm describes Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as 'this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen' (V, viii, 108). Whether his judgement is accurate is debatable as we have seen the inner workings of the minds and imaginations of both Macbeth and his wife. Thus their consciences and their guilt mean that we cannot define them as true inhuman monsters.

Sample topic sentence 1

At the beginning of the play, Macbeth is noble, brave and loyal, characteristics that do not stamp him as a monster.

Sample topic sentence 2

At first, Macbeth's conscience makes him fully aware of the horror of the murder he is contemplating.

Sample topic sentence 3

However, Lady Macbeth, Macbeth's accomplice, has no qualms about committing murder, even though she is not able to do the bloody deed herself.

Sample topic sentence 4

After the murder of Duncan, Macbeth ruthlessly embarks on a path of monstrous crimes, while Lady Macbeth suffers from a guilty conscience.

Sample conclusion

To be a monster requires one to be absolutely without conscience. It is clear from Macbeth's constant internal reflections and anguished prevarications that he is no monster. Yet he does become hardened by his horrible crimes and seems to have lost all sense of conscience except at the very end when he considers the pointlessness of all he has achieved. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, lacks all feeling and conscience at the beginning and becomes increasingly disturbed by guilt. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude that they are both monsters as they are shown by Shakespeare to have human feelings.

Additional topics

- 1 'The play *Macbeth* is more about the consequences of murder than it is about the motives for murder.' Discuss.
- 2 'Look like the innocent flower but be the serpent under't'. Shakespeare shows in his play *Macbeth* how evil hides behind a pleasant exterior. How successful is Macbeth in deceiving others?
- 3 Lady Macbeth seems at the beginning to be a much stronger character than Macbeth. Explain the changes in her and the changes in their relationship.
- 4 'The world of *Macbeth* is dark and full of evil. Even the good characters, like Macduff, Malcolm and Banquo do not convince us that goodness can be restored.' Do you agree?
- 5 'Macbeth and Lady Macbeth bring about their own destruction because their ambition blinds them.' Do you agree?
- 6 'We are horrified by Macbeth's violent and destructive course of action, yet strangely enough, we never lose sympathy for him.' Do you agree with this judgement of Macbeth?

Strands in action

Core tasks

1 With a partner, create your own modern murder story or play using characters based on those in *Macbeth*. Your story should have the following ingredients:

- a supernatural or spooky scene
- an ambitious male character who wants advancement in his career and commits a violent murder
- a wife who dominates him
- at least three quotes from Shakespeare's play (you can modernise the wording).

Firstly, make decisions about the setting, the time and the names of the characters and their roles. Decide whether you want to write a play or a story. Then organise the stages in the story—the beginning, the middle and the end. If it is a play, this will mean three main scenes. After you have made these decisions, brainstorm the ideas and events in the story. The most important part of the story is the beginning. Practise a few different openings before you choose the best. Try to balance description with dialogue and remember to begin each new exchange of speech on a new line. If you are writing a play, remember to include stage directions.

2 Read carefully Macbeth's soliloquy (II, I, 33–64) from 'Is this a dagger I see before me' to 'That summons me to heaven or to hell' and answer the following questions.

The soliloquy occurs just before Macbeth enters Duncan's chamber to kill him.

a Identify these elements:

- the number of questions asked
- to whom or what is Macbeth speaking (Hint: Macbeth says 'thee' or 'you'. Who or what is this?)
- the senses Macbeth uses—quote a line for each of the senses referred to
- three personal pronouns.

b How do the questions at the beginning of the soliloquy create dramatic tension?

c Quote the line where you think the vision of the dagger has disappeared.

d Explain Macbeth's meaning, 'Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going' (42)

e Explain the last three lines of the soliloquy. What is a 'knell'? What two words does it rhyme with?

3 Write a carefully constructed essay on one of the above topics on the previous page. Use quotes and examples from the text to support your view. Your essay should have an introduction, three body paragraphs and a conclusion.

Extra tasks

1 There are other important themes in *Macbeth*, such as ambition and power. Choose one of these themes and create a mind map which illustrates how this theme is explored in the play.

2 In pairs, perform the soliloquy analysed in Core task 2, using props, sounds and visual effects. Use appropriate music and digital images as a background to the speech.

3 Turn your story from Core task 1 into a graphic novel, a photo story or film using a digital camera and any multimedia software to create the images.

4 In pairs, interview either Macbeth or Lady Macbeth as part of a psychological study of crime and guilt that you are compiling.

5 View the murder scene from the 1983 BBC version of *Macbeth* (director, Jack Gold; starring Nicol Williamson) and the same scene from Polanski's 1971 film, starring Jon Finch. This scene is the cinematic version of Shakespeare's Act II, Scene ii. Note the decisions made by the directors in their interpretations of the scene. Compare the two versions. Include details such as choice of actors, setting, musical score, filming techniques and costume. Which version did you prefer and why?