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Best of luck in your exams,

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*Qualified and experienced teacher, tutor and
examiner.*



Contents

Introduction.....	3
Revision Checklist.....	5
Plot summary	6
Character summaries	7
Themes.....	9
Form	11
Structure	12
Language.....	13
Dramatisation.....	15
Historical context	18
Vocabulary list	20
Quote list.....	21
Past questions	22
2017	23
2018	24
2019	26
2020	27
2021	29
2022	31
2023	32
2024	34
Sample 1	36
Sample 2.....	37
Sample 3.....	38
Appendix 1: recommended further resources	40
Appendix 2: privacy notice	41



Introduction

(Please note: this is the concise version of this revision guide. An extended version is also available from [GCSEEnglish.uk](https://www.gcseenglish.uk).)

This last-minute revision guide is designed to help you prepare for the *Macbeth* question in your AQA GCSE English Literature Paper 1 exam (8702/1).

Macbeth is assessed in Section A of the exam, and you will have 52.5 minutes to complete your answer. If you have 25% extra time, your total time for this section will be 65 minutes and 37.5 seconds (rounded to 66 minutes for practical purposes).

The exam question will present you with an extract from the play followed by a question asking you to explore a theme or character. You must analyse both the extract and the play as a whole.

Since this is a last-minute revision guide, it does not contain every possible piece of information about *Macbeth* or the exam. However, it covers the key elements needed for success, helping you focus on what truly matters in the final days before your exam.

How Many Marks Are Available?

Your *Macbeth* essay is worth 30 marks for content and analysis. Additionally, 4 marks are awarded for AO4 (technical accuracy), which assesses spelling, punctuation, and grammar. This means your response is worth a total of 34 marks. To maximise your marks, make sure to write clearly and accurately, using a formal academic style and correct punctuation.

The Four Key Revision Tasks

If you are feeling overwhelmed, focus on these four essential revision tasks:

1. **Read the text** – Even if you have studied *Macbeth* in class, take time to re-read key scenes. Understanding the plot, characters, and themes will allow you to engage confidently with any question.
2. **Memorise key quotations** – You need to reference the play accurately in your response. Aim to memorise at least 10 key quotations, ensuring they



cover characters, themes, and dramatic moments. Shorter quotes are easier to remember and can be used flexibly in different essays.

3. **Read model answers** – Studying high-quality example essays, such as those available from [GCSEEnglish.uk](https://www.gcseenglish.uk), will help you understand how to structure your response, use evidence effectively, make links to relevant context and develop your analysis.
4. **Complete timed essay practice** – The best way to prepare for the exam is to practise writing full answers under timed conditions. Use a stopwatch and stick to the allotted time to simulate exam conditions. Practising within time limits will improve your confidence, speed, and ability to structure your ideas clearly.

Note: you should hand write your practise essays on lined A4 paper unless you know that you (or your school) will be typing your exams. If this is the case, practise typing in a blank document with spelling and grammar checking tools turned off.

About the Author

This revision guide was written by Edward Mooney, an experienced teacher, tutor and examiner. He has also written a series of high-quality Grade 9 model answers for the GCSE English exams, which are available for purchase on Amazon and [GCSEEnglish.uk](https://www.gcseenglish.uk).

Final Thoughts

This guide is here to simplify your revision and boost your confidence. While it may not cover every detail, it provides the essential knowledge and skills you need to approach the exam with clarity and focus.

Stay calm, use your revision time wisely, and remember: preparation is the key to success.

Best of luck in your exam!



Revision Checklist

<input type="checkbox"/>	Re-read the text in full.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read a modern English version of the text.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Watch a good film/theatre adaptation.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read and remember the plot summary.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read and remember the character summaries.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read and remember information about the text's main themes.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read and remember information about the text's form, structure and language.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read and remember information about the text's historical context.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read and remember information about the dramatisation of the text.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read and memorise key vocabulary.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read and memorise key quotes.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read model answers.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Write timed essays using past questions.	



Plot summary

William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a tragedy exploring ambition, fate, guilt, and the supernatural. It follows Macbeth, a Scottish nobleman whose unchecked ambition leads to his downfall.

The play begins with three Witches prophesying that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor and later King of Scotland. When the first prediction comes true, Macbeth's ambition is ignited. Encouraged by Lady Macbeth, he murders King Duncan, framing the guards. Duncan's sons flee, making them seem guilty, and Macbeth is crowned king.

Fearing Banquo's descendants will inherit the throne, Macbeth orders Banquo and his son Fleance killed. Banquo dies, but Fleance escapes. At a banquet, Macbeth is haunted by Banquo's ghost, raising suspicion. Seeking guidance, Macbeth visits the Witches again. They warn him about Macduff and give misleading prophecies that make Macbeth believe he is invincible. Becoming increasingly ruthless, Macbeth orders the slaughter of Macduff's family.

Lady Macbeth, overcome with guilt, descends into madness and takes her own life. Meanwhile, Malcolm's army advances, using Birnam Wood's branches as camouflage, fulfilling the Witches' prophecy. Macduff confronts Macbeth and reveals he was born via caesarean section. Realising his fate is sealed, Macbeth fights but is killed. Malcolm becomes king, restoring order.

Macbeth warns of unchecked ambition and its destructive consequences.



Character summaries

Macbeth

Macbeth is a brave Scottish nobleman, initially loyal to King Duncan. After hearing the Witches' prophecy, ambition consumes him. Encouraged by Lady Macbeth, he murders Duncan and seizes the throne. As king, he grows paranoid and ruthless, ordering more killings to secure his power. Isolated and feared, he fights to the end but is ultimately killed by Macduff. His downfall illustrates the dangers of unchecked ambition.

Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth is ambitious and manipulative, persuading Macbeth to kill Duncan by questioning his masculinity. Initially strong-willed, she later succumbs to guilt, hallucinating blood on her hands. Her descent into madness contrasts with her earlier dominance. Unable to cope, she takes her own life, showing the psychological consequences of crime and ambition.

Banquo

Banquo, a noble general, hears the Witches' prophecy but does not act on it. The Witches predict his descendants will rule, making him a threat to Macbeth. Macbeth has him murdered, but his son, Fleance, escapes. Banquo's ghost later haunts Macbeth, symbolising his guilt. He represents honour, contrasting with Macbeth's ruthless ambition.

Macduff

Macduff, a loyal nobleman, suspects Macbeth's role in Duncan's murder and helps Malcolm overthrow him. Macbeth orders the murder of Macduff's family, fuelling Macduff's revenge. In the final battle, Macduff, born via caesarean section, fulfils the Witches' prophecy and kills Macbeth, restoring justice to Scotland. He embodies loyalty and resistance to tyranny.



King Duncan

Duncan is a just and benevolent king who rewards loyalty. His trust makes him vulnerable, and Macbeth murders him, plunging Scotland into chaos. Duncan's goodness contrasts with Macbeth's tyranny, and his death symbolises the loss of rightful rule and order.

Malcolm

Malcolm, Duncan's eldest son, flees after his father's murder. Initially cautious, he matures into a wise leader. Testing Macduff's loyalty, he later leads the English army to defeat Macbeth and restore order to Scotland. He represents legitimate rule, contrasting with Macbeth's tyranny.

The Witches

The Witches set the play's events in motion by prophesying Macbeth's rise and Banquo's lineage. Speaking in riddles, they manipulate Macbeth with misleading truths. Their presence raises questions about fate and free will. Their cryptic language and eerie presence create the play's dark atmosphere.



Themes

Ambition

Ambition is Macbeth's fatal flaw, leading to his downfall. Encouraged by the Witches and Lady Macbeth, he kills Duncan to seize the throne. His Machiavellian thirst for power turns him into a ruthless tyrant. Lady Macbeth shares his ambition but later succumbs to guilt. Shakespeare presents ambition as both a driving force and a destructive power when unchecked by morality.

Good and Evil

Macbeth's descent into tyranny symbolises ambition's corrupting power. Duncan and Banquo represent goodness, while Macbeth embraces evil under the Witches' influence. Lady Macbeth initially seeks cruelty but later regrets it. Macbeth's downfall highlights that evil is seductive yet self-destructive, reinforcing that virtue ultimately prevails.

The Supernatural

The Witches' prophecies fuel Macbeth's ambition, manipulating him with cryptic messages. Lady Macbeth invokes dark forces to suppress weakness. Macbeth's visions, like Banquo's ghost, reflect his deteriorating mind. Shakespeare blurs reality, creating fear and uncertainty while showing that embracing the supernatural leads to destruction.

Masculinity

Lady Macbeth questions Macbeth's manhood to manipulate him into murder. Macbeth equates masculinity with aggression, but his cruelty makes him a tyrant. Macduff embodies true masculinity, balancing strength with compassion. When Malcolm urges him to "dispute it like a man," Macduff insists he must also "feel it as a man."



Appearances and Reality

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth mask their intentions, echoing the Witches' riddle, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." Macbeth trusts misleading visions, while Banquo remains sceptical. Shakespeare warns that relying on deception leads to downfall, as Macbeth's faith in illusions seals his fate.

Kingship and Tyranny

Shakespeare contrasts rightful kingship with tyranny. Duncan is just and generous, whereas Macbeth's rule is based on fear. Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty by pretending to be corrupt, proving he understands true kingship. Shakespeare suggests a ruler must lead with morality, not ruthless ambition.

Loyalty

Loyalty divides the characters between duty and ambition. Macbeth betrays Duncan, while Banquo remains honourable. Macduff sacrifices everything to restore rightful rule. Lady Macbeth's devotion to Macbeth collapses under guilt. Shakespeare portrays loyalty as noble, while betrayal leads to chaos and ruin.

Guilt

Guilt haunts Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Macbeth hesitates before killing Duncan and later suffers hallucinations. Lady Macbeth, once fearless, becomes obsessed with washing away imaginary blood. Her suicide shows that guilt is inescapable. Shakespeare reveals that even the most ruthless cannot silence their conscience forever.



Form

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* follows the structure of a classical tragedy as outlined in Aristotle's *Poetics* (c335 BC), featuring a noble protagonist with a fatal flaw, dramatic reversals, and catharsis. Its five-act structure, verse, and dramatic techniques enhance its tragic power.

At its core is hamartia, the protagonist's fatal flaw. Macbeth, initially noble, is undone by unchecked ambition. Acting on the Witches' prophecy, he murders King Duncan, setting his downfall in motion. Unlike a villain, he possesses greatness but is destroyed by ambition and manipulation.

Macbeth's antagonist is both external and internal. The Witches plant ambition in his mind, Macduff embodies justice, but Macbeth's greatest enemy is himself. His conscience battles his ambition until paranoia takes over. His psychological torment adds depth, making him a tragic figure rather than a mere tyrant.

Aristotle's concept of catharsis – emotional purging – plays a key role. Initially, Macbeth earns sympathy through his bravery. Even after Duncan's murder, his guilt humanises him. However, as he becomes tyrannical, killing Banquo and Macduff's family, sympathy fades. His final realisation of his fate and inevitable death restores moral order, offering catharsis.

Through its Aristotelian structure, *Macbeth* exemplifies classical tragedy, portraying a noble figure whose hamartia leads to downfall, internal and external struggles, and a resolution that reinforces the consequences of unchecked ambition.



Structure

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* follows **Freytag's Pyramid**, a five-act model of dramatic progression:

1. **Exposition (Act 1)** – The witches' prophecy introduces the central conflict. Macbeth is a noble warrior, but Lady Macbeth manipulates him into considering murder.
2. **Rising Action (Acts 1-2)** – Macbeth's turmoil leads to Duncan's murder. Instead of security, he becomes paranoid, covering his tracks with more violence.
3. **Climax (Act 3)** – Macbeth orders Banquo's murder, but Fleance escapes, keeping the prophecy alive. His vision of Banquo's ghost exposes his instability.
4. **Falling Action (Acts 4-5.7)** – Macbeth misinterprets the witches' new prophecies and becomes ruthless. Lady Macbeth, consumed by guilt, unravels. Malcolm's army advances.
5. **Catastrophe (Act 5.8)** – Macbeth realises he was deceived but fights bravely before being slain by Macduff. Malcolm restores order.

Use of Verse and Prose

Shakespeare's metrical choices reflect character psychology and status:

- **Iambic Pentameter** – Most noble characters speak in unrhymed iambic pentameter, but Macbeth's verse becomes disordered as he descends into paranoia.
- **Trochaic Tetrameter** – The Witches speak in this unsettling rhythm, enhancing their supernatural presence (e.g., "Double, double, toil and trouble").
- **Prose** – Used for lower-status characters and madness. The Porter's scene provides comic relief, while Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking speech signals her breakdown.



Language

Blood

Blood symbolises guilt and violence. After murdering Duncan, Macbeth asks, “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?” (2.2.78-79), showing immediate remorse. Lady Macbeth later hallucinates bloodstains: “Out, damned spot! Out, I say!” (5.1.30). Blood imagery highlights the inescapable consequences of ambition.

Night

Night represents secrecy and evil. Macbeth calls for darkness to hide his thoughts: “Stars, hide your fires; / Let not light see my black and deep desires” (1.4.50-51). Similarly, Lady Macbeth invokes night to conceal murder: “Come, thick night, / And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell” (1.5.49-50). Night imagery reinforces deception and the supernatural.

Milk

Milk symbolises innocence and weakness. Lady Macbeth mocks Macbeth’s reluctance: “too full o’ the milk of human kindness” (1.5.17). She rejects nurturing instincts, vowing she would “have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums, / And dashed the brains out” (1.7.56-58). Milk contrasts compassion with ruthless ambition.

Disguise

Disguise represents deception. Lady Macbeth urges Macbeth to “look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t” (1.5.64-65). Macbeth distrusts others: “There’s daggers in men’s smiles” (2.3.146). Disguise also appears when Malcolm’s army hides behind branches to attack Dunsinane.



Religion

Religious imagery underscores Macbeth's guilt. After Duncan's murder, he cannot pray: "Amen / Stuck in my throat" (2.2.32-33). Macduff describes Scotland's suffering: "each new morn / New widows howl, new orphans cry" (4.3.4-5). Macbeth's failure to emulate saintly King Edward highlights his moral corruption.

Disease

Lady Macbeth describes ambition as an "illness" (1.5.19) and mocks Macbeth as "green and pale" (1.7.37). Macbeth's guilt manifests as a "mind full of scorpions" (3.2.36). Scotland suffers under his rule, described as a sick nation needing healing.

Birds

Birds foreshadow fate. Lady Macbeth links Duncan's arrival to a raven's croak (1.5.37-38). Ross sees Duncan's murder reflected in unnatural events: "A falcon... / Was by a mousing owl hawked at and killed" (2.4.12-13). Macduff mourns his family, calling them "pretty chicks" struck down by a "hell-kite" (4.3.219-221).



Dramatisation

Casting Choices

Casting is a crucial consideration for any production of *Macbeth*, particularly in the portrayal of the three Witches, Macbeth, and Lady Macbeth.

- **The Witches:** The Witches can be played as grotesque, supernatural figures or as more human but sinister manipulators. Some productions, such as Rupert Goold's 2010 film adaptation starring Patrick Stewart, present them as eerie nurses in a war-torn setting, blending the supernatural with the horrors of human conflict. Others, like the 2015 Justin Kurzel adaptation, depict them as ethereal and almost elemental beings, using eerie vocal distortions and slow, deliberate movements to enhance their otherworldly nature.
- **Macbeth:** The casting of Macbeth must balance his initial nobility with his descent into paranoia and tyranny. An actor playing Macbeth must capture his emotional turmoil, particularly in his reaction to the Witches' prophecies: "If good, why do I yield to that suggestion / Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair?" (1.3.133-135). This moment can be performed with visible trembling, a shaking voice, or even a brief pause as if Macbeth is trying to suppress his own dark thoughts.
- **Lady Macbeth:** Lady Macbeth should be played as commanding and persuasive in the early scenes but increasingly fragile and unravelled later on. Her reaction to Duncan's murder – "A little water clears us of this deed" (2.2.70) – could be performed dismissively, with cold pragmatism, or with an edge of hysteria, suggesting she is trying to convince herself as much as Macbeth.

Performance Choices

- **Macbeth's reaction to Fleance's escape:** "Then comes my fit again" (3.4.21) should be performed with a sudden loss of composure – perhaps with Macbeth gripping the arms of a chair, pacing erratically, or even throwing a goblet across the room. A director could highlight his unravelling mind by using a whispered, frantic delivery rather than a shouted outburst.



- **Macbeth's reaction to Lady Macbeth's death:** "She should have died hereafter" (5.5.16) can be played in multiple ways. A detached, almost indifferent tone suggests that Macbeth is emotionally drained, while a bitter, regretful delivery could reveal his guilt. Michael Fassbender in the 2015 film adaptation portrays this moment with quiet resignation, standing motionless in a foggy battlefield, highlighting the weight of his despair.
- **Soliloquies and Asides:** Macbeth's soliloquies provide insight into his inner conflict and moral deterioration. The "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" soliloquy (5.5.18-27) should be delivered with a sense of numb despair, reflecting his complete loss of purpose. A director might have Macbeth deliver this speech with vacant eyes, slumped shoulders, or in a slow, monotone voice to emphasise his emotional detachment.

Staging Choices

Lighting

- **The Witches' Scenes:** Harsh, flickering light – perhaps from torches or lightning flashes – can enhance the eerie atmosphere of the Witches. The 2010 Goold adaptation uses dim, clinical lighting to create a sterile, unsettling environment.
- **Duncan's Murder:** A shift to deep red or complete darkness could symbolise Macbeth's moral descent.
- **The Final Scene:** Malcolm's coronation should be brightly lit to contrast with the gloom of Macbeth's reign, symbolising the return of order.

Sound

- **The Witches' Voices:** Distorted, whispering, or overlapping voices can make their speech unsettling.
- **Macbeth's Internal Conflict:** Echoing effects on lines like "Is this a dagger which I see before me?" (2.1.33) could reflect his fractured psyche.
- **Lady Macbeth's Madness:** A distant, echoing sound of dripping water during her sleepwalking scene could reinforce the motif of guilt.



Visual Effects

- **The Ghost of Banquo:** Some productions opt for an invisible ghost, with only Macbeth reacting, while others use physical staging, such as a bloodied Banquo stepping out of the darkness.
- **The Apparitions:** In the 2015 film, they are depicted as child-like spirits rising from a smoky battlefield, blending reality with the supernatural.

Costume

- **The Witches:** Their costumes can range from traditional ragged robes to modern, unsettling uniforms (as in Goold's adaptation).
- **Macbeth and Lady Macbeth:** Early in the play, they should wear regal, composed outfits, which become increasingly dishevelled as their psychological state deteriorates.

Scenery and Props

- **Minimalist vs. Elaborate Sets:** The 2021 Joel Coen adaptation with Denzel Washington used stark, geometric black-and-white sets, focusing on shadows and contrasts, while other productions opt for grand medieval castles.
- **Blood as a Visual Motif:** Lady Macbeth's handwashing could be enhanced with visible stains that do not disappear, symbolising her inescapable guilt.

The Final Scene: Malcolm Proclaimed King

This moment should be staged to emphasise the restoration of order. A strong, confident delivery of Malcolm's speech, a triumphant swell in music, and a shift to bright, golden lighting can signify hope and stability returning to Scotland.



Historical context

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was written around 1606 during the reign of King James VI and I. The play reflects Jacobean concerns, including witchcraft, kingship, and political instability. Shakespeare drew from historical sources and tailored the play to flatter James while reinforcing contemporary anxieties.

Shakespeare's Life and Theatre

By 1606, Shakespeare was an established playwright, with *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear* already performed. *Macbeth* is faster-paced and more brutal than earlier tragedies, reflecting Jacobean audience preferences. Theatre was central to London's culture, and *Macbeth* was likely performed before King James at court.

Witchcraft and James VI and I

Scotland had severe witch trials, influenced by James's personal obsession. His 1597 book *Daemonologie* reinforced fears that witches threatened society. In *Macbeth*, the Witches embody these fears, manipulating fate and corrupting Macbeth, reinforcing the Jacobean belief that witchcraft led to political chaos.

King James and Scottish History

James became King of England and Scotland in 1603, but English subjects saw him as an outsider. *Macbeth* appeals to him by portraying Scottish history as a warning against regicide. Banquo, whom James claimed as an ancestor, is shown as noble and virtuous, reinforcing James's legitimacy.

The Gunpowder Plot (1605)

The failed Gunpowder Plot heightened fears of treason. *Macbeth* reflects this, showing how regicide leads to chaos. Just as England punished plotters, Macbeth is divinely punished for usurping Duncan, reinforcing James's belief in the Divine Right of Kings.



Women and Religion

Women were expected to be obedient, yet *Macbeth* features powerful, transgressive women. Lady Macbeth's ambition and downfall reflect anxieties about women in power, while the Witches' influence over men unsettled audiences. Religious imagery reinforces Protestant fears – Macbeth's inability to say Amen symbolises his moral corruption.

The Real King Macbeth

The historical Macbeth (1040–1057) was a stable ruler who killed Duncan in battle, not through treachery. Shakespeare exaggerated his villainy to serve King James's interests, reinforcing the idea that usurpers bring destruction.

Conclusion

Macbeth reflects Jacobean fears and political concerns, reinforcing James's authority while addressing themes of witchcraft, treason, and divine justice. Its historical, cultural, and theatrical influences make it one of Shakespeare's most politically charged tragedies.



Vocabulary list

Ambition – Strong desire for power or success.

Antagonist – A character opposing the protagonist.

Aside – A brief remark, heard by the audience but unheard by other characters.

Catharsis – Emotional release felt by the audience.

Divine Right of Kings – The belief that kings rule by God's will.

Duplicity – Deception or double-dealing.

Emasculate – To weaken or deprive of masculinity.

Equivocation – The use of ambiguous language to mislead.

Foreshadowing – Hints at future events in a story.

Guilt – A deep sense of remorse.

Hamartia – A tragic flaw leading to downfall.

Hubris – Excessive pride leading to downfall.

Machiavellian – Cunning, deceitful, and power-hungry.

Nemesis – Retribution or an inescapable downfall.

Omens – Signs of future events, often supernatural.

Patriarchy – A society dominated by men.

Prophecy – A prediction of the future.

Protagonist – The central character in a narrative.

Regicide – The act of killing a king.

Soliloquy – A speech revealing a character's inner thoughts.

Supernatural – Beyond natural laws, often linked to magic.

Treachery – Betrayal of trust or loyalty.

Tragedy – A serious play ending in disaster.

Tyrant – A cruel and oppressive ruler.

Usurp – Seize power unlawfully.



Quote list

1. Witches – “Fair is foul, and foul is fair.” (1.1.12)

Establishes the theme of deception and inversion of moral order.

2. Lady Macbeth – “Yet do I fear thy nature; / It is too full o’th’milk of human kindness.” (1.5.15–16)

Lady Macbeth doubts Macbeth’s ruthlessness, showing her manipulative and ambitious nature.

3. Lady Macbeth – “Unsex me here.” (1.5.40)

Rejects femininity to pursue power, challenging Jacobean gender roles.

4. Macbeth – “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?” (2.2.63–64)

Macbeth realises the permanence of his crime – water cannot cleanse his guilt.

5. Macbeth – “O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!” (3.2.36)

Macbeth’s paranoia and descent into violence – he plans Banquo’s murder.

6. Macduff – “All my pretty chickens and their dam.” (4.3.220)

Macduff expresses devastation upon hearing of his family’s brutal murder, reinforcing Macbeth’s cruelty and tyranny.

7. Lady Macbeth – “Out, damned spot! Out, I say!” (5.1.31)

Contrasts with her earlier dismissal of guilt – she is now consumed by it.

8. Macbeth – “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more. It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.” (5.5.23–27)

Macbeth reflects on the meaningless nature of life, expressing despair and nihilism after Lady Macbeth’s death.

9. Macduff – “Macduff was from his mother’s womb / untimely ripp’d.” (5.8.15–16)

Reveals how Macbeth has been misled by the witches – his downfall is inevitable.

10. Malcolm – “This dead butcher and his fiend-like queen.” (5.9.35)

Summarises how Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are remembered – reinforces their moral corruption.



Past questions

Below are all of the past questions since the first examination of the renewed AQA GCSE English Literature syllabus (8702/1) in 2017. You will also find three sample questions published by the exam board for training purposes but never used as real exams.

In the interests of brevity, mark schemes, examiner reports and grade boundaries are not included in this revision guide. They are readily available to download from AQA.



2017

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

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

LADY MACBETH

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

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

Write about:

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

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



2018

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

At this point in the play, after receiving The Witches' prophecies, Macbeth and Banquo have just been told that Duncan has made Macbeth Thane of Cawdor.

BANQUO

But 'tis strange,
And 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. –
Cousins, a word, I pray you.

MACBETH [Aside]

Two truths are told,
As happy prologues to the swelling act
Of the imperial theme. – I thank you, gentlemen. –
This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
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? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is,
But what is not.

Starting with this moment in the play, explore how Shakespeare presents the attitudes of Macbeth and Banquo towards the supernatural.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents the attitudes of Macbeth and Banquo towards the supernatural in this extract
- how Shakespeare presents the attitudes of Macbeth and Banquo towards the supernatural in the play as a whole.



[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



2019

Read the following extract from Act 1 Scene 2 of *Macbeth* and then answer the question that follows.

At this point in the play, the Captain tells Duncan about Macbeth's part in the recent battle.

CAPTAIN

Doubtful it stood,
As two spent swimmers that do cling together
And choke their art. The merciless Macdonald –
Worthy to be a rebel, for to that
The multiplying villainies of nature
Do swarm upon him – from the Western Isles
Of kerns and galloglasses is supplied,
And Fortune on his damned quarrel smiling,
Show'd like a rebel's whore. But all's too weak,
For brave Macbeth – well he deserves that name –
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
Which smok'd with bloody execution,
Like Valour's minion carv'd out his passage
Till he fac'd the slave,
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th'chaps
And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

Starting with this speech, explore how Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a violent character.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents Macbeth in this extract
- how Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a violent character in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



2020

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

At this point in the play, the Doctor and the Gentlewoman watch Lady Macbeth sleepwalking.

LADY MACBETH Out, damned spot! Out, I say! One, two. Why then 'tis time to do't. Hell is murky. Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account? Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?

DOCTOR Do you mark that?

LADY MACBETH The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now? What, will these hands ne'er be clean? No more o'that, my Lord, no more o'that. You mar all with this starting.

DOCTOR Go to, go to; you have known what you should not.

GENTLEWOMAN She has spoke what she should not, I am sure of that. Heaven knows what she has known.

LADY MACBETH Here's the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. O, O, O.

DOCTOR What a sigh is there! The heart is sorely charged.

GENTLEWOMAN I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body.

DOCTOR Well, well, well –

GENTLEWOMAN Pray God it be, sir.

DOCTOR This disease is beyond my practice; yet I have known those which have walked in their sleep who have died holily in their beds.

LADY MACBETH Wash your hands, put on your night-gown, look not so pale. I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot come out on's grave.

DOCTOR Even so?

LADY MACBETH To bed, to bed; there's knocking at the gate. Come, come, come, come, give me your hand; what's done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed.

'Lady Macbeth is a female character who changes during the play.'

Starting with this moment in the play, explore how far you agree with this view.



Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth in this extract
- how far Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a female character who changes in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



2021

Read the following extract from Act 2 Scene 2 of *Macbeth* and then answer the question that follows.

At this point in the play, Macbeth has murdered Duncan and has returned to Lady Macbeth.

MACBETH

Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more:
Macbeth does murder sleep', the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravelled 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.

LADY MACBETH

What do you mean?

MACBETH

Still it cried, 'Sleep no more' to all the house;
'Glamis hath murdered sleep', and therefore Cawdor
Shall sleep no more: Macbeth shall sleep no more.

LADY MACBETH

Who was it, that thus cried? Why, worthythane,
You do unbend your noble strength to think
So brain-sickly of things. Go get some water
And wash this filthy witness from your hand.
Why did you bring these daggers from the place?
They must lie there. Go carry them and smear
The sleepy grooms with blood.

MACBETH

I'll go no more.
I am afraid to think what I have done;
Look on't again, I dare not.

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.



Starting with this conversation, explore how Shakespeare presents the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents their relationship in this extract
- how Shakespeare presents the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



2022

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

At this point in the play, Macbeth is thinking of his feelings about Banquo.

MACBETH

To be thus is nothing,
But to be safely thus. Our fears in Banquo
Stick deep, and in his royalty of nature
Reigns that which would be feared. 'Tis much he dares,
And to that dauntless temper of his mind,
He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour
To act in safety. There is none but he,
Whose being I do fear; and under him
My genius is rebuked, as it is said
Mark Antony's was by Caesar. He chid the sisters
When first they put the name of king upon me
And bade them speak to him. Then prophet-like,
They hailed him father to a line of kings.
Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown
And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,
Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand,
No son of mine succeeding. If't be so,
For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind;
For them, the gracious Duncan have I murdered,
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace
Only for them, and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common enemy of man,
To make them kings, the seeds of Banquo kings.
Rather than so, come Fate into the list,
And champion me to th'utterance. Who's there?

Starting with this speech, explore how Shakespeare presents Macbeth's fears.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents Macbeth's fears in this speech
- how Shakespeare presents Macbeth's fears in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



2023

Read the following extract from Act 5 Scene 3 of *Macbeth* and then answer the question that follows.

At this point in the play, Macbeth hears that the English army is approaching and asks the Doctor for a report about Lady Macbeth.

MACBETH

Seyton! – I am sick at heart,
When I behold – Seyton, I say! – this push
Will cheer me ever or disseat me now.
I have lived long enough. My way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.
Seyton!

Enter SEYTON

SEYTON

What's your gracious pleasure?

MACBETH

What news more?

SEYTON

All is confirmed, my lord, which was reported.

MACBETH

I'll fight till from my bones my flesh be hacked.
Give me my armour.

SEYTON

'Tis not needed yet.

MACBETH

I'll put it on;
Send out more horses; skirr the country round.
Hang those that talk of fear. Give me mine armour.
How does your patient, doctor?

DOCTOR

Not so sick, my lord,
As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies



That keep her from her rest.

MACBETH

Cure her of that.

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?

Starting with this conversation, explore how far Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a male character who changes during the play.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents Macbeth in this conversation
- how far Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a male character who changes in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



2024

Read the following extract from Act 1 Scene 7 of *Macbeth* and then answer the question that follows.

At this point in the play, Macbeth has decided that he is no longer prepared to carry out the plan to murder King Duncan.

LADY MACBETH

Was the hope drunk
Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?
And wakes it now, to look so green and pale
At what it did so freely? From this time
Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting I dare not wait upon I would,
Like the poor cat i' th' adage?

MACBETH

Prithee, peace.
I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none.

LADY MACBETH

What beast was't, then,
That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And, to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man. Nor time nor place
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both:
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now
Does unmake you. I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this.

MACBETH

If we should fail?

LADY MACBETH



We fail?
But screw your courage to the sticking-place,
And we'll not fail.

Starting with this speech, explore how far Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a strong female character.

Write about:

- how far Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a strong female character in this conversation
- how far Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a strong female character in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



Sample 1

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

At this point in the play Lady Macbeth is speaking. She has just received the news that King Duncan will be spending the night at her castle.

LADY MACBETH

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

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

Write about:

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

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



Sample 2

Read the following question from Act 5 Scene 3 of *Macbeth* and then answer the question that follows.

At this point in the play Macbeth is under siege from the English army.

MACBETH

Bring me no more reports; let them fly all:
Till Birnam wood remove to Dunsinane,
I cannot taint with fear. What's the boy Malcolm?
Was he not born of woman? The spirits that know
All mortal consequences have pronounc'd me thus:
'Fear not, Macbeth; no man that's born of woman
Shall e'er have power upon thee.' Then fly, false thanes,
And mingle with the English epicures:
The mind I sway by and the heart I bear
Shall never sag with doubt nor shake with fear.

Enter a Servant

The devil damn thee black, thou cream-fac'd loon!
Where got'st thou that goose look?

Starting with this speech, explain how far you think Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a hero.

Write about:

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

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



Sample 3

Read the following extract from Act 1 Scene 7 of *Macbeth* and then answer the question that follows.

At this moment in the play, Macbeth has left the banquet he and his wife are holding for Duncan, and his wife has come to find him.

LADY MACBETH

He has almost supp'd. Why have you left the chamber?

MACBETH

Hath he ask'd for me?

LADY MACBETH

Know you not, he has?

MACBETH

We will proceed no further in this business.
He hath honour'd me of late, and I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon.

LADY MACBETH

Was the hope drunk
Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?
And wakes it now to look so green and pale
At what it did so freely? From this time,
Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour,
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting I dare not wait upon I would,
Like the poor cat i'th'adage?

MACBETH

Prithee, peace.
I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none.

Starting with this moment in the play, explore how Shakespeare presents the marriage between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

Write about:



- how Shakespeare presents their relationship at this moment in the play
- how Shakespeare presents their marriage in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



Appendix 1: recommended further resources

Model Answers



Flashcards



CGP Resources



AQA Resources





Appendix 2: privacy notice

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