



MACBETH

MACBETH'S ROLE IN THE PLAY

Macbeth is a warrior and the Thane of Glamis. His ambitions lead him to betray and murder his king to take the throne of Scotland. In the play, Macbeth:

- defeats the armies of the rebellion against King Duncan (I.2).
- meets three witches who prophesy that he will be king.
- plots with his wife to murder Duncan and assume the throne (I.7, II.2, 4).
- arranges for his friend, Banquo, to be murdered (III.2, 3) in fear of the witches' prediction that Banquo's children will be kings.
- has Macduff's family killed on the basis of further prophecies.
- is cornered by English and Scottish forces, and killed in single combat by Macduff.

MACBETH'S IMPORTANCE TO THE PLAY AS A WHOLE

Macbeth is the fatal **protagonist** of the play whose tragic rise and fall is told. Although he is initially presented as brave and valiant, we witness how ambition drives Macbeth to betrayal, brutality and ultimately his death.

TOP TIP A02

Consider the extent to which the witches are to blame for the death of Duncan. Is Macbeth's ambition or their prophecy the real reason for his actions?

EXAM FOCUS: WRITING ABOUT MACBETH A01

Key point	Evidence/Further meaning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Macbeth is first and foremost a warrior – courage is his defining quality. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'For brave Macbeth – well he deserves that name' (I.2.16). • The Captain describes Macbeth's bravery in battle.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He is not essentially a brutal character. In fact, Lady Macbeth worries that her husband might be too kind to kill the king. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Yet do I fear thy nature; / It is too full o'the milk of human-kindness / To catch the nearest way' (I.5.14–16). • Mildness and pure white colour of milk suggests Macbeth has these attributes too.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Banquo observes that the witches' prophecies have come true, but he fears his friend has accelerated events with dishonesty. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Thou hast it now: king, Cawdor, Glamis, all, / As the weird women promised, and, I fear, / Thou play'dst most foully for't' (III.1.1–3). • Echoes the witches claim that 'fair is foul' (I.1.9).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finally, Macbeth is thought of as a mass murderer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'this dead butcher' (V.6.108). • Malcolm does not even use his name.

TOP TIP: WRITING ABOUT TRAGEDY A01

When you are writing about Macbeth always remember that the play is the 'tragedy' of Macbeth. In other words, Shakespeare does not present him as a wholly bad person. At the start of the play he has good qualities. He changes under the influence of the witches and his wife. You need to balance his final condition – the treacherous, mass murderer under the sway of supernatural forces – with his earlier and finer qualities: his love of his wife, his sensitive imagination and bravery. Ask, what remains at the end? Ensure your answer is balanced.

KEY QUOTATION: A FATAL FLAW A02

At the end of his soliloquy, Macbeth admits he has 'no spur/To prick the sides of my intent, but only/Vaulting ambition' (lines 25–7). This reveals his fatal flaw to the audience, and suggests the **tragedy** to come. Shakespeare shows us that Macbeth knows King Duncan is 'meek' and 'great' (lines 17–18) but still his ambition is stronger than his respect.



TOP TIP A03

Don't forget, Shakespeare places Macbeth between two opposing forces: the witches who are evil and God who is good. Macbeth is human, and so a mixture of good and evil. This is what interests us about him.

KEY THEME: SECURITY A01

Macbeth has been obsessed with the need for security since assassinating Duncan. Shakespeare portrays him as frightened of what he cannot control. This is shown in his need to visit the witches and find the certainty of 'security' (III.5.32). One factor in establishing the trustworthiness of the prophecies in Macbeth's mind is the speed with which they happen: he becomes 'Cawdor' (I.3.106) immediately after the witches say he will; now, having been told to watch out for Macduff, Shakespeare has Lennox appear with the same warning. The effect of this is that Macbeth (and, to an extent, the audience) feels secure at this point that the prophecies can be trusted.

REVISION FOCUS: MACBETH'S TRANSFORMATION

Consider how Macbeth changes throughout the play. Make a chart to show how he descends into a moral abyss. Choose a series of key moments and quotations to record his fall and add these to your graph. Learn the pattern of these events so that you can write confidently about his character development.

TOP TIP: MAKING CONNECTIONS A02

Look for original and powerful connections between characters. For example, Banquo and Macduff are linked by their opposition to Macbeth; Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff both die, though in very different circumstances. You could focus on how Macbeth is tempted. Contrast this with how Banquo is tempted, but does not give way.

RESPONDING TO WRITERS' EFFECTS

The two most important assessment objectives are **AO1** and **AO2**. They are about *what* writers do (the choices they make, and the effects these create), *what* your ideas are (your analysis and interpretation), and *how* you write about them (how well you explain your ideas).

ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVE 1

What does it say?	What does it mean?	Dos and Don'ts
<p>Read, understand and respond to texts.</p> <p>Students should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response Use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations 	<p>You must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use some of the literary terms you have learned (correctly!) Write in a professional way (not a sloppy, chatty way) Show you have thought for yourself Back up your ideas with examples, including quotations 	<p>Don't write ...</p> <p><i>Lady Macbeth is a really evil character. Shakespeare uses lots of forceful words to describe her. Macbeth says she should 'Bring forth men-children only'</i></p> <p>Do write ...</p> <p><i>Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth at the start of the play as a determined, and forceful character. For example Macbeth says she should 'Bring forth men-children only', which implies that she has a strong and ruthless nature with the masculine attributes worthy of a warrior.</i></p>

IMPROVING YOUR CRITICAL STYLE

Use a variety of words and phrases to show effects. For example:

Shakespeare suggests ... , conveys ... , implies ... , explores ... , demonstrates ... , describes how ... , shows how ...

I/we (as readers) infer ... , recognise ... , understand ... , question ... , see ... , are given ... , reflect ...

For example, look at these two alternative paragraphs by different students about Lady Macbeth. Note the difference in the quality of expression:

Student A:

Chatty, informal tone

Could use more context for the quotation

Try to use a wider range of vocabulary rather than 'show' and 'showing'

Shakespeare shows that Lady Macbeth is basically like a witch when she calls on the spirits of darkness in Act I Scene 5. She says 'unsex me here'. This means she wants to be like a man because does not think women are strong enough to do what she wants to do. Shakespeare is showing us that she is like a man.

There are other possibilities for the 'meaning' of this phrase

Point is repeated here rather than explored

Student B:

Makes a link between the character and the rest of the play

Good use of technical language

Good range of vocabulary overall

Shakespeare connects Lady Macbeth with the forces of evil in the play when she calls on the spirits of darkness in Act I Scene 5. Her language is commanding: 'Come, you spirits'. The imperative 'Come' could suggest she has some control over the spirits, or alternatively show that she is pleading. She then asks them to 'unsex me here'. This implies that Lady Macbeth regards her own female nature to be a hindrance to her plans.

Specific point about language

Variety of vocabulary for analysis

ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVE 2

What does it say?	What does it mean?	Dos and don'ts
<p>Analyse the language, form and structure used by the writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.</p>	<p>'Analyse' – comment in detail on particular aspects of the text or language.</p> <p>'Language' – vocabulary, imagery, variety of sentences, dialogue/speech etc.</p> <p>'Form' – how the story is told (e.g. first person narrative, letters, diaries, chapter by chapter?)</p> <p>'Structure' – the order in which events are revealed, or in which characters appear, or descriptions are presented.</p> <p>'Create meaning' – what can we, as readers, infer from what the writer tells us? What is implied by particular descriptions, or events?</p> <p>'Subject terminology' – words you should use when writing about plays, such as 'character', 'protagonist', 'imagery', 'staging', etc.</p>	<p>Don't write:</p> <p><i>The witches speak in rhyme, which means we can imagine how they say it.</i></p> <p>Do write:</p> <p><i>Shakespeare conveys a sense of unease to the audience through the rhyme patterns used by the witches. Unlike other characters who speak in blank verse, the witches are distinguished by the spell-like rhythm and rhyme of their speech.</i></p>

THE THREE 'I'S

- Firstly, the best analysis focuses on specific ideas, events or uses of language and thinks about what is **implied**.
- This means looking beyond the obvious and beginning to draw **inferences**. On the one hand Macbeth is presented as a brave warrior at the start of the play – but what do we learn about his potential for ruthless brutality, or about his ambitious nature?
- From the inferences you make across the text as a whole, you can arrive at your own **interpretation** – a sense of the bigger picture, a wider evaluation of a person, relationship or idea.