

# Macbeth

## 1. Context (AO3)

- Shakespeare criticises the Jacobean **heroic ideal** of being brave, strong and violent in battle as being problematic.
- Shakespeare presents the supernatural as against **Natural Order and the Great Chain of Being**: the witches represent the threat to society by subversive activities.
- Shakespeare represents the threats from uprisings, as a mirror to the Jacobean situation, where the **Gunpowder Plot** was recent and relevant.
- Shakespeare advocates the belief in the **Natural Order (The Great Chain of Being)** and the **Divine Right of Kings** as being stabilising influences in society.
- Jacobean society was based on **strict hierarchies** (status, wealth and gender), which were strictly enforced.

## 2. Themes (AO1 and AO3)

- Shakespeare warns against the corruptive nature of power and abuse of positions of authority.
- Ambition is presented as being a potentially disruptive influence on natural order.
- The importance of nature and order are presented as being critical over chaos and anarchy.
- Shakespeare questions the nature of kingship and presents an idealistic notion of power.
- The theme of inheritance and the importance of progeny in Jacobean society is explored as a motif in the play.

## 3. Key events (AO1)

- Macbeth meets witches and receives the prophecies (Thane of Cawdor, Thane of Glamis, King + Banquo's children to be kings)
- Lady Macbeth persuades Macbeth to kill Duncan.
- Macbeth hallucinates and sees the dagger, then kills Duncan.
- Macbeth doesn't trust Banquo, has him killed, then sees his ghost.
- Lady Macbeth can't calm Macbeth at the banquet scene (Banquo's ghost).
- Macbeth seeks out witches and gets second set of prophecies (Beware Macduff, no one born of woman will harm him, only fear when Birnam Wood moves to Dunsinane and Banquo's children still set to be kings).
- Macbeth has Macduff's wife and children killed.
- Lady Macbeth sleepwalks and dies.
- Macbeth faces final battle and is killed by Macduff.

## 4. Key literary features (AO2)

- A Shakespearean **tragedy** contains a **tragic hero** with a **flaw/hamartia** (ambition).
- A tragedy **resolves** by restoring order from chaos.
- The key **turning point** is when Macbeth decides to kill Banquo to continue his ambition alone.
- **Dramatic irony** is when the audience knows more than the characters.
- A **soliloquy** is when actors speak their minds alone on stage (we hear the truth).

## 5. Prepared introduction to adapt for the exam question

Shakespeare presents [key focus] to reveal the **corruptive nature of power**. The play warns against the way individuals can abuse and corrupt, manipulating others to establish complete control. Macbeth's **tragic downfall** is presented as the inevitable consequence of ambition and breaking the **Great Chain of Being**. The play is a warning to its **Jacobean audience** of the consequences of betraying the monarchy and disrupting society's order.

## 6. Vocabulary

<b>Agency:</b> (noun)	The ability to take action and have control over your own life.
<b>Ambition:</b> (noun)	A strong desire to do or achieve something.
<b>Artificial:</b> (adjective)	Something that is fake or not natural.
<b>Barren:</b> (adjective)	Too poor to produce seed or fruit; empty, bleak and lifeless.
<b>Elegy:</b> (noun)	A poem or speech that expresses grief and sorrow for the dead.
<b>Emasculation:</b> (noun)	The act of trying to make a man weak by undermining his masculinity.
<b>Epithet</b> (noun)	A characterising word or phrase accompanying or occurring in place of the name of a person or thing.
<b>Equivocation:</b> (abstract noun)	The use of ambiguous language to conceal the truth about something.
<b>Euphemism:</b> (noun)	A mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered to be too harsh or rude.
<b>Fragmented:</b> (adjective)	To break into small pieces.
<b>Harmoniously:</b> (adverb)	Working together in a friendly and peaceful manner.
<b>Heresy:</b> (noun)	A belief or opinion that goes against religious beliefs.
<b>Illegitimate:</b> (adjective)	Not authorised; going against the accepted standards or rules.
<b>Introspection:</b> (noun)	The examination of your own mental and emotional processes.
<b>Masculinity:</b> (noun)	The qualities regarded as characteristic of men.
<b>Maternal:</b> (adjective)	Relating to a mother, especially during pregnancy or shortly after childbirth.
<b>Misogyny:</b> (noun)	Feelings of hatred towards women or a belief that men are much better than women.
<b>Neuroticism:</b> (noun)	A mental illness caused by depression, anxiety or obsessive behaviour that causes a radical loss of touch with reality.
<b>Paradox:</b> (noun)	A contradictory statement which when investigated may prove to be well founded or true.
<b>Patriarchal:</b> (adjective)	A society that is controlled by men.
<b>Psyche:</b> (noun)	The deep part of your mind where your thoughts and feelings come from.
<b>Reaffirm:</b> (verb)	To state something again strongly
<b>Regicide:</b> (noun)	The purposeful killing of a monarch.
<b>Stereotype:</b> (noun)	A widely held, fixed but oversimplified image of a person or thing
<b>Subversion:</b> (noun)	The act of trying to weaken or destroy an established system or authority.
<b>Tedious:</b> (adjective)	Too long, slow, dull or tiresome.
<b>Tyranny:</b> (noun)	Cruel and oppressive rule by a person or government.
<b>Tyrant:</b> (noun)	A cruel leader who uses their power to rule with fear.
<b>Wake:</b> (noun)	Something that happens in the aftermath of another event.

## 7. Techniques

**Antimetabole:** where the words in one phrase are repeated in reverse order in the next.

**Aside:** When the character speaks directly to the audience and the other characters on the stage cannot hear them.

**Soliloquy:** A solo speech given by a character to the audience that reveals inner thoughts.

**Antithesis:** A person or thing that is the direct opposite of someone or something else.

**Hamartia:** A fatal flaw leading to the downfall of the tragic hero.

**Phallic Image:** Any object that may be taken as a representation of the penis or a man's masculinity.

## 8. Key quotations

### "Brave Macbeth"

- The **epithet** "brave" represents Macbeth as being idealised as a Jacobean hero.
- The **motif** of bravery is set up as a critical part of Macbeth's masculine identity.
- The epithet **foreshadows** the downfall of Macbeth: Lady Macbeth uses this characteristic to manipulate Macbeth into committing regicide.



#### Key words:

- Jacobean hero
- Masculinity

### "Dead butcher and his fiend-like queen"

- The **epithet** "butcher" implies that Macbeth dehumanised people and slaughtered needlessly.
- The **occupational** noun "butcher" is used insultingly to indicate low status.
- The **demonic adjective** "fiend-like" highlights the supernatural evil aspects of Lady Macbeth, linking her with the witches (the antithesis of the Jacobean female stereotype)



#### Key words:

- Evil
- Dehumanised

### "I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, only vaulting ambition"

- The **negative phallic imagery** in "no spur" implies that Macbeth is doubting his masculinity.
- The **adverb** "only" indicates that Macbeth doesn't think that ambition is enough to persuade him to kill.
- The **adjective** "vaulting" implies stepping outside of the Great Chain of Being, which would have been considered heretical.



#### Key words:

- Foreshadowing
- Phallic imagery
- Masculinity

### "Was the hope drunk wherein you dress'd yourself? Hath it slept since?"

- The **personification** of hope as 'drunk' implies that Macbeth's ambition is artificial: Lady Macbeth taunts him that his bravery is fuelled only by drink.
- The **repeated questions** suggest that Lady Macbeth is reprimanding Macbeth and questioning his bravery.
- The use of the clothing **motif** foreshadows the disguises and covering up that the Macbeths will later do.

#### Key words:

- Personification
- Reprimanding
- Masculinity

### "Yet do I fear thy nature; it is too full of the milk of human kindness"

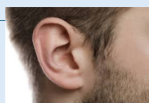
- The maternal **metaphor** of "milk" indicates that Lady Macbeth undermines Macbeth's patriarchal authority.
- The **conjunction** "yet" and the caesura indicated by the semi-colon represents Lady Macbeth's lack of confidence in Macbeth's ability to pursue his ambition.
- The **verb** "fear" reveals Lady Macbeth's plan to manipulate and control her husband.

#### Key words:

- Masculinity
- Maternal
- Manipulation

### "Hie thee hither that I might pour my spirits in thine ear"

- The **command** represents Lady Macbeth's power over Macbeth. She is presented as having agency even whilst Macbeth is away.
- The **personal pronouns** "I" and "my" contrast with "thine", indicating a division between the Macbeths, even from the start.
- The **metaphor** of "spirits" links directly with the witches as well as with the regicide plot: Lady Macbeth uses "spirits" (alcohol) to drug the guards.

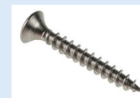


#### Key words:

- Command
- Personal pronoun
- Division

### "Screw your courage to the sticking place"

- The **command** represents Lady Macbeth's power over Macbeth. She is presented as having agency whilst Macbeth is disempowered.
- The **metaphor** "sticking place" could either be a weaponry image or a butchery image: both reveal her subversion of traditional maternal roles.
- The **euphemism** of "screw" could be a sexual image, implying that Lady Macbeth is taking over Macbeth's patriarchal role.



#### Key words:

- Command
- Gender roles
- Patriarchy

"Is this a dagger I see before me"



- The **question** suggests that Macbeth is unsure and is showing introspection.
- The use of the hallucination implies that Macbeth's psyche might be disintegrating.
- The **phallic imagery** of the dagger might reflect Macbeth's concerns about Lady Macbeth's emasculation of him.

Key words:

- Question
- Phallic imagery
- Masculinity

"Glamis hath murdered sleep and therefore Cawdor Shall Sleep no more; Macbeth shall sleep no more."



- The **metaphor** of Macbeth murdering sleep symbolises the destruction of natural order.
- Shakespeare uses the **motif** of sleep to show the impact of unnatural deeds on the psyche: Macbeth has destroyed his own mental health.

Key words:

- Natural order
- Psyche

"Out damned spot! Out I say"



- The **fragmented short exclamations** imply that Lady Macbeth's psyche is damaged and she no longer has agency.
- The **repetition** of "out" reveals her desperation in trying to conceal her guilt.
- The **adjective** "damned" implies that she understands her divine condemnation.
- The **command** links back to her earlier command to be filled with evil – it's ironic that she now wants to be released from it.

Key words:

- Evil
- Motif - blood
- Condemned

"Will all great Neptune's Ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?"



- The **rhetorical question** reflects Macbeth's lack of agency after the regicide.
- The **hyperbole** implies that Macbeth realises the enormity of his crime: he is divinely condemned.
- The **classical allusion** to Neptune (Roman God of the sea) shows that Macbeth understands he cannot have salvation.

Key words:

- Classical allusion
- Agency
- Condemnation

"Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown and put a barren sceptre in my gripe"



- The **symbolism** of the "fruitless crown" implies that Macbeth is concerned about his kingship: it will be temporary and futile.
- The **metaphors** of "fruitless" and "barren" suggest that Macbeth will not pass this kingship to any children and nothing positive will come of his reign.

Key words:

- Illegitimate
- Divine Right of Kings
- Futile

"O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!"



- The **metaphor** of "scorpions" indicates Macbeth's increasing paranoia and disintegrating psyche.
- The **symbolism** of scorpions carries imagery of betrayal, being stung and evil.
- The use of the **exclamation** suggests that Macbeth is losing his agency and control and is becoming increasingly neurotic.

Key words:

- Paranoid
- Neurotic
- Self-betrayal

"My dearest partner of greatness"

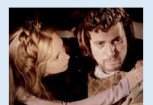


- The **loving superlative** "dearest" reinforces the devotion that Macbeth has for his wife.
- The **abstract noun** "greatness" links with the theme of ambition and the witches' prophecies for Macbeth.

Key words:

- Partnership
- Team
- Devotion

"Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck"



- The **command** gives Macbeth power and agency over Lady Macbeth.
- The **symbolism** of "chuck" (chicken) **juxtaposed** with "innocent" implies that Macbeth is no longer including his wife in his plans: this indicates the start of their distancing.

Key words:

- Agency
- Guilt
- Separation

"By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked  
this way comes"

- The **rhythmic chanting** implies that the witches are using supernatural spells to lure Macbeth to evil.
- The **ambiguous noun** "something" dehumanises Macbeth and suggests that he is no longer a "man".
- The **adjective** "wicked" has links with evil, divinely condemned and devil-like.



Key words:

- Supernatural
- Dehumanise
- Condemned

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"like a giant's robe, upon a dwarfish thief"

- The **motif** of clothing represents that Macbeth is covering up his illegitimate kingship.
- The **metaphor** of the "giant's robe" indicates Duncan's Divine Right and better kingly values.
- The **metaphor** of the "dwarfish thief" implies Macbeth is low in status and no longer has the respect of his subjects and peers.



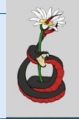
Key words:

- Motif
- Illegitimate
- Divine Right

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"Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent  
under it"

- The **Biblical allusion** of the Garden of Eden implies the temptation of regicide, but also the consequences of disobeying God.
- The **metaphor** of the serpent emphasises the evil, deceptive nature of the corruption to society.
- The **metaphor** of evil disguised as nature reflects the deception of the Macbeths.



Key words:

- Evil
- Biblical allusion
- Appearance vs. reality

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"Stars hide your fires! Let not light see my black  
and deep desires"

- The **commands** "hide" and "Let" imply that Macbeth is hubristic in attempting to control nature.
- The **semantic field** of "light" and "black" connects with the image of heaven and hell.
- The **unnatural imagery** implies that Macbeth is subverting Natural Order and is invoking chaos on society.



Key words:

- Nature imagery
- Hubris
- Condemnation

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## Contextual Articles

### James I and Witchcraft

The witch-hunts that swept across Europe from 1450 to 1750 were among the most controversial and terrifying phenomena in history – holocausts of their times. Historians have long attempted to explain why and how they took such rapid and enduring hold in communities as disparate and distant from one another as Navarre and Copenhagen. They resulted in the trial of around 100,000 people (most of them women), a little under half of whom were put to death.

One of the most active centres of witch-hunting was Scotland, where perhaps 4,000 people were consigned to the flames – a striking number for such a small country, and more than double the execution rate in England. The ferocity of these persecutions can be attributed to the most notorious royal witch-hunter: King James VI of Scotland, who in 1603 became James I of England.

### Mesmerised by magic

In 1597 he became the only monarch in history to publish a treatise on witchcraft. *Daemonologie* (literally, the science of demons) was the result of painstaking and meticulous work on James's part, and must have taken years to complete.

The purpose of *Daemonologie* wasn't only to convince the doubters of the existence of witchcraft – it was also to inspire those who persecuted witches to do so with new vigour and determination. James described witchcraft as "high treason against God", which meant that all manner of horrors were justified in wringing confessions from the accused. Though lacking in original or profound ideas, the fact that it had been written by a king made it enormously influential. It is no coincidence that cases of witchcraft in his kingdom multiplied at an alarming rate thereafter.

## **Macbeth Brief Summary:**

Three witches tell the Scottish general Macbeth that he will be King of Scotland. Encouraged by his wife, Macbeth kills the king, becomes the new king, and kills more people out of paranoia. Civil war erupts to overthrow Macbeth, resulting in more death.

### **Act 1:**

On a bleak Scottish moorland, Macbeth and Banquo, two of King Duncan's generals, discover three strange women (witches). The witches prophesise (predict) that Macbeth will be promoted twice: to Thane of Cawdor (a rank of the aristocracy bestowed by grateful kings) and King of Scotland. Banquo's descendants will be kings, but Banquo isn't promised any kingdom himself. The generals want to hear more, but the "weird sisters" disappear.

Soon afterwards, King Duncan names Macbeth Thane of Cawdor as a reward for his success in the recent battles. The promotion seems to support the prophecy. The King then proposes to make a brief visit that night to Macbeth's castle at Inverness. Lady Macbeth receives news from her husband about the prophecy and his new title. She vows to help him become king by whatever means are necessary.

### **Act 2:**

Macbeth returns to his castle, followed almost immediately by King Duncan. The Macbeths plot together to kill Duncan and wait until everyone is asleep. At the appointed time, Lady Macbeth gives the guards drugged wine so Macbeth can enter and kill the King. He regrets this almost immediately, but his wife reassures him. She leaves the bloody daggers by the dead king just before Macduff, a nobleman, arrives. When Macduff discovers the murder, Macbeth kills the drunken guards in a show of rage and retribution. Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, flee, fearing for their own lives; but they are, nevertheless, blamed for the murder.

### **Act 3:**

Macbeth becomes King of Scotland but is plagued by feelings of insecurity. He remembers the prophecy that Banquo's descendants will inherit the throne and arranges for Banquo and his son Fleance to be killed. In the darkness, Banquo is murdered, but his son escapes the assassins. At his state banquet that night, Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo and worries the courtiers with his mad response. Lady Macbeth dismisses the court and unsuccessfully tries to calm her husband.

### **Act 4:**

Macbeth seeks out the witches who say that he will be safe until a local wood, Birnam Wood, marches into battle against him. He also need not fear anyone born of woman (that sounds secure, no loop-holes here). They also prophesy that the Scottish succession will still come from Banquo's son. Macbeth embarks on a reign of terror, slaughtering many, including Macduff's family. Macduff had gone to seek Malcolm (one of Duncan's sons who fled) at the court of the English king. Malcolm is young and unsure of himself, but Macduff, pained with grief, persuades him to lead an army against Macbeth.

### **Act 5:**

Macbeth feels safe in his remote castle at Dunsinane until he is told that Birnam Wood is moving towards him. Malcolm's army is carrying branches from the forest as camouflage for their assault on Macbeth's stronghold. Meanwhile, an overwrought and conscience-ridden Lady Macbeth walks in her sleep and tells her secrets to her doctor. She commits suicide. As the final battle commences, Macbeth hears of Lady Macbeth's suicide and mourns.

In the midst of a losing battle, Macduff challenges Macbeth. Macbeth learns Macduff is the child of a caesarean birth (loophole!), realises he is doomed, and submits to his enemy. Macduff triumphs and brings the head of the traitor Macbeth to Malcolm. Malcolm declares peace and goes to Scone to be crowned king.

## **The Divine Right of Kings.**

The Christian kings of Europe once believed they were answerable to no one except God. This idea became known as the **divine right of kings**.

The divine right was an ancient idea that began with Europe's medieval kings. They claimed that they had been chosen by God and were his representatives on Earth. These kings had absolute power and could do as they liked. They expected total obedience from the people they ruled and no-one could question them because to question them was to question God, and this would be blasphemy. Furthermore, if someone was to usurp a king, they would be committing a crime against God himself.

James I was a strong believer of the Divine Right of Kings. He wrote two books on the subject- *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (1598) and a treatise called *Basilikon Doron* (1599). These books outline his beliefs that a rightful king is only answerable to God and has absolute power over his people (including over their life and death). However, he also suggests that a good king rules not only over his people, but over himself. The books emphasise that a good king is a good Christian and not a tyrant.

## **The Great Chain of Being**

During Elizabethan and Jacobean times people believed in the **Great Chain of Being**, a natural order ordained by God in which every living creature had its proper place as a link in that chain. This idea is also related to a hierarchy of life according to which everything had its special place, from God, Angels, Saints, King and Nobles down to the lowest life forms such as serfs, rats, snakes and spiders. Essentially so long as this natural order was not disturbed society or the State would function harmoniously. However, the balance or equilibrium in society is upset when this natural order is interfered with by the conduct of human beings. For example, when Macbeth gives into his "vaulting ambition" and murders the rightful King this damages a major link in the Great Chain of Being and results in the corrosion or corruption of other links in the chain. Hence society and the natural order is thrown into chaos.

## **The Gunpowder Plot: Historical Context**

This Gunpowder Plot of 1605 was a conspiracy that resulted from severe oppression of Catholics in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. The Protestant Queen Elizabeth I, who reigned from 1558 to 1603, passed anti-Catholic laws naming herself the secular and spiritual leader of England, to which Catholics naturally objected. Perceived traitors were beheaded, drawn and quartered, hanged, or a combination of these. Catholics had expected King James I, Elizabeth's successor, to be more lenient, but they were mistaken.

To stop the oppression, a small group of Catholic men plotted to blow up the House of Lords on November 5, 1605, when James and his administration would be inside, and replace them with a Catholic government. Led by Robert Catesby, they rented a house next to the Houses of Parliament and smuggled thirty-six barrels of gunpowder into the cellar of the House of Lords. The most famous conspirator and explosives expert, Guy Fawkes, went there to light the fuse. A warning letter exposed the plot, however, and he was caught before he could act. Fawkes was arrested and tortured until he gave the names of the other conspirators. All involved were tortured and executed.

## **Jacobean Masculinity**

In the Jacobean Era, like today, there were certain cultural definitions that went alongside masculinity. First and foremost, Men were expected to be physically and mentally strong. As well as this, men were also expected to be powerful, respected, honourable, courageous (brave) and chivalric (respectful towards women).

If men were seen not to be exhibiting these character traits, they were considered not a man at all; in cases such as this, men were seen to be weak and therefore not respected.

## **Jacobean Gender Roles**

Men assumed a dominant position in the society. It was the man of the house who worked and fetched for food to keep his family alive. Apart from being the sole bread earner of the family, the eldest male member was the head of the house. Everyone had to obey him and do as was being told. Marriages were normally decided by elders or parents of the bride or bridegroom.

The young couple getting married had no say in selecting their spouse. Jacobean men had property rights as well as voting rights. The property was either passed down from father to son or from brother to brother.



This superior position of men in society was also reflected in the Jacobean theatrical plays. Most of the characters were played by men. Even the role of a woman was played by a young man. Boys were given preference as far as education was concerned.

Jacobean women continued to live a life that was subordinate to men. They were supposed to obey what was told to them. The main responsibility of married women was to take care of the household matters and raise children. Before marriage, a girl was under the control of her father, after marriage her husband and after the death of her husband, her son. Thus, women were made to depend on their male relatives throughout their lives. Young girls were groomed for later life. Since childhood they were trained to take care of the house apart from sewing.

The concept of equality between the sexes would have seemed very foreign to most in Shakespeare's day: Adam was created first, and Eve from his body; she was created specifically to give him comfort, and was to be subordinate to him, to obey him and to accept her lesser status. A dominant woman was unnatural, a symptom of disorder.

Lady Macbeth is a powerful yet sinister figure: at the very outset she deliberately tries to suppress her feminine qualities in order to exercise power.