

Macbeth

Revision Guide

**AQA English
Literature**

Text guide and
practice exam questions

For grade 9-1
GCSE English Literature



**BEYOND
REVISION**

YOUR GCSE COMPANION

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How to Use This Guide

In this revision guide, you'll find a lot of useful information about Macbeth, so it may be a little tricky knowing where to start. Here you can find out more about what's included, along with some ideas for how to make the most of it in your revision.

Summary

This section gives you a quick summary of all the events in the play, scene by scene. You need to have a solid understanding of the whole plot of the play for the exam, as well as understanding how the characters develop as the play goes on. To help you test your knowledge, there are quick questions throughout the summary section. You could work with a partner to test each other by reading the questions and answering aloud, or you could set yourself a quick timer (around 5 minutes) and write down the most detailed answer you can.

Themes

This section covers some of the main themes that Shakespeare explores in Macbeth. Each theme is divided into the same sections to give you a thorough understanding of its importance in the play.

Context

Within each theme, you'll find information about the play's context (what life was like at the time the play was written and what influenced Shakespeare to write it). Some of the terms are highlighted in bold – these are the most crucial terms to remember to show that you understand the play's context, so make sure you read about these thoroughly. Try reading the information and then making your own context poster for each theme using your own words.

Key Quotes

These are some of the most important quotations to remember for each theme, with an explanation of what they mean in easier language. It's important that you memorise as many key quotations as you can because you'll only have an extract in the exam, not the full script, and you get marks for precisely referencing the text. Try covering them up and writing them out until you can get them word-for-word.

Mini Exams

These questions will test your understanding of the themes and push you a little harder to think about how they impact the play. It's important to talk about why Shakespeare wrote the play the way he did and how his choices affect the audience, and these questions will help you to think about this. You could discuss them aloud in a pair or a small group and mind-map your responses, or give yourself a 10-minute timer to answer each one independently in writing.

Exam Questions

The exam questions are written in the same format and style as the one you'll answer in the real exam, so they're perfect to use as practice. You should set yourself a timer of 45 minutes to plan and write your response.

Sample Answers

For each exam question, there are two sample answers provided. The first one is a 'good' response and the second is a 'great' one. Each answer is labelled with a colour code to show you where it has met the different Assessment Objectives and some comments are provided to show where it has been successful and where it could be improved. Remember, the exam is about your own personal interpretation of the play, so these aren't 'right' answers – you may have lots of other ideas that aren't included. They're simply meant to give you an idea of what an answer might look like. You could read them in a group and discuss how they could be improved or added to.

About the Exam

As part of the GCSE English Literature exams, you'll answer one question about Macbeth. You won't be allowed to have a copy of the play with you in the exam, so it's really important that you revise thoroughly. The question will give you a short extract from the play and ask you to write about how Shakespeare presents a particular theme or idea, both in the extract and the play as a whole.

The Assessment Objectives

You get marks in the exam for meeting the Assessment Objectives (AOs). The AOs are:

AO1: Read, understand and respond to texts. Students should be able to:

- maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response
- use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.

AO1 means that you can show you have read and understood the text. You can give your own personal ideas and thoughts about the play and use quotes from the text as evidence to back up your points. The more detailed and developed your ideas are, the more marks you pick up.

AO2: Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.

AO2 means that you can talk about the way that Shakespeare wrote the play. You can analyse the language that Shakespeare used and why he used it, and you can analyse the way that he structured the play and why he chose to do it the way he did. You can talk about the effects that Shakespeare's choices make and how the audience would respond to them.

AO3: Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written.

AO3 means that you can describe how the play's context affects the way it was written. You can show that you understand what life was like at the time the play was written and what events influenced Shakespeare to write it, and talk about how this affected Shakespeare's writing. You can talk about how an audience in Shakespeare's time would have reacted to the play.

AO4: Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.

AO4 means that you can write accurately - there are marks available for correct spelling, punctuation and grammar.

In this revision guide, there are sample answers to GCSE-style questions. These have been highlighted with the colour code above to show where they have met the AOs.



Macbeth by William Shakespeare

What's It About?

Macbeth is one of William Shakespeare's best-known tragedies. Based partly on real events, it's the story of a Scottish warrior whose desire for power leads him to commit terrible crimes.

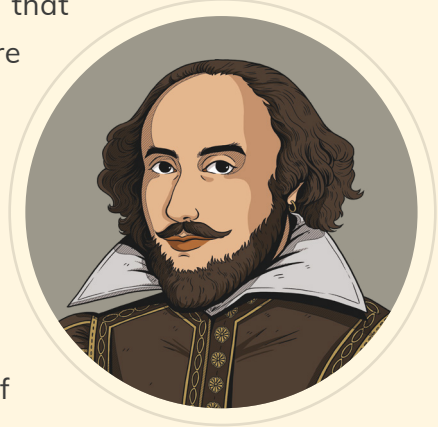
Macbeth, the titular character, hears a prophecy that he will one day become King of Scotland. Encouraged by his wife, Lady Macbeth, he murders King Duncan and takes his throne. Once Macbeth becomes king, he becomes increasingly ruthless, killing anyone who stands in his way, including his best friend Banquo and the family of his rival, Macduff. His tyrannical rule eventually leads to his own downfall as he is killed by Macduff and Duncan's son Malcolm takes the crown.

Through the play, Shakespeare explores a number of key themes including power and ambition, fate and free will, and the role of women in society.



Context

Macbeth is an example of a **tragedy**, a play that ends unhappily. Shakespeare's tragedies were especially popular with audiences because they often included bloody and violent scenes. *Macbeth* is a classic example of a **tragic hero** (a main character who starts out good but suffers a terrible downfall) – he begins the play as a heroic soldier, but his own ambition leads him to commit a series of terrible murders that result in his own death.



Most of the plot of *Macbeth* is fictional, but many of the characters are based on real historical figures. Macbeth was a Scottish nobleman in the 11th century who killed King Duncan in battle and took the throne of Scotland. He was later killed himself by Malcolm, Duncan's son. Over the years, these events were retold in stories and legends that changed many of the facts and added dramatic details. Shakespeare took the story and added his own twists, most importantly the character of Lady Macbeth.

Lots of the themes and events in *Macbeth* are relevant to real-life events at the time the play was written. *Macbeth* was written in around 1606, early in the reign of King James I. Many of



the plot details can be seen as references to James's reign. In 1605, the Gunpowder Plot (a plot to kill James by blowing up the Houses of Parliament) was stopped just in time, and *Macbeth* explores the consequences of regicide (the murder of a king). The character of Banquo and the prophecy that his descendants will be kings are also nods to King James, who was thought to be a descendant of the real-life Banquo.

Who's Who

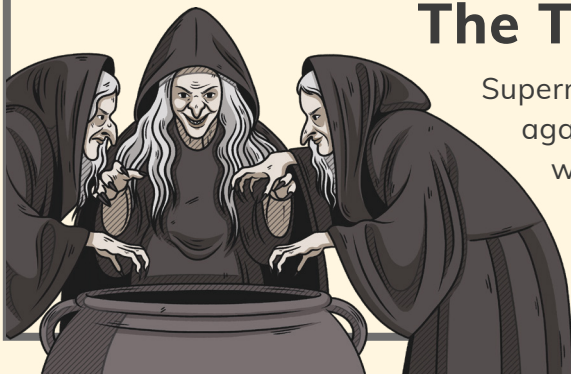


Macbeth

A Scottish noble and a general in King Duncan's army. His desire for power, encouraged by his wife and by the prophecy of the witches, leads him to kill Duncan and take the throne himself. Once he becomes king, he becomes increasingly ruthless, using murder and terror to hold onto his throne.

Lady Macbeth

Macbeth's wife. She is ruthless and ambitious and encourages Macbeth to kill King Duncan. After the murder, she is filled with guilt and falls into madness, eventually taking her own life.



The Three Witches

Supernatural creatures who plot mischief against Macbeth. They predict that he will become Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland. Macbeth interprets their prophecy as a sign that he must murder King Duncan.

King Duncan

The King of Scotland. He is a good and generous ruler and a father figure to Macbeth. Macbeth murders him to take his throne.



Who's Who



Banquo

Macbeth's friend and fellow general. The witches predict that Banquo's children will take the throne of Scotland. Macbeth sees this prophecy as a threat to his power and has Banquo murdered, but is haunted by visions of his ghost.

Fleance

Banquo's son - destined by the witches' prophecy for the throne. He escapes Macbeth's attempt to have him murdered.



Macduff

A Scottish nobleman who leads the fight to remove Macbeth from the throne. Macbeth has Macduff's wife and son murdered. Macduff wants to restore the throne to Duncan's son, Malcolm, but also wants revenge for his family's murder.

Malcolm

King Duncan's son and the rightful heir to the throne. He flees the country when Macbeth kills his father but wins the support of the King of England and returns to Scotland with an army to claim his crown.





Summary

Act I

Scene i: Three witches meet during a storm and decide to approach Macbeth.

Scene ii: A wounded sergeant returns from a battle. He tells King Duncan that Macbeth and Banquo have fought heroically and defeated the Thane of Cawdor, a rebel against the king. Duncan orders that the Thane of Cawdor should be executed and says that his title will be given to Macbeth.



Scene iii: Macbeth and Banquo encounter the three witches. The witches address Macbeth as the Thane of Cawdor and the future king. They declare that Banquo will not be king, but his children will be kings. The witches disappear. Ross and Angus arrive to give Macbeth the news that he has been made Thane

of Cawdor. Banquo and Macbeth are shocked by this news as it seems to confirm that the witches' prophecy is coming true. Macbeth immediately begins to feel ambitious about becoming king.

Scene iv: King Duncan praises Macbeth and decides to visit him at his castle. He announces that

when he dies, his son Malcolm will inherit the throne. Macbeth sees Malcolm as standing between him and the crown. He sends a letter to Lady Macbeth, explaining the details of the

witches' prophecy and telling her that Duncan is coming to stay at the castle.

How does Macbeth feel about the witches' prophecy?

Why does Lady Macbeth call upon 'spirits' in this scene? What does this tell us about her?



Scene v: Lady Macbeth reads the letter and quickly decides that Macbeth needs to kill Duncan and take his throne. She believes that he is too good-hearted to do this on his own and decides to convince him. When Macbeth arrives, Lady Macbeth tells him that she will make the plans for Duncan's murder.

Scene vi: King Duncan arrives at the castle and Lady Macbeth gives him a warm welcome.

Scene vii: Macbeth thinks about the consequences of killing Duncan. He knows that he would be risking his soul in the afterlife. He also considers all the reasons he should not kill Duncan and realises he has no motives for the murder other than his own ambition. He tells Lady Macbeth that he can't go through with the murder, but she mocks him and calls him a coward. She explains her plan to kill Duncan while he sleeps and frame his servants for the crime.

What arguments does Macbeth give for not killing Duncan?

How does Lady Macbeth influence Macbeth to go ahead with the murder?

Act II

Scene i: Banquo and Macbeth briefly talk about the witches. Banquo notes that some of the things they have predicted have come true, but Macbeth claims he has not thought about them since the meeting. Macbeth has a vision of a dagger floating in front of him and questions whether it is real or a hallucination. A bell rings and Macbeth heads to Duncan's chamber to commit the murder.



Scene ii: Lady Macbeth has drugged the king's servants and prepared a pair of daggers for Macbeth. She waits for him to commit the murder, full of confidence that he will succeed. When Macbeth returns, he is full of horror and remorse at his actions. Lady Macbeth notices that

Does the vision of the dagger give Macbeth confidence or fear?



he has forgotten to leave the daggers behind to frame the servants. She becomes angry at Macbeth for his cowardice and takes the daggers herself. She takes Macbeth to wash the blood from his hands and then the two pretend to be asleep.

How does Macbeth react to murdering Duncan? What does this tell us about him?

Scene iii: A porter answers the door to Macduff and Lennox, who have arrived to meet Duncan. Macduff discovers the king's body in his chamber and shouts that Duncan has been murdered. Macbeth and Lennox rush into the room and Macbeth kills the king's servants, who were found with the bloody daggers, blaming them for the murder. Malcolm and Donalbain, Duncan's sons, fear that whoever killed their father will want to kill them too. They decide to flee the country.

Scene iv: Ross, a nobleman, talks to an old man outside the castle. They note that strange events have been happening over the past few days that seem to be bad omens. Macduff arrives to tell Ross that Macbeth has been chosen as the next king. Because they fled the scene, Malcolm and Donalbain are suspected of arranging Duncan's murder.

What is the significance of the strange supernatural events that happen after Duncan's murder?

Act III

Scene i: Banquo notes that all the witches' predictions about Macbeth have come true and suspects Macbeth of Duncan's murder. He wonders if the prophecy about his children will come true as well. Macbeth arrives and invites Banquo to a feast that evening. Because of the prophecy, Macbeth sees Banquo as a threat to his rule. He hires murderers to kill Banquo and his son Fleance while they are out horse-riding.

How has Macbeth's character begun to change in this scene?

Scene ii: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth talk. Macbeth feels troubled that Banquo and Fleance are still alive. He tells Lady Macbeth to put on a cheerful face and make Banquo feel welcome at the feast.

Scene iii: The murderers wait in the woods for Banquo and Fleance. They kill Banquo but Fleance escapes. The murderers return to the castle to give Macbeth the news.



How does Macbeth react to Banquo's ghost? What does its appearance represent?

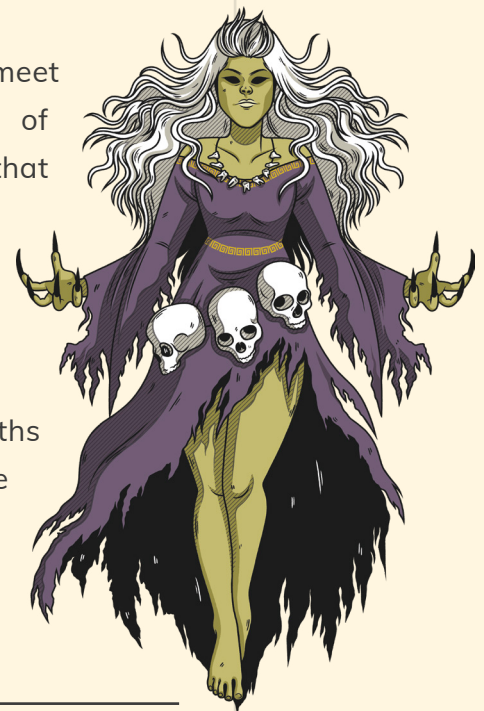
Scene iv: The feast is taking place at the castle. Macbeth learns that Banquo is dead and that Fleance escaped. He worries that the threat to his power has not been stopped. As he returns to the feast, he sees the ghost of Banquo in his seat and reacts with horror. Lady Macbeth tells the guests he is ill and sends them away. Macbeth decides to visit the witches again to learn more about his future.

Scene v: The witches meet with Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft. Hecate is angry that the witches did not involve her in their previous mischief with Macbeth. She tells them to prepare particularly powerful spells to trick Macbeth when he arrives.

Scene vi: Lennox and another lord talk about the deaths of Banquo and Duncan. They suspect Macbeth of the murders. The lord says that Macduff and Malcolm are in England, asking the king for help in removing Macbeth from the throne.

Act IV

Scene i: The witches brew a powerful potion. Macbeth arrives and demands another prophecy about his future. The witches show Macbeth three visions. A floating head tells Macbeth to beware Macduff. A bloody child tells him that no man born of a woman will harm him. A crowned child tells him that he will





never be defeated until Birnam Wood marches to his castle. The witches then show Macbeth a parade of kings walking ahead of Banquo's ghost. The witches vanish. Lennox arrives to tell Macbeth that Macduff has gone to England. Macbeth decides that he will have Macduff's family killed as punishment for betraying him.

What is the significance of each of the visions Macbeth sees?

Scene ii: Macduff's wife, Lady Macduff, finds out that her husband has gone to England. She worries that people will think he is a traitor because he has fled. Murderers sent by Macbeth arrive and kill Lady Macduff and her son.

Scene iii: Macduff tries to convince Malcolm to return to Scotland with an army to overthrow Macbeth. Ross brings the news that Macbeth has killed Macduff's family. Macduff swears to take revenge on Macbeth. Malcolm and Macduff leave to lead an army to Scotland.

Act V

Scene i: A doctor and a gentlewoman watch as Lady Macbeth walks and talks in her sleep. She mentions the murders of Duncan, Banquo and Lady Macduff. She seems to see blood on her hands that cannot be cleaned off.

Scene ii: Outside the castle, the English army led by Malcolm and Macduff approaches. Scottish lords opposed to Macbeth arrange to meet them with their own soldiers at Birnam Wood.

Scene iii: Macbeth boasts that he has nothing to fear from Malcolm or the English army because of the witches' prophecies. His servant warns him that ten thousand soldiers are approaching the castle and Macbeth puts on his armour. The doctor tells Macbeth that Lady Macbeth is suffering hallucinations and he cannot cure her.

What does the blood on Lady Macbeth's hands represent?



Scene iv: Malcolm and his army arrive at Birnam Wood. He orders every soldier to break down a branch and carry it in front of himself to disguise the size of the army.

Scene v: Macbeth prepares the castle to defend against the attack. His servant tells him that Lady Macbeth has taken her own life. Macbeth talks bitterly about the nature of life. A messenger tells Macbeth that Birnam Wood is moving towards the castle. Macbeth recalls the prophecy and says that he is ready to die.

How does Macbeth react to the news of his wife's death? How is he feeling in this scene in general?

Scene vi: The battle begins outside the castle. Malcolm orders the soldiers to throw down the branches and draw their swords.

Scene vii: Macbeth enters the battle and fights without fear, believing he cannot be harmed by anyone born of a woman. He kills the son of Siward, the English leader.



Scene viii: Macduff finds Macbeth in the battle, determined to avenge his family. Macbeth tells Macduff that he is wasting his time trying to kill him as he cannot be killed by anyone born of a woman. Macduff reveals that he was not born from his mother, but cut from her womb. Macbeth says he will fight to the death. The two fight and Macduff kills Macbeth.

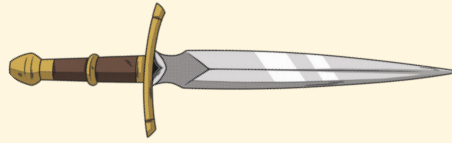
Scene ix: Malcolm enters the castle. Macduff enters carrying Macbeth's head and declares Malcolm King of Scotland. Malcolm says that he will begin to right the wrongs done to the country by Macbeth and invites all of the gathered Scottish noblemen to his coronation.



What is the tone of the play's ending? What message do you think Shakespeare was trying to get across?

Themes

Ambition



Ambition is one of the most important themes in the play. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are led to commit their crimes because of their desire for power. Shakespeare shows that ambition can take over a person and corrupt all of their good qualities – at the beginning of the play, Macbeth is portrayed as a brave and noble man, but by the end he is a tyrant who will let nothing stand in the way of his power.

In *Macbeth*, ambition is shown to destroy those who aim to win power unfairly. Lady Macbeth is consumed by guilt for her actions and goes mad, while Macbeth creates his own downfall by making enemies of Malcolm and Macduff, who swear to avenge Macbeth's crimes. Macbeth's ambition is also shown to bring him nothing – although he wins what he wanted (the crown), he loses everything else: his morals, his friends, his wife and ultimately his life.

Shakespeare doesn't present ambition itself as evil. Other characters in the play are ambitious – Banquo, Malcolm and Macduff all want greater things for themselves – but these characters don't allow their ambition to come before their morals. Shakespeare shows that those who sacrifice their honour to win power are unfit to be leaders.





Themes: Ambition

Context

In Shakespeare's time it was accepted that God created all living things and set out their order in the universe. People believed that God decided the place of everything, including people's roles in society. This idea was called the **Great Chain of Being**. This meant that kings and queens were believed to have been chosen by God to rule (an idea known as the **Divine Right**

of Kings). A crime against the king was therefore a crime against God, which was particularly shocking to the heavily religious society of the time. Macbeth's ambition to become king means that he overthrows the natural order of the world and directly sins against God - a greivous transgression which the audience would have viewed as especially villainous.

Themes: Ambition

Key Quotes



Why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid images doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature?

Macbeth, Act I Scene iii

Macbeth describes how he is horrified by the idea of killing Duncan - yet by 'yielding' to the idea, he shows that he's tempted by it. His ambition is struggling against his morals.



Stars, hide your fires;
Let not light see my black and deep desires.

Macbeth, Act I Scene iv

Macbeth wants to hide his ambitions because he knows they will involve evil ('black') deeds, but his 'deep desires' show how strongly he wants to be king.



Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it.

Lady Macbeth, Act I Scene v

Lady Macbeth's shows her attitude to ambition - people need to be ruthless and cruel to get what they want, and there's no place for kindness.



I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on th'other.

Macbeth, Act I Scene vii

Macbeth makes it very clear that he has no good reason to kill Duncan other than his own selfish ambitions, and he knows it may have consequences that could lead to his downfall.

Mini Exams

Question 1

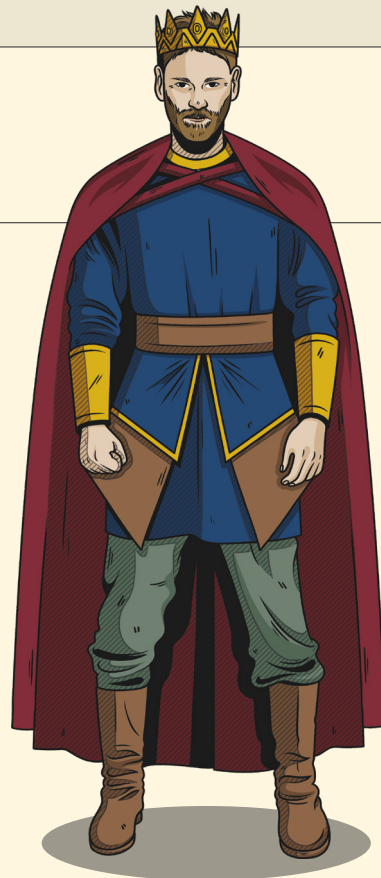
How important is the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth when it comes to their ambitions?

Question 2

Which other characters show ambition? Does it have the same effect on them that it has on the Macbeths?

Question 3

'Ambition is Macbeth's fatal weakness.' Discuss.



Q

Exam Question

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

At this point in the play, Lady Macbeth has just received a letter from Macbeth describing the prophecies he has received from the witches.

LADY MACBETH

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be
What thou art promised. 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'ld'st 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 crowned withal.

Starting with this extract, explore how Shakespeare presents ambition in the play. Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth's ambition in this scene;
- how Shakespeare presents ambition in the play as a whole.



Themes: Ambition

Sample Answer

Good Response

Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as an ambitious woman in this scene. She believes that Macbeth is too kind to kill King Duncan and take his throne: "Yet do I fear thy nature; it is too full o' th' milk of human kindness". This tells the audience that Lady Macbeth thinks kindness is the same as weakness and it stops people from getting what they want. This makes the audience see Lady Macbeth as a ruthless person - she thinks that people should do whatever it takes to get what they want. This is also seen when she says she will take away "all that impedes thee from the golden round". The golden round is a metaphor for the crown. This means that she will convince Macbeth to get rid of anything that is stopping him from becoming king. The audience would have been shocked by Lady Macbeth's ambition because women were supposed to know their place in society and not want power of their own.

Shakespeare shows that Macbeth is also ambitious when he says "thou wouldst be great, Art not without ambition". This shows that Macbeth also wants to be powerful. However he is a noble and honest man at this point in the play and he does not want to do anything evil or sinful to get what he wants. This shows the audience that Macbeth is a good character. This makes Lady Macbeth seem more evil for corrupting her husband and influencing him to commit evil deeds. Later in the play Macbeth is presented as without any kindness and he ruthlessly kills anyone who gets in his way. Shakespeare shows that ambition can remove all of the good qualities from a person.

Shakespeare shows that ambition has negative consequences if people do bad things to get what they want. Both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth eventually lose their minds and meet their downfall because of the guilt they feel

Good point with a relevant quotation and analysis.

Good reference to context but could be developed further - what was Shakespeare trying to say to the audience through Lady Macbeth's character?

Refers to a language feature but without any analysis of its effect.

This paragraph makes a good point and explores how Macbeth is presented. It could go into more detail on why Shakespeare chose to present Macbeth this way.

for the crimes they committed out of ambition for power. Shakespeare shows that it is fine to want bigger things for yourself but you should not take what is not rightfully yours or it will have negative consequences in the future.

This paragraph is a good summary with a personal interpretation of how ambition is presented in the play.

This response shows a good understanding of how ambition is presented differently in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in the extract. The student shows a good basic understanding of the play's ideas but they could explore how Shakespeare creates effects on the audience in more detail. There needs to be more reference to both language and structure and more developed references to context.

Great Response

In Macbeth we are presented with two versions of ambition. There is ambition that is performed in a humble and noble way; and ambition that is presented as being scheming and sinister. Ambition doesn't always win. For a time Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's ambition puts them in a position of power, but in the end they are defeated. It is Macduff, who is written as a humble warrior and lord, who finishes the play victorious, and his ambition is simply to do what is right and to avenge past wrongs.

Good introductory paragraph to focus the student on the points they are going to develop.

The extract is from the beginning of the play and is an example of Lady Macbeth's mindset. We get a taste of both good and bad ambition when she talks about herself (bad) and her husband (sometimes good). We notice the confidence with which Lady Macbeth talks: Macbeth "shalt be / What thou art promised". The phrase begins with a modal verb ("shalt"), emphasising the fact that Lady Macbeth does not think her plan will fail, she is completely convinced within herself that she can arrange events to lead her husband to power ("screw your courage to the sticking place, and we'll not fail" she later convinces Macbeth).

Good analysis of a specific language feature (modal verb).

Explores the effect of another language feature (symbolism).

However she is also aware of the conflict within Macbeth's mind. She describes him as being "too full o' th' milk of human kindness". Milk symbolically represents purity (it's white) and goodness (it's a nutritious drink), but also reminds us of parenthood and the milk that a woman with an infant would produce. It's interesting that Lady Macbeth accuses Macbeth of being "full" of milk: she appears to be describing her husband using a characteristic we associate with women - breastfeeding. This image would have stood out to 16th century audiences: women would have been expected to raise their children and feed the family, whereas men were seen as the people who would have a career path and be ambitious - in this description Shakespeare suggests that the roles have been reversed at this stage.

Detailed reference to context and how it would have affected the audience's response.

This paragraph gives a detailed interpretation of Shakespeare's presentation of the character.

In my opinion Macbeth is also ambitious: whilst at first he appears to mostly follow his wife's instructions, having been made a thane and had a taste of power he is very happy

to listen to advice that sends him down a dark path. Lady Macbeth talks about this when she speaks in two couplets in this extract. She says: "What thou wouldst highly, / That wouldst thou holily;" recognising that Macbeth has high ambitions, but is keen to gain power "holily" - meaning in the right way, by following the rules. There is a hint of the darkness in Macbeth's mind in her second couplet though: "wouldst not play false, / And yet wouldst wrongly win". Again she notices that Macbeth is keen to achieve his goal in the right way ("not play false"), but that in reaching the ultimate goal would have to "wrongly win". It is in these contrasting "wouldst"s across these two couplets that we see the conflict in Macbeth's soul - he wants to be powerful, he wants to do it morally, but he has no right to the power.

This conflict within Macbeth plays out through the story. There is no way he could have gained power in the right way, so when he is crowned king he is mentally torn to pieces because of the decisions he has made.

In some ways Lady Macbeth suffers more. She descends into a madness that she can't escape from, except through death. Possibly she is being punished for the way she manipulates Macbeth. In the extract she tells the audience that she will "pour [her] spirits in [Macbeth's] ear". The mention of "spirits" is a reference to the supernatural. Not only is Lady Macbeth rejecting the role of a female by describing Macbeth in a feminine way as I described earlier (an idea a 16th century audience may be disturbed by), she is also messing with supernatural beliefs, as well as leading Macbeth astray. She identifies that Macbeth isn't fully onboard with her plan and floods his mind with manipulative thoughts. Considering the gender expectations at the time of the play being written, an audience would probably have been pleased about Lady Macbeth's unhappy end later in the story.

So, there are two types of ambition represented throughout the play: good and bad. It would be fair to say that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth largely demonstrate sinister ambitions. It could be argued that Shakespeare keeps Macbeth alive for longer because at some stage he has had noble thoughts. But the eventual message of the play is that scheming,

This paragraph uses relevant quotations to back up detailed points about the way Macbeth is presented as a character.

This paragraph includes more good analysis of quotations and references to context but it could be more focused on how it relates to the topic in the question (ambition).

selfish ambition corrupts, whereas noble, selfless ambition comes out on top.

Good summary paragraph with the student's personal interpretations of Shakespeare's intent.

This response provides really detailed personal interpretations of the choices Shakespeare made in presenting his characters. The student has thoughtfully considered the different ways that ambition is presented throughout the play and the author's intent in presenting them this way. They could be more detailed in their analysis of language and structure throughout their response, and although there are contextual references throughout, these could be a little more focused on why they would have affected the audience.

Themes

Gender

Shakespeare explores gender roles through the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Both characters are powerful, but they display their power in different ways. Macbeth expresses his power through violence – he wins the title of Thane of Cawdor through victory in battle and wins the crown through murder. Lady Macbeth displays power through words, manipulating and controlling her husband to achieve her own ambitions.

Traditional gender roles are disrupted in the play. Lady Macbeth sees her femininity as a barrier to getting what she wants and wishes for more 'masculine' traits, such as cruelty. When she manipulates Macbeth, she reverses their gender roles – she mocks his lack of masculinity and takes control of him. The witches also display a masculine appearance that represents their strange and evil nature – Banquo is confused to see that they have beards.

Shakespeare shows a more sensitive side to masculinity through the character of Macduff. When Macduff learns about his son's death, Malcolm tells him to take it 'like a man', but Macduff replies that he must also 'feel it as a man'. He shows that you don't have to sacrifice feelings or emotions to be masculine – in fact, you should embrace your feelings to be a complete person.





Themes: Gender

Context

Britain in Shakespeare's time was a **patriarchal** society. This meant that almost all positions of power and authority were held by men. Women were essentially treated as property – they belonged to their fathers until they were married, then they belonged to their husbands, and they were expected to obey them at all times. A wife's role was to stay at home to cook, clean and care for children. Lady Macbeth's character would have been extremely controversial to

an audience in Shakespeare's time because she breaks all the expected rules. She has a dominant role in her marriage and controls her husband, she rejects her womanhood and takes on 'masculine' traits, and she shows no maternal instincts – she even says that she would kill her own child if she had sworn to do it. At the same time, Macbeth would have been seen as a weak and flawed character because he allows his wife to control him and dictate his actions.

Themes: Gender

Key Quotes



Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty.

Lady Macbeth, Act I Scene v

Lady Macbeth believes that in order to get what she wants she will need to be cold, calculating, ruthless and cruel. In Shakespeare's time, women were seen as weak, fragile and overly emotional. She wants to get rid of the feminine characteristics which she believes are an obstacle to her ambitions.



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.

Act I Scene v

Shakespeare explores two different attitudes to masculinity here. Macbeth argues that a man who isn't honourable isn't a real man at all. Lady Macbeth argues that being a man means daring to do whatever it takes to get what you want.



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.

Lady Macbeth, Act I Scene vii

Shakespeare uses shocking imagery to show Lady Macbeth's ruthlessness. The reversal of gender roles is clear here. Lady Macbeth shows a complete lack of the caring and mothering instinct that would be expected for a woman in Shakespeare's time, but she also mocks her own husband for cowardice.



MACDUFF

He has no children. All my pretty ones?
Did you say "all"? O hell-kite! All?
What, all my pretty chickens and their dam
At one fell swoop?

MALCOLM

Dispute it like a man.

MACDUFF

I shall do so,
But I must also feel it as a man.
I cannot but remember such things were
That were most precious to me.

Act IV Scene iii

Shakespeare uses Macduff as a contrast to the Macbeths. The Macbeths think masculinity is about ruthlessness and cruelty, but Macduff shows that men can have feelings and emotions too. When Macduff learns that his children have been killed, Malcolm tells him to take it like a man by killing Macbeth in revenge. Macduff says that he will, but he also has to be able to grieve for his family.

Mini Exams

Question 1

Describe the relationship between masculinity and power in *Macbeth*.

Question 2

What do the characters of Lady Macbeth and the witches tell us about Shakespeare's attitude to women?

Question 3

'*Macbeth* presents a negative view of masculinity.' Discuss.



Q

Exam Question

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

At this point in the play, Macbeth is having second thoughts about murdering King Duncan. Lady Macbeth is trying to convince him to go through with their plan.

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 extract, explore how Shakespeare presents gender roles in the play. Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in this scene;
- how Shakespeare presents gender in the play as a whole



Themes: Gender

Sample Answer

Good Response

Relevant point with a quotation as evidence.

Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as masculine in this scene when she tells Macbeth she would have “dashed the brains out”. This tells me that she doesn’t care about her child because she would kill it if Macbeth asked her to. This is shocking because in Shakespeare’s time a woman was expected to be a mother so she would have been seen as a bad woman. This makes her seem ruthless and cruel.

Another relevant point followed by a reference to context.

Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a coward when he asks “if we should fail?”. He seems less manly because he is not sure of himself and he relies on his wife to tell him what to do. This makes it seem like he has less power than Lady Macbeth. The audience would see Macbeth as weak because in Shakespeare’s time a man was supposed to control his wife and make the decisions. Later on in the play he is braver and takes action on his own, such as when he decides to kill Banquo. This shows that evil deeds destroy a person’s character and make it easier for them to commit more crimes in future.

Reference to context, but needs a more detailed explanation of why this shocking image is effective at developing Lady Macbeth’s character.

Lady Macbeth mocks Macbeth when she says “then you were a man”. She means that he used to be a man but he has lost his manhood by being a coward who is afraid to kill Duncan. She is able to control Macbeth by mocking him. Shakespeare shows that Lady Macbeth is ambitious and wants power for herself but because she is a woman she can’t get it without Macbeth’s help so she controls him to get what she wants.

Good point with some analysis of the effect of Shakespeare’s choices. Could be developed with a reference to the audience’s response.

Shakespeare shows that men and women can be very different from the stereotypes that are expected of them. Men can be weak and cowardly and women can be cruel and powerful. However they have different ways of showing their power. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth end up going mad and losing their lives so Shakespeare could be showing

the audience the danger of people trying to change what is expected from them.

Personal interpretation with some good ideas about Shakespeare's intent.

This student makes clear and structured points and uses evidence to support them. They need to develop their analysis more to focus on why Shakespeare presented the characters this way and how they develop over the course of the play beyond the scene in the extract. There also needs to be much more reference to specific language features or structures that Shakespeare has chosen and the effects they create.

Great Response

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth present conflicting attitudes to masculinity in this scene. With Macbeth's assertion that "I dare do all that may become a man; Who dares do more is none" Shakespeare presents him as an honourable character; Macbeth believes that manhood is about loyalty and his duty as a man is to know his proper place. This reinforces Shakespeare's presentation of Macbeth early in the play as an essentially noble man who is tempted by power but (initially) rejects the temptation, as seen earlier in the scene when Macbeth lists the arguments against Duncan's murder. In contrast, Lady Macbeth argues that masculinity is about being resolute enough to seize what you want: "When you durst do it, then you were a man". Her use of the past tense ("you were a man") emasculates Macbeth, implying that he is no longer a man because of his hesitation. This creates a conflict between the Macbeths; by questioning his very idea of manhood, she assumes power over him, subverting the roles that would be expected of a married couple in Shakespeare's time.

Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as ruthless and lacking any compassion, and he uses her lack of femininity to achieve this. Her assertion that she would kill her own child ("I would... have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out") is shocking both for its graphic imagery and for its contrast with all the expectations of motherhood; the imagery of motherhood normally represents love, care and tenderness and Shakespeare shows that Lady Macbeth lacks any of these traditionally 'feminine' qualities. As a woman in Shakespeare's time was expected to be primarily a wife and mother, Lady Macbeth's rejection of her femininity would have been perceived as particularly cruel and evil and establishes her villainous nature to the audience.

Shakespeare presents two extremes in his portrayal of masculinity to suggest that the best way to be a man is to be a well-rounded character. Macbeth is presented as overly sensitive at the beginning of the play and as a result he is

These opening points use evidence well to show how Shakespeare establishes the characters' points of view.

Good reference to a language feature and analysis of its meaning.

Good choice of quotation with a detailed exploration of its effect.

Reference to context with a good understanding of how it would have affected the audience's reaction to the play.

This sentence combines an analysis of Shakespeare's language choice with a reference to the play's context.

Reference to language feature (imagery) with analysis of its effect.

easily manipulated and controlled by Lady Macbeth, despite her status in Shakespeare's time as his social inferior. In contrast, once Macbeth becomes king, he is ruthless and unfeeling and lacks the empathy and sensitivity that he needs to rule his people justly. Shakespeare presents the character of Macduff as a middle ground between these two extremes: he is decisive enough to take action to avenge the murder of his family, but he is also in touch with his feelings and expresses his grief and remorse, stating that he must "feel it like a man" when he learns of their deaths. Shakespeare suggests that to be a man is to be well-rounded and capable of both decisiveness and sensitivity.

The last paragraph presents a detailed personal response that shows a thorough understanding of the theme across the play as a whole. It offers a good analysis of Shakespeare's overall intent.

This response shows a detailed understanding of how Shakespeare presents gender both in the scene and across the play. The student offers strong personal interpretations of Shakespeare's choices and discusses how he develops characters to create effects on the audience. While there are good references to context, they could be expanded to show a greater understanding of how the gender roles of the time would have affected the audience's response to the play.

Themes

Fate and the Supernatural

All of the events in *Macbeth* are surrounded by a dark and evil atmosphere. Supernatural forces are at work throughout the play – the witches use spells and potions to influence Macbeth, while Lady Macbeth calls upon evil spirits to help her get what she wants. When Duncan is killed, strange and unnatural events start happening – it goes dark in the daytime and Duncan’s horses go mad and eat each other.

Fate is a key theme of the play as Shakespeare explores whether people can really control their own destinies. Macbeth’s downfall comes from his attempts to fulfil the witches’ prophecies, but it’s left unclear how much power the witches *actually* have over the future. Are their prophecies really fate and destined to happen whatever Macbeth does, or are they simply toying with Macbeth and leading him astray? Would Macbeth still have murdered Duncan if he hadn’t heard the prophecy? Shakespeare leaves these questions up to the audience, but the clear message is those who try to control their own fate through evil deeds will be ruined in the end.

Many of the play’s supernatural elements are used to represent the characters’ inner feelings. Macbeth sees a vision of a dagger when he’s tempted to kill Duncan and he’s haunted by the ghost of Banquo when he is full of guilt for his murder. Again, it’s not clear whether these visions are real or just hallucinations in Macbeth’s mind. Shakespeare uses the visions to explore Macbeth’s mental state throughout the play.





Themes: Fate and the Supernatural

Context

In Shakespeare's time, witches and evil spirits were considered to be very real by most people. Witches were believed to have made a pact with the Devil in exchange for magical powers which they used to cause mischief and harm, and witchcraft was often blamed for unfortunate events such as a bad harvest or an outbreak of illness. The audience would have immediately recognised the witches in *Macbeth* as evil creatures with harmful intentions.

Macbeth's willingness to trust them would be seen as a clear weakness in his character. King James I had a personal fascination with witchcraft (he published a book on the subject called *Daemonologie*) and Shakespeare may have included the witches in *Macbeth* to personally interest the king. The strange events that occur after Duncan's murder represent the idea that the king is chosen by God to rule and, as such, killing the king is a crime that disturbs all of nature.

Themes: Fate and the Supernatural

Key Quotes



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

The Witches, Act I Scene i

This line sums up the tone of the whole play. Throughout *Macbeth*, nothing is what it seems. Things that seem good have terrible consequences, and people hide their real intentions.



FIRST WITCH

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!

SECOND WITCH

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!

THIRD WITCH

All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!

Act I Scene iii

The witches clearly have a supernatural knowledge of the future – they know Macbeth has been made Thane of Cawdor before he does. However, they never tell him what needs to happen for their prophecy to come true. Macbeth has to decide whether to leave his future up to chance or to take action.



If chance will have me king,
why, chance may crown me,
Without my stir.

Macbeth, Act I Scene iii

Macbeth shows his belief in 'chance' (fate) and thinks that the crown may come to him without him having to do anything. Lady Macbeth is the one who pushes him towards the idea of murder later on.



Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me
clutch thee.

I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.

Macbeth, Act II Scene i

The vision of the dagger appears when Macbeth makes up his mind to kill Duncan. His instinct is to grab it, representing his desire for power. The dagger could be a vision to tempt Macbeth, a warning for him to reconsider his actions or a hallucination representing his guilty conscience – it's left up to the audience to decide.

Mini Exams

Question 1

Explain the significance of the supernatural within the play.

Question 2

If the witches were taken out of the play, would it be better or worse, and why?

Question 3

'In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare shows us that the supernatural is a powerful and uncontrollable influence on our lives.' To what extent do you think this is true?



Q

Exam Question

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

At this point in the play, Macbeth and Banquo are returning from battle when they encounter the witches.

BANQUO

How far is't call'd to Forres? What are these
So wither'd and so wild in their attire,
That look not like the inhabitants o' the earth,
And yet are on't? Live you? or are you aught
That man may question? You seem to understand me,
By each at once her chappy finger laying
Upon her skinny lips: you should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so.

MACBETH

Speak, if you can: what are you?

FIRST WITCH

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, thane of Glamis!

SECOND WITCH

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!

THIRD WITCH

All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!

BANQUO

Good sir, why do you start; and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair? I' the name of truth,
Are ye fantastical, or that indeed
Which outwardly ye show? My noble partner
You greet with present grace and great prediction
Of noble having and of royal hope,
That he seems rapt withal: to me you speak not.
If you can look into the seeds of time,
And say which grain will grow and which will not,
Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear
Your favours nor your hate.

Starting with this extract, explore how Shakespeare presents the supernatural in the play. Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents the witches in this scene;
- how Shakespeare presents the supernatural in the play as a whole.



Themes: Fate and the Supernatural

Sample Answer

Good Response

Relevant point with a quotation as evidence and a comment on the effect on the audience.

Macbeth thinks that the witches don't look like they come from this world. A quote that shows this is when he says "look not like the inhabitants o'the earth". This shows that the witches look scary and unusual, which makes us fear them. He makes a list of what they look like: "chappy finger" and "skinny lips" and "beards" which shows Macbeth is confused about whether they are women or men. Also, when Macbeth sees them he says "what are you" not "who" which tells us that he doesn't think they are human. Shakespeare is presenting the supernatural to be something out of this world. This would have been especially scary for audiences in Shakespeare's time because they believed in witchcraft and superstition and King James wrote a book about witches that lots of people read. So audiences would have believed that the witches were real.

When the witches speak to Macbeth they call him by his title and then what he is going to be. They call him "thane of Cawdor" and "king hereafter" which tells him that he is going to become king. They do the titles in order, so they go up in order of importance. In Shakespeare's time this would have been really important because kings were the most powerful people and if you thought you were going to be king it was a very big thing. This presents the witches as having special powers as they can see into the future. They show that they can do this again later in the play when Macbeth goes to see them and they tell him that he is safe until Birnham Wood moves and that he can't be killed by a "man of woman born". This also shows that they have power over Macbeth as they know things he doesn't know.

Banquo asks Macbeth why he is scared of the witches. He says "why do you start and seem to fear things that do sound so fair?" This shows that Macbeth knows the witches

Identifies a language feature and explains its meaning.

References the context, but could give a more detailed explanation of the society of the time felt about witchcraft and why the witches would have been scary to the audience.

This paragraph mainly explains the story of the play - it needs to say more about why Shakespeare presented the witches this way.

What does Macbeth's change in attitude to the witches tell the audience about Macbeth as a character? Why is it important that he no longer fears them?

are evil and strange and he is careful around them. He doesn't know what to think. Later in the play he gets braver and he goes to find the witches and calls them "secret black and midnight hags". He wants to control the supernatural but he can't because they won't do what he tells them to.

This shows us that Shakespeare is saying the supernatural is something evil that can't be controlled. He is saying it is dangerous.

It is all because of the witches and the supernatural that Macbeth decides to start killing people so it is really the reason everything happens in the play. The witches get Macbeth thinking he could be king and then Banquo comes to Macbeth and starts haunting him. These are supernatural events that basically send Macbeth and Lady Macbeth mad so you could say the supernatural is presented as the most powerful thing in the play.

This last paragraph is mostly a narrative without analysis - why do you think Shakespeare chose to include the supernatural in this way?

This response shows a good understanding of the supernatural events of the play and uses quotations to support points well. The student needs to focus less on retelling the story of the play and more on why Shakespeare chose to present the supernatural this way - they should talk about the effect the witches have on the audience and how they affect the presentation of the other characters. They could also talk more about the language and structure Shakespeare chose to use.

Great Response

Relevant point with a quotation as evidence, analysing the effect created and the author's intent.

Shakespeare presents the witches as disturbingly unnatural in appearance. Banquo is struck by their otherworldly nature, noting that they “look not like the inhabitants o’ the earth”, while Macbeth asks “what are you?” instead of “who are you?”, implying that they have an unhuman quality. This creates an immediate atmosphere of mystery around them. Shakespeare uses this to reinforce the audience’s fear of the witches and distrust of their motives. The audience would already be suspicious and fearful of the witches due to the strong belief in magic and witchcraft in Jacobean society; witches were commonly blamed for unfortunate and harmful events, and the audience would have recognised them as dangerous characters. Their strange and supernatural appearance adds to this.

The witches appear to exert a powerful influence over Macbeth. Shakespeare’s use of repetition (“All hail, Macbeth!”) gives the prophecy a spell-like feel that highlights its supernatural nature. Macbeth seems to be almost spellbound by the witches; he does not respond to the prophecy straight away, and Banquo notes that he is “rapt”, an adjective suggesting that Macbeth is speechless and entranced by the witches. In contrast, Banquo seems unfazed by the witches, stating that he will “neither beg nor fear your favours nor your hate”. The difference between Macbeth and Banquo’s reactions helps to establish their characters; Macbeth is too easily tempted and manipulated by dark and dangerous forces, which is the flaw that leads to his eventual downfall, while Banquo is more careful and less readily swayed. The characters of the witches and Banquo’s disdain for them could have been Shakespeare’s way of pleasing King James I, who was noted for his interest in (and hatred for) witchcraft and who believe himself to be a descendant of the real-life Banquo.

A key aspect of the supernatural in *Macbeth* is that it is left unclear whether the events of the play are truly fate or whether the prophecies are simply meant to tempt and manipulate Macbeth. The witches do show a supernatural knowledge of the future when they address Macbeth as

Detailed understanding of context and its effect on the audience.

Identifies language features (repetition, adjective) and discusses their effect.

Another good reference to context explaining Shakespeare’s choices.

“thane of Cawdor” and “king hereafter”; however, it is Macbeth himself who interprets the prophecy as meaning he must murder Duncan and sets himself on the path to ruin. Throughout the play, Macbeth interprets supernatural happenings as justifications for murder, such as the vision of the dagger that finally steels him to kill Duncan or the prophecy to “beware Macduff” that leads him to have Macduff’s family killed. These deeds in fact come back to haunt Macbeth. Shakespeare’s implication is that while supernatural forces can be dangerous, they are less dangerous than human nature itself, which is easily tempted to foul deeds by the promise of power. Macbeth’s death at the end of the play is a warning to the audience that those who try to control their own destiny through evil deeds are doomed to ruin.

This paragraph includes a detailed personal interpretation of Shakespeare’s intent and its impact on the audience.

This response includes detailed personal interpretations of the play. The student has focused on the effect of Shakespeare’s choices, how they develop the characters and the impact they create on the audience. They have used a good structure with quotations to support their points. They could improve their response with a bigger focus on AO2, talking more about language features or structure.

Themes

Guilt

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare explores the destructive power of guilt. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are both powerful and ruthless characters, but neither of them can escape the guilt they feel for their crimes. It's guilt that eventually causes their downfalls.

Guilt causes Macbeth to lose his humanity. At the start of the play, he's shown as an honourable and sensitive man and the idea of killing his king horrifies him, even if he is tempted by power. As soon as he commits the murder, he shows immense guilt. His response is to try and cover up his crime by murdering everyone who could get in his way, but he can't escape his guilty conscience – he is tormented by the ghost of Banquo. The more murders he commits, the more brutal he becomes in his attempts to escape the consequences of his actions; by the end of the play he is a heartless and inhuman tyrant.

Lady Macbeth shows no conscience at the beginning of the play and she shows no outward guilt straight after the murder. Over time, though, her guilt starts to drive her mad – she walks and talks in her sleep, seeing blood on her hands that can't be cleaned off. Shakespeare implies that some crimes are so terrible that no-one can escape their consequences, no matter how heartless they are.





Themes: Guilt

Context

Macbeth's guilt helps the audience to see him as a sympathetic character before his eventual downfall – it shows that he knows that his actions are wrong and that he feels remorse. This helps to create the tragedy of the play (the downfall of an otherwise good character because of a fatal flaw or mistake). Macbeth's guilt also reflects the deeply religious society of Shakespeare's time. He knows that he has committed

a crime against God and he will face punishment not only in his lifetime but in the afterlife as well. Lady Macbeth is unable to handle her guilt without losing her mind, which could reflect society's attitude to women in Shakespeare's time. Women were seen as weaker than men both physically and mentally, and Lady Macbeth's madness could be seen as a warning about women trying to take on 'male' roles in society.

Photo courtesy of Welcome Collection, licensed under CC BY 4.0, Cropped from original

Themes: Guilt

Key Quotes



Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand?

Macbeth, Act II Scene ii

Blood becomes a symbol for guilt in the play. Macbeth can wash the blood from his hands literally, but his guilty conscience means he can always see it in his mind, and nothing can remove it.



Avaunt, and quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee.
Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold.
Thou hast no speculation in those eyes
Which thou dost glare with

Macbeth, Act III Scene iv

Macbeth is horrified by Banquo's ghost and its gruesome appearance. It reminds him of the horrible crime that he has committed against his friend. It also haunts him at his own banquet – Macbeth's guilt stops him from being able to enjoy the power that he committed his crimes to win in the first place.



Sinful Macduff,
They were all struck for thee! Naught that I am,
Not for their own demerits, but for mine,
Fell slaughter on their souls. Heaven rest
them now.

Macduff, Act IV Scene iii

Shakespeare shows a healthier attitude to guilt through Macduff, who blames himself for his family's murder. He feels genuine sorrow and remorse but does not lose control of himself in the way that the Macbeths do.



The thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now?
What, will these hands ne'er be clean?

Lady Macbeth, Act V Scene i

Lady Macbeth's madness is caused by her guilt. She talks in childlike rhymes that show her broken mental state and the blood she imagines on her hands continues the theme that Macbeth began earlier. The thane of Fife's wife was Lady Macduff, who Macbeth had murdered.

Themes: Guilt

Mini Exams

Question 1

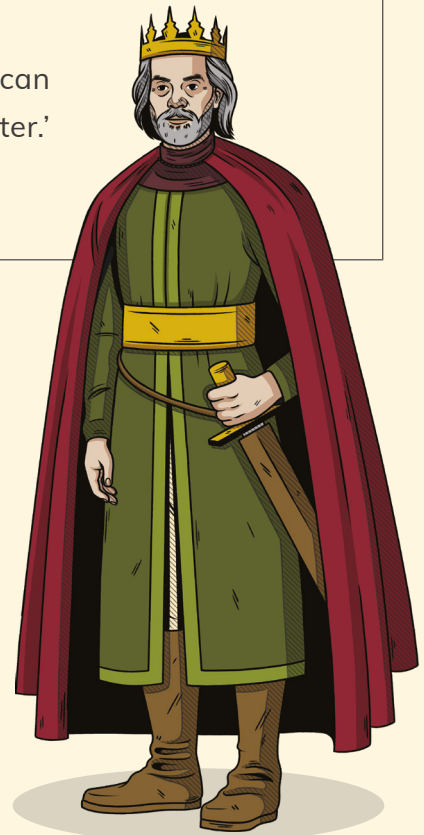
Explain how Macbeth and Lady Macbeth react to feelings of guilt differently.

Question 2

How does Macbeth's guilt affect his decision-making in other events in the play?

Question 3

'In choosing not to feel guilty for the murder of King Duncan to begin with, Lady Macbeth ultimately suffers more later.'
Discuss.



Q

Exam Question

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

At this point in the play, Macbeth has just murdered King Duncan and 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 ravell'd 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 murder'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor
Shall sleep no more; Macbeth shall sleep no more."

LADY MACBETH

Who was it that thus cried? Why, worthy thane,
You do unbend your noble strength, to think
So brainsickly 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.



Starting with this extract, explore how Shakespeare presents guilt in the play. Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents Macbeth's guilt in this scene;
- how Shakespeare presents guilt in the play as a whole.

Themes: Guilt

Sample Answer

Good Response

Relevant point with a quotation as evidence.

Macbeth knows that killing Duncan is wrong, and when he says someone shouted “Macbeth does murder sleep” this shows how deep his guilt is – he hears voices accusing him, even when there aren’t any there. The alliteration stresses what he is saying. This is really important because it refers to Macbeth’s act of murdering Duncan while he sleeps and also to the fact that Macbeth has murdered his own chance of sleeping well ever again – so he will be haunted by guilt for what he has done. This is shown when he gives a list of metaphors describing sleep, including calling it “innocent” and a “balm”. He knows that he is no longer innocent and does not deserve any comfort.

Reference to a language feature, but the explanation of its effect could be more detailed.

How does this make the audience feel about Lady Macbeth?

Lady Macbeth tries to comfort Macbeth, but by calling his thoughts “brainsickly”, she shows that she doesn’t get how guilty he is feeling. The adjective implies that he is weak and unstable, and shouldn’t feel this way. But later in the play she also starts to feel really guilty about what they’ve done. Shakespeare shows guilt as something that destroys people and makes them mad – Lady Macbeth thinks that “a little water” will make their murders go away, but in fact she can’t get rid of the “damned spot” on her hands which will not wash off.

Why does Shakespeare use these metaphors? What effect do they create?

Reference to a language feature.

This paragraph is mostly a narrative of the plot - it needs more focus on how guilt affects Macbeth and why it leads him to behave as he does.

In the extract, Macbeth is “afraid to think” about the murder. This is ironic, because over the course of the play he can’t think of anything else. His guilt over the murder and his fear that people will find out make him murder Banquo, who then comes back as a ghost to haunt him. This also happens to Macduff, who runs away from Scotland and leaves his wife and children to be killed on Macbeth’s orders. He says their ghosts will “haunt me still”. For both characters, Shakespeare presents guilt as something that cannot be avoided.

Relevant point with quotations as evidence. References the whole text.

Macbeth also says that he “dare not” look at what he has done. He realises how bad his action is and he feels guilt for it. Audiences in Shakespeare’s time would have especially understood this, as it was a terrible crime to kill a king, who was supposedly chosen by God. Shakespeare is presenting guilt as what happens when you go against the rule of God. Modern audiences might not get this point as much, but they would understand Macbeth’s guilt at killing someone who loved and trusted him – he describes Duncan as having “honoured him of late”. In both cases, Macbeth’s guilt is as a result of having done something terrible and immoral.

Reference to context but the explanation of the effect on the audience could be more developed.

This answer is focused on the question and the student shows a good understanding of the text. They could develop their ideas on how guilt affects the characters and focus more on how Shakespeare chooses language to create ideas and effects. The response could expand on how guilt is presented throughout the rest of the text. There is a short reference to context, but this could be expanded with more development of how the audience would have reacted to Macbeth’s guilt.

Great Response

One of the main ideas in *Macbeth* is 'guilt'. Shakespeare uses the plot of the play to show that in the end, guilt does take over, even when you have lost your soul.

Relevant point with a quotation as evidence, showing understanding of the scene.

In the extract, Macbeth has just murdered the honourable and trusting King Duncan out of an egoistic desire for the throne. However, he immediately regrets this irreversible decision, claiming that he "shall sleep no more". Macbeth's act emotionally drains him in a way that does not affect Lady Macbeth at this point, who is only thinking about their plan of action and how to escape getting caught. Macbeth mentions that he has "murder'd" sleep, and this metaphor brings into view how much guilt is clouding his judgement, because murdering sleep would be an enormously sinful act due to the pain it causes others. This implies that greedy actions will only result in the long-lasting ache of guilt. The Jacobean audience of the play will have seen this as a result of 'The Divine Right Of Kings', a theory that suggested that the king or queen was chosen by God before birth to be the heir to the throne. Macbeth's actions are breaking this philosophy, and so this guilt would have been seen as punishment from God, killing a king being the worst sin he could ever commit. A modern audience may see this as a message to those who act on selfish impulses, that making these decisions is against human nature, and will ultimately end in guilt leaving you in turmoil.

Detailed reference to context and its importance to the play.

This extract also conveys the image that guilt can't be washed away in the way that blood can wash off your hands. Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth to "wash this filthy business" from his hands, suggesting that guilt can be remedied by forgetting about it and leaving no traces of the deed. Macbeth's obvious distress contradicts this, and proves that visible evidence doesn't say anything to the imprint left in his head. This metaphor is extended later in the text when Macbeth asks, "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?", implying that this crime is harder to forget about than he thought it would be. Showing that guilt isn't as easy to wash away as blood with water conveys to the audience that this guilt in

Identifies a language feature and discusses its meaning and effect.

Identifies a language feature and explores how Shakespeare presents guilt differently in *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth*.

Discusses the writer's intentions.

Macbeth's mind will not fade, and will lead to his downfall. Shakespeare may have wanted to show the audience that bad deeds catch up with you, and you will always regret them, and Macbeth is a perfect example of this message.

Later on in the play, Macbeth becomes obsessed with feeling secure in his throne, convinced that killing another person will make him finally feel like the rightful king. He starts to show no remorse when killing, even sinking as low as killing innocent women and children. However, Lady Macbeth becomes haunted by what she initially encouraged Macbeth to do and in her sleep continuously washes her hands, saying, "Out, damn'd spot", implying that even those determined not to be taken over by guilt or human emotions cannot succeed. Lady Macbeth's soliloquy in Act 1, Scene 5 in which she says, "fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty" is full of her agonising over the idea that Macbeth won't be "brave" enough to kill Duncan, and she summons evil spirits to help her to be rid of guilt and empathy. This immediately gives the audience the impression that Lady Macbeth is empty of human emotions, but her later regret and eventual demise lead the audience to believe that even those that seem unable to feel sadness and regret will eventually get led to the dark path of guilt. The Jacobean audience may have seen Lady Macbeth's misfortune as punishment from God for summoning evil spirits and encouraging Macbeth's evil deeds.

Relevant point with a quotation as evidence.

Discusses the structure of the play by analysing how characters change over time and how this affects the audience.

Overall, the play Macbeth challenges those who are tempted to perform a sinful deed, and shows the audience through his characters that it will only result in chaos, suffering and eventually one's downfall.

References the context of the play but the explanation of the society of the time could be more detailed.

This response is a detailed exploration of the theme with a strong focus on what Shakespeare wanted to get across to the audience and how he achieved this. The student identifies language and structural features and explores the effects they create. They could develop the references to the context of Shakespeare's time to give a more detailed explanation of how the audience would have reacted to the play, but overall this is a really strong response.

Themes

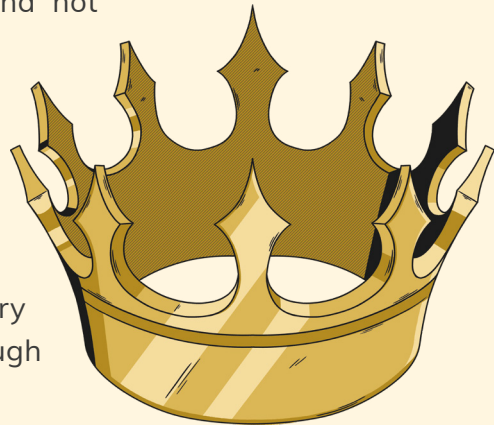
Kingship and Tyranny

Shakespeare presents several different versions of leadership in *Macbeth* to explore what makes a good king.

King Duncan seems like a perfect king. He's always talked about in a positive light – he puts the good of his country first and he wants to be a fair ruler of his people. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth both see him as a father figure. Despite this, he shows weakness as a leader. He is betrayed by his close companions twice in the play – first the Thane of Cawdor rebels against him and then Macbeth murders him. His overly kind nature is a weakness because he trusts those around him too easily.

Macbeth is the exact opposite of Duncan as a ruler – he trusts nobody and he doesn't care about his people, only his own power. He ruthlessly kills anybody who gets in his way. As a result, the country falls into chaos and violence. Macbeth is shown to be unfit to rule because he acts only in his own interests and not his people's.

At the end of the play, Malcolm takes the throne and promises to restore the order that Macbeth destroyed. Shakespeare presents Malcolm as a good middle ground between Duncan and Macbeth: he cares for his country and his people while being strong enough to stand up to those who oppose him.





Themes: Kingship and Tyranny

Context

At the time *Macbeth* was written, James I had been king of England for about three years. James wrote a number of essays about his idea of kingship. He saw himself as an **absolute monarch** (a king or queen who has complete and total control over their country). He believed that this was his right because God had placed him on the throne.

However, he also believed that this meant he had a responsibility to rule his people fairly. Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* to appeal directly to King James's interests and his presentation of good and bad kingship reflects this. Shakespeare suggests that James's style of kingship, balancing authority with fairness, is the best way to rule.

Key Quotes



Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off

Macbeth, Act I Scene vii

When Macbeth tries to talk himself out of killing Duncan, he describes the qualities that make Duncan a good king. He says that Duncan has been such a humble and fair leader that murdering him would be a huge injustice.



To crown my thoughts with acts,
be it thought and done:
The castle of Macduff I will surprise,
Seize upon Fife, give to th' edge o' th' sword
His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls
That trace him in his line.

Macbeth, Act IV Scene i

As king, Macbeth becomes a tyrant – he kills innocent people like Macduff's family without hesitation. He doesn't care about fairness or justice, only keeping hold of his own power.



The king-becoming graces,
As justice, verity, temperance, stableness,
Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness,
Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude...

Malcolm, Act IV Scene iii

In this scene, Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty to the country by pretending to have none of the qualities of a good king. He lists the traits a king should possess, and it's clear to the audience that Macbeth does not fit the bill.



O nation miserable,
With an untitled tyrant bloody-scepter'd,
When shalt thou see thy wholesome days again?

Macduff, Act IV Scene iii

Macduff emphasises that a good leader is needed for a country to be happy. With a tyrant like Macbeth on the throne, the whole nation is worse off because he does not care for the needs of the people.

Mini Exams

Question 1

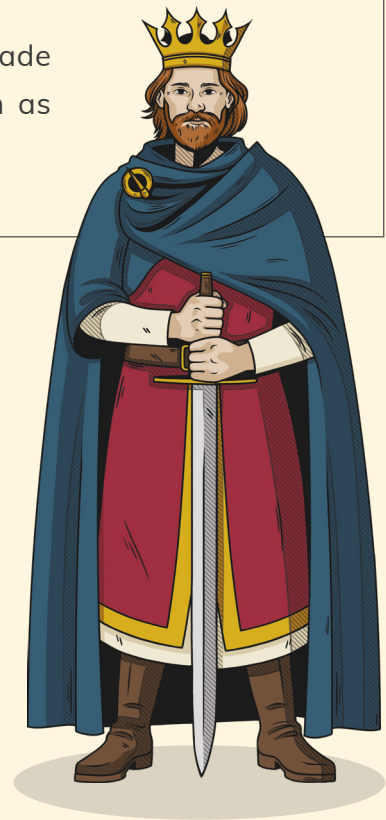
What does Shakespeare tell us about kingship in the play? Use King Duncan, Macbeth and Malcolm to answer.

Question 2

'Duncan is too trusting to be an effective king. In fact, Macbeth shows more of the traits of a strong king.' How true do you think this is?

Question 3

Explain why the political situation of the time made Shakespeare portray Duncan, Macbeth and Malcolm as he did.



Q

Exam Question

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

At this point in the play, Malcolm is testing Macduff's loyalty to Scotland by pretending to be unfit to be king.

MALCOLM

But I have none: the king-becoming graces,
As justice, verity, temperance, stableness,
Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness,
Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude,
I have no relish of them, but abound
In the division of each several crime,
Acting it many ways. Nay, had I power, I should
Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell,
Uproar the universal peace, confound
All unity on earth.

MACDUFF

O Scotland, Scotland!

MALCOLM

If such a one be fit to govern, speak:
I am as I have spoken.

MACDUFF

Fit to govern!
No, not to live. O nation miserable,
With an untitled tyrant bloody-scepter'd,
When shalt thou see thy wholesome days again,
Since that the truest issue of thy throne
By his own interdiction stands accursed,
And does blaspheme his breed? Thy royal father
Was a most sainted king: the queen that bore thee,
Oftener upon her knees than on her feet,
Died every day she lived. Fare thee well!
These evils thou repeat'st upon thyself
Have banish'd me from Scotland. O my breast,
Thy hope ends here!



Starting with this extract, explore how Shakespeare presents kingship in the play. Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents kingship in this scene;
- how Shakespeare presents kingship in the play as a whole.

Themes: Kingship and Tyranny

Sample Answer

Good Response

Clear and relevant point evidenced with quotations, with a reference to the effect on the audience.

Shakespeare shows what a good king should be like when Malcolm gives a list of their qualities. He lists things such as “justice”, “mercy” and “patience”. These qualities show that a good king should be fair and kind and look after his people. Macbeth does not do this when he becomes king. He only cares about his own power and kills anyone who opposes him, such as Macduff’s family. Shakespeare shows the audience that Macbeth is not a good king because he does not have any of these qualities. However Duncan is presented as being a kind and fair leader which makes it more evil to the audience that Macbeth killed him.

Shakespeare also shows that a good king should be religious. Macduff says that Duncan was “sainted” meaning he was very religious and devoted to God. Macbeth is the opposite of this because he killed Duncan. This was a crime against God because of the Divine Right of Kings which meant that the king was chosen by God. People were very religious in Shakespeare’s time so they would have been very shocked by this.

Reference to context, explaining how the audience would have reacted to Macbeth’s actions.

Another clear point with evidence and explanation.

Macduff shows how a bad king affects the country he rules when he says “O nation miserable”. This shows that a bad king makes all his subjects suffer and live in misery. He also says that his “hope ends here” because he thinks that Malcolm is no better than Macbeth and there is no chance of Scotland being ruled by a good king again. This shows the audience that Macduff is a good character because he cares about the fate of his country and wants the best for everyone.

Overall Shakespeare shows the audience that a king needs to care about his country and all of its people rather than just himself. Macbeth doesn’t care about anything but his own power and as a result of this he can never be a good

king. The audience would be happy at the end of the play when Malcolm becomes king because they know that he has the right qualities to be a good king to his people.

Detailed reference to context and its importance to the play.

The student has structured their paragraphs well to include points, evidence and explanations and clearly focused on the topic in the question. They need to make much more reference to the specific language features that Shakespeare has used and they could develop their answer to show more understanding of the whole play beyond the extract in the question.

Great Response

Through the character of Malcolm, Shakespeare presents his vision of an ideal leader; the “king-becoming graces” that Malcolm lists show the audience the qualities of a good king, focusing on a sense of justice, duty to their subjects and benevolence. By presenting these qualities as a lengthy list (“justice, verity, temperance, stableness, bounty, perseverance, mercy...”), Shakespeare emphasises to the audience just how poorly Macbeth represents a good leader - he lacks any of these qualities. The audience would recognise that Macbeth’s paranoid and tyrannical behaviour stands in total contrast to Malcolm’s ideal of kingship.

This paragraph makes a focused point about Shakespeare’s intent and references the effect of a specific language feature (listing).

Another clear point evidenced with quotations and developed with an analysis of specific language features (metaphor).

In pretending to lack any of the previously listed “graces”, Malcolm indicates the consequences of a bad king occupying the throne: it would “pour the sweet milk of concord into hell, uproar the universal peace, confound all unity on earth”. The metaphor of “milk”, representing purity and goodness, occurs several times throughout the play, such as when Lady Macbeth refers to “the milk of human kindness” in Macbeth; Malcolm suggests that this purity and goodness is destroyed by poor kingship. His comment that bad leadership will “confound all unity on earth” is a reference to the Jacobean belief in the Great Chain of Being, a natural order created by God with God himself at the top, followed by the king as his representative on Earth. Shakespeare suggests that without a just ruler on the throne, this natural order will collapse.

Good understanding shown of context and how it affected Shakespeare’s intent in writing the play.

Through Macduff, Shakespeare comments on how an unjust king affects the people he rules. He uses personification to show how the people are made to suffer by tyranny: he laments “O nation miserable... When shalt thou see thy wholesome days again?” This personification of the country as miserable and desperate for relief shows how bad kingship affects the whole populace and mood of a country. Macduff emphasises that Macbeth’s leadership is illegitimate when he refers to an “untitled tyrant bloody-scepter’d”; “untitled” shows that Macbeth was not crowned justly or chosen by God for his position and “bloody-scepter’d” emphasises both how Macbeth uses violence to hold onto his position

This paragraph continues to combine clear points and evidence with analysis of language features.

and the eternal guilt that Macbeth bears for his crimes. It continues the extended metaphor of blood representing guilt that occurs throughout the play, with the Macbeths' bloody hands being the clearest example.

Shakespeare discusses the ideal of kingship to appeal directly to King James I, who was on the throne at the time of the play's writing; James considered himself to have a great responsibility to rule his people justly and fairly and wrote essays on the subject. Shakespeare implies that James represents the ideal of kingship presented by Malcolm while contrasting it with the brutal and tyrannical qualities shown by Macbeth; this would help the audience to feel gratitude for James's benevolent leadership when contrasted with the bloody consequences of rule by a tyrant.

Good summary paragraph showing contextual knowledge and using it to develop a point about Shakespeare's intent and the play's effect on the audience.

This response combines clear points, focused on the theme in the question and supported with evidence, with some detailed analysis of language features and references to the context of the play. The student clearly understands that the play was created as a construct by Shakespeare to convey ideas to an audience and they clearly refer to the intentions behind Shakespeare's choices as well as the audience's response to them.