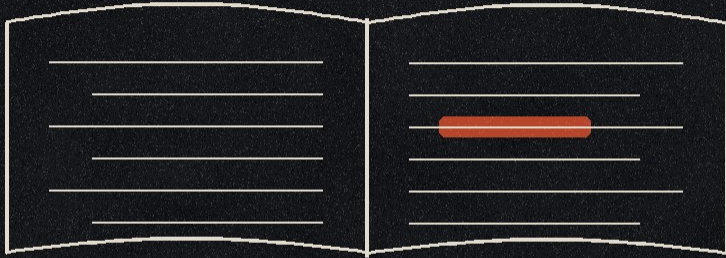




Shakespeare: Macbeth

Plot and context, characters, themes, and moving from the extract to the whole play

4 SUBTOPICS · 4 LESSONS OF ABOUT 60 MINUTES





Who is to blame for Duncan's murder?



FIG 1 Henry Fuseli, *The Three Witches Appearing to Macbeth and Banquo* (public domain)

Three witches greet a brave soldier with a prophecy:

“All hail, Macbeth! that shalt be king hereafter!” (1.3)

Within days, the king is dead and Macbeth wears the crown.

Who is most to blame: the witches, Lady Macbeth, or Macbeth himself?



By the end of this section you can...

01

PLOT AND CONTEXT

Know what happens in each act, and the Jacobean ideas behind it.

02

CHARACTERS

Track how Macbeth and Lady Macbeth change, and why the others matter.

03

THEMES

Use key quotations on ambition, guilt, kingship, appearances and masculinity.

04

THE EXAM

Write about the extract, then the whole play, covering AO1, AO2, AO3 and AO4.

Follows the AQA GCSE English Literature specification (8702), Paper 1 Section A (Shakespeare).



Paper 1, Section A: Shakespeare

THE QUESTION

One question on Macbeth: an extract is printed, then you write about the extract and the whole play.

THE MARKS

30 marks for the essay, plus 4 more for spelling, punctuation and grammar (AO4).

NO BOOK

It is a closed-book exam: quotations must come from memory.

PAPER 1

Section B, the 19th-century novel, is on the same paper (Topic 3 or 4).

A01

Your response: a clear argument, backed by quotations

A02

Shakespeare's methods: language, form and structure

A03

Context: ideas and beliefs of the time

A04

Spelling, punctuation, grammar and vocabulary

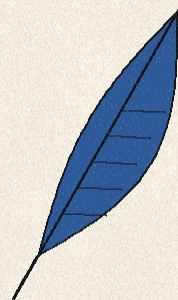
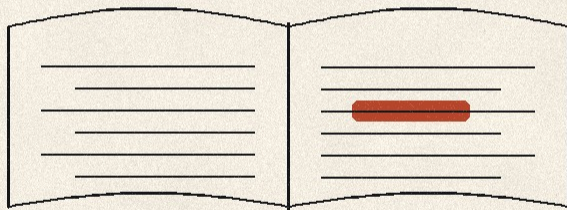


PART 1 OF 4

Plot and context

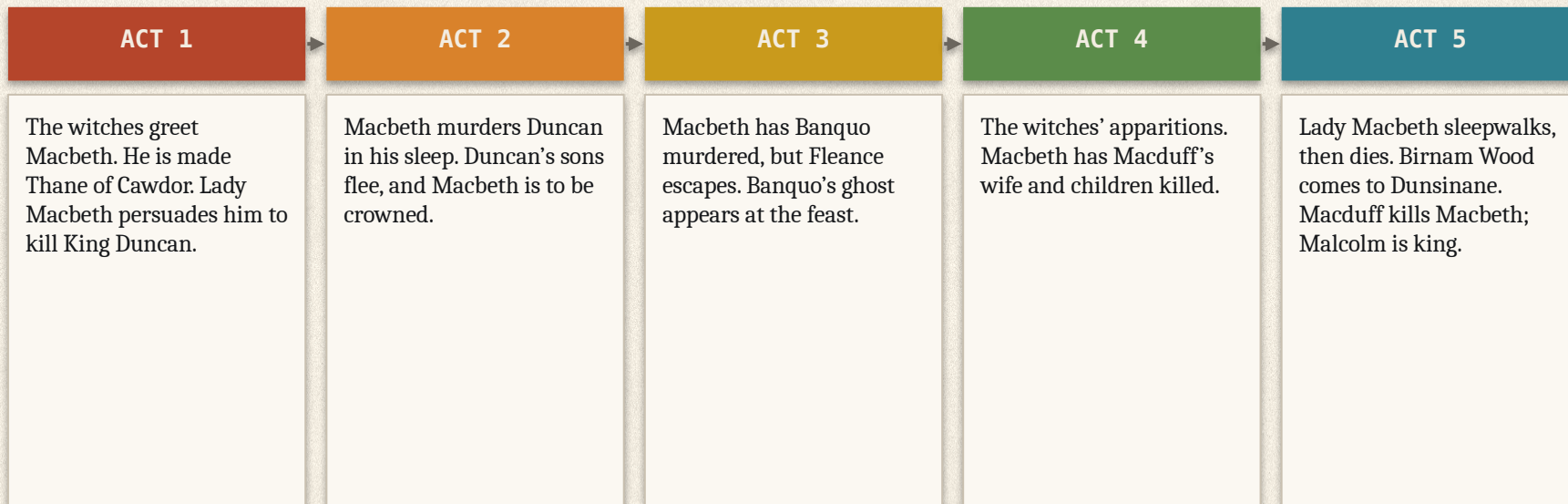
What happens, act by act, and what a Jacobean audience believed.

01 PLOT AND CONTEXT





The play in five acts



Shape: a rise to the crown in Acts 1 and 2, then a long fall: each murder makes Macbeth less safe, not more.



Jacobean context (A03)

JAMES I	Written around 1606 for an audience under King James I, who was also James VI of Scotland and was said to descend from Banquo.
WITCHCRAFT	James wrote a book about witches, Daemonologie (1597). Many people feared witches as agents of the devil.
DIVINE RIGHT	Kings were believed to be chosen by God. Killing one (regicide) was a sin against God as well as a crime.
GUNPOWDER PLOT	In 1605 plotters tried to blow up James and Parliament. Treason and regicide were very much in the news.
SOURCE	Shakespeare took the story from Holinshed's Chronicles, and changed it: his Banquo is innocent.





Context that earns marks

WEAK: BOLTED ON

People in Jacobean times believed in witches. King James wrote a book about them. This is why there are witches in the play.

STRONG: WOVEN IN

When the witches chant “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (1.1), a Jacobean audience, many of whom feared witches as servants of the devil, would hear a warning that the moral order is being turned upside down.

The test: does the context explain why Shakespeare wrote something, or how an audience would react to a specific moment? If not, cut it.

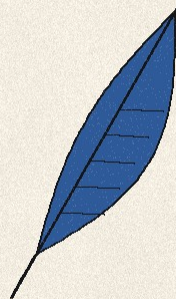
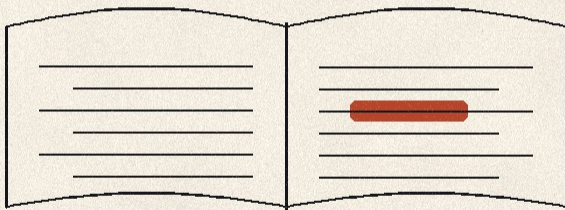


PART 2 OF 4

Characters

How Macbeth and Lady Macbeth change, and what the others are for.

02 CHARACTERS





Macbeth

From brave soldier to tyrant

HERO "For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name)" (1.2)

DOUBT "We will proceed no further in this business" (1.7)

HALLUCINATION "Is this a dagger which I see before me" (2.1)

TORMENTED "O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!" (3.2)

DESPAIR "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (5.5)

JUDGED "this dead butcher, and his fiend-like queen" (5.8)

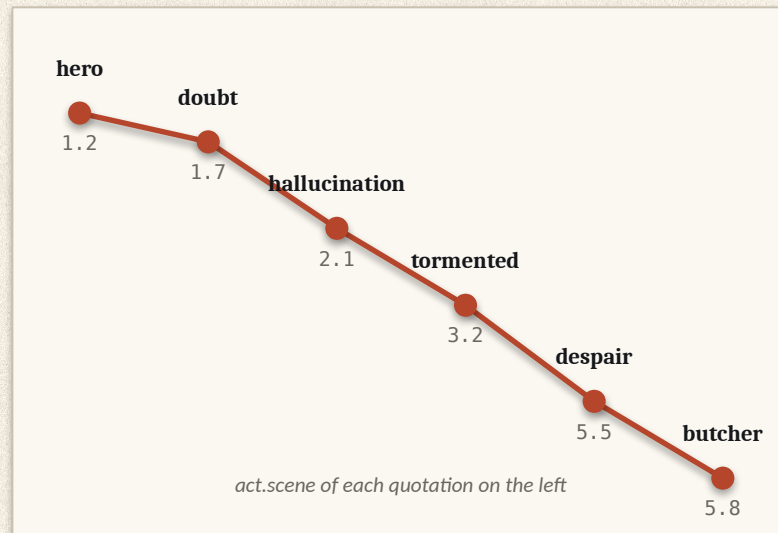


FIG 2 Macbeth's fall, act by act (drawn)



Lady Macbeth: strength to collapse

ACTS 1 AND 2: IN CONTROL

“unsex me here” (1.5)

“look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t” (1.5)

“A little water clears us of this deed” (2.2)

ACT 5: BROKEN BY GUILT

“Out, damned spot! out, I say!” (5.1)

“Here’s the smell of the blood still” (5.1)

“who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?” (5.1)

The reversal: in Act 2 she thinks water will wash away the guilt; in Act 5 she cannot stop washing. Shakespeare structures her story as a mirror.





Banquo and Macduff: two foils

BANQUO

Hears the same prophecy, but does not act on it.

“The instruments of darkness tell us truths; / Win us with honest trifles, to betray’s / In deepest consequence” (1.3)

Macbeth fears him: “Our fears in Banquo / Stick deep” (3.1)

MACDUFF

Loyal to Scotland; loses his family to Macbeth.

“He has no children” (4.3)

“I must also feel it as a man” (4.3)

“Macduff was from his mother’s womb / Untimely ripp’d” (5.8)





The witches, Duncan and Malcolm

QUOTATION

“Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (1.1)

THE WITCHES

WHAT IT SHOWS

Paradox: nothing is what it seems. They speak in riddles and half-truths.

“Something wicked this way comes” (4.1)

THE WITCHES

Macbeth himself is now the wicked thing they sense.

“There’s no art / To find the mind’s construction in the face” (1.4)

DUNCAN

A trusting king, betrayed twice: by Cawdor, then by Macbeth.

“the king-becoming graces” (4.3)

MALCOLM

He lists the qualities of a good king: the opposite of Macbeth.





A model paragraph, with its AOs

Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a man who understands that his ambition will destroy him. He admits he has only “Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself”: the image of a rider who jumps too hard and falls off the other side suggests ambition is a force that defeats itself. A Jacobean audience, who believed kings were chosen by God, would see that the fall Macbeth fears is a punishment for breaking God’s order, so his murder of Duncan is shown to be doomed before it happens.

A01

clear argument

A02

method: a metaphor, explained

A03

context linked to this moment

A04

accurate, precise writing throughout



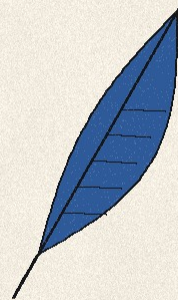
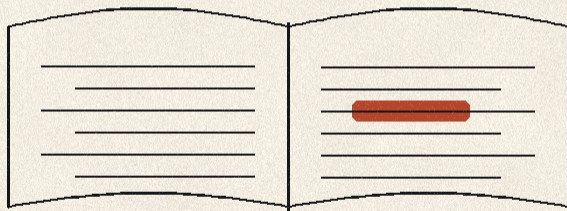


PART 3 OF 4

Themes

Ambition, guilt, kingship, appearance and reality, and masculinity: with the quotations to prove them.

03 THEMES





Ambition

QUOTATION

WHAT IT SHOWS

“Stars, hide your fires! / Let not light see my black and deep desires” (1.4)

MACBETH

He hides his ambition even from the heavens: he knows it is wrong.

“Thou wouldst be great; / Art not without ambition” (1.5)

LADY MACBETH

She sees the ambition in him and decides to feed it.

“To be thus is nothing, / But to be safely thus” (3.1)

MACBETH

Being king is worthless unless he is safe: ambition turns to fear.

“I am in blood / Stepp’d in so far” (3.4)

MACBETH

Like wading a river of blood: going back is as hard as going on.





Guilt and the mind

QUOTATION

“Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?” (2.2)

MACBETH

WHAT IT SHOWS

Hyperbole: guilt is too great for the whole sea to wash away.

“Macbeth shall sleep no more” (2.2)

MACBETH (A VOICE HE HEARS)

Sleep stands for innocence and peace: both are now lost.

“O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!” (3.2)

MACBETH

A metaphor of constant, poisonous pain inside his mind.

“What, will these hands / ne’er be clean?” (5.1)

LADY MACBETH

Her guilt surfaces in her sleep: the blood imagery returns.





Kingship and order

QUOTATION

“O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman!” (1.2)

DUNCAN

WHAT IT SHOWS

A generous king who rewards loyalty.

“’Tis unnatural, / Even like the deed that’s done” (2.4)

OLD MAN

After the murder nature itself goes wrong: Duncan’s horses “eat each other”.

“Not in the legions / Of horrid hell can come a devil more damn’d / In evils to top Macbeth” (4.3)

MACDUFF

The rightful order sees Macbeth as worse than any devil.

“the king-becoming graces” (4.3)

MALCOLM

A good king has virtues; Macbeth is called a tyrant again and again.





Appearance and reality

QUOTATION

WHAT IT SHOWS

“Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (1.1)

THE WITCHES

The play’s first idea: things are not what they seem.

“look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t” (1.5)

LADY MACBETH

Echoes the serpent in the Garden of Eden: deceit as original sin.

“False face must hide what the false heart doth know” (1.7)

MACBETH

He has learned her lesson by the end of Act 1.

“Is this a dagger which I see before me” (2.1)

MACBETH

He cannot trust his own eyes: what is real?





Masculinity and power

QUOTATION

“unsex me here” (1.5)

LADY MACBETH

WHAT IT SHOWS

She believes cruelty belongs to men, so asks to lose her womanhood.

“When you durst do it, then you were a man” (1.7)

LADY MACBETH

She attacks his manhood to push him to murder.

“I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none” (1.7)

MACBETH

A real man knows limits; Macbeth gives up this view.

“I must also feel it as a man” (4.3)

MACDUFF

True manhood includes grief and feeling.





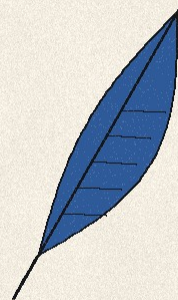
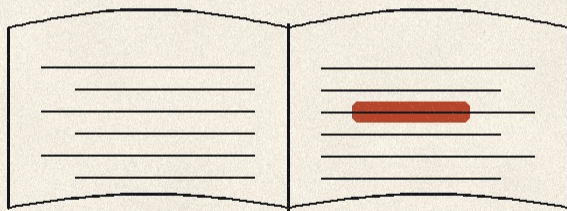
PART 4 OF 4

Extract to whole play

How to plan the exam answer, a worked plan, and timed practice.

07 FROM THE EXTRACT TO THE WHOLE PLAY

EX EXAM PRACTICE





Extract to whole play

The 50-minute answer

STARTING WITH	Begin with the extract: zoom in on words and methods.
THE WHOLE PLAY	Then move to other moments, before and after the extract.
LINK	Use the question's focus word in every paragraph.
AN ARC	Show change over the play: beginning, middle, end.
CONTEXT	Weave in one or two precise points; do not bolt them on.

5 MIN	Read the question; underline the focus word.
5 MIN	Annotate the extract: 3 or 4 short quotations.
5 MIN	Plan: 2 extract points, 2 whole-play points.
30 MIN	Write: extract first, then the rest of the play.
5 MIN	Check spelling and punctuation (AO4).

FIG 3 A suggested timing (about 50 minutes for this question)





A planned answer: the dagger soliloquy

EXTRACT · ACT 2 SCENE 1

*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.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?*

Question: Starting with this extract, explore how Shakespeare presents Macbeth's state of mind.

EXTRACT 1

Questions show confusion: "Is this a dagger which I see before me". AO2: rhetorical question.

EXTRACT 2

He tries to grab it: "let me clutch thee". The dagger leads him towards murder. AO1.

WHOLE PLAY 1

"Stars, hide your fires" (1.4): the desire was there before the vision.

WHOLE PLAY 2

"full of scorpions is my mind" (3.2): after the murder, the mind is poisoned. AO3: guilt as God's punishment.





So who is to blame?

THE WITCHES

They plant the idea, but never tell him to kill. Banquo hears them too and does nothing.

LADY MACBETH

She pushes hard in 1.7, but she is gone from the play's centre after Act 3, and he kills on alone.

MACBETH

He knows it is wrong ("Vaulting ambition"), decides alone to kill Banquo and Macduff's family.

A strong exam argument weighs all three and then decides. Saying 'it is all of them equally' is weaker than a reasoned judgement.





Common mistakes

✗ Retelling the story earns marks.

✓ Marks come from analysing methods and ideas, not plot.

✗ Only write about the extract.

✓ The question also asks about the play as a whole.

✗ Context means a history paragraph.

✓ Link one precise context point to a specific moment.

✗ Long quotations show more knowledge.

✓ Short ones (2 to 6 words) are easier to analyse.

✗ The witches make Macbeth kill Duncan.

✓ They predict; he chooses. Banquo shows the choice.

✗ Spelling does not matter in Literature.

✓ AO4 gives 4 extra marks on this question.





Question 1: ambition

ACT 1 SCENE 7 • MACBETH AND LADY MACBETH

MACBETH.

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

LADY MACBETH.

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

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

Write about:

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

[30 marks] A04 [4 marks]

Allow about 50 minutes. Closed book.





Question 2: more practice titles

GUILT	Starting with the sleepwalking scene (Act 5 Scene 1), explore how Shakespeare presents guilt in Macbeth.
LADY MACBETH	Starting with Act 1 Scene 5, explore how Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a powerful woman.
THE SUPERNATURAL	Starting with Act 1 Scene 3, explore how Shakespeare presents the supernatural.
KINGSHIP	Starting with Act 4 Scene 3, explore how Shakespeare presents ideas about good and bad kingship.

Each: [30 marks] plus AO4 [4 marks]. Use your own copy of the play to find the extract.



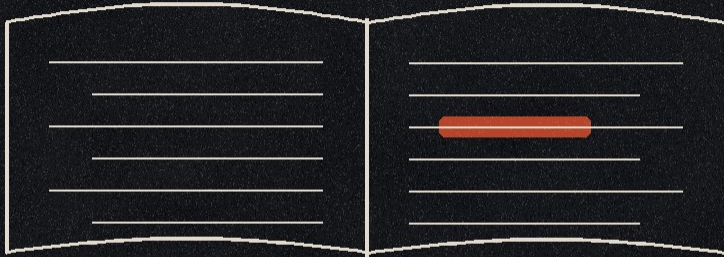
SECTION COMPLETE



Well done!

You can now tell the story of Macbeth with its context, track each main character, quote on five themes, and plan an answer from the extract to the whole play.

Short quotations, real analysis, and the whole play.





Images used in this lesson

The Three Witches Appearing to Macbeth and Banquo · Henry Fuseli · Public domain