

English Literature Revision Guide

Macbeth

by William Shakespeare



How to approach your exam

In the Macbeth section you will be given two questions:

Part a: extract question (15 marks – 20 minutes): A short extract from the play will be printed and you will be asked to focus on either:

- a) how a character speaks and behaves or;
- b) how Shakespeare creates mood and atmosphere for the audience.
- Whatever the question, you should firstly make it clear in your response where the extract appears in the play.
- You should then track the text, commenting on at least five quotes and ensuring that you always relate your comments to the key words in the question.
- Try to refer to subject terminology at some point e.g. *Macbeth uses the adjective “brief” to suggest his life has flashed before him...*

Part b: essay question (25 marks – 40 minutes): You will then be given one essay question that you must answer. The focus of the question might be a character or a theme from the play.

- It is essential to plan your essay – spend five minutes selecting 5-6 key events from across the text (beginning, middle, end) and make notes on any quotes or detail from the play that could relate to the question.
- You are assessed on your understanding of language so explore some quotes in your comments e.g. *Lady Macbeth uses the simile...*
- Try to evaluate the character through your essay, including your own opinion as to why they behave as they do.
- You will need to check your spelling and punctuation thoroughly as there are five marks for accuracy.

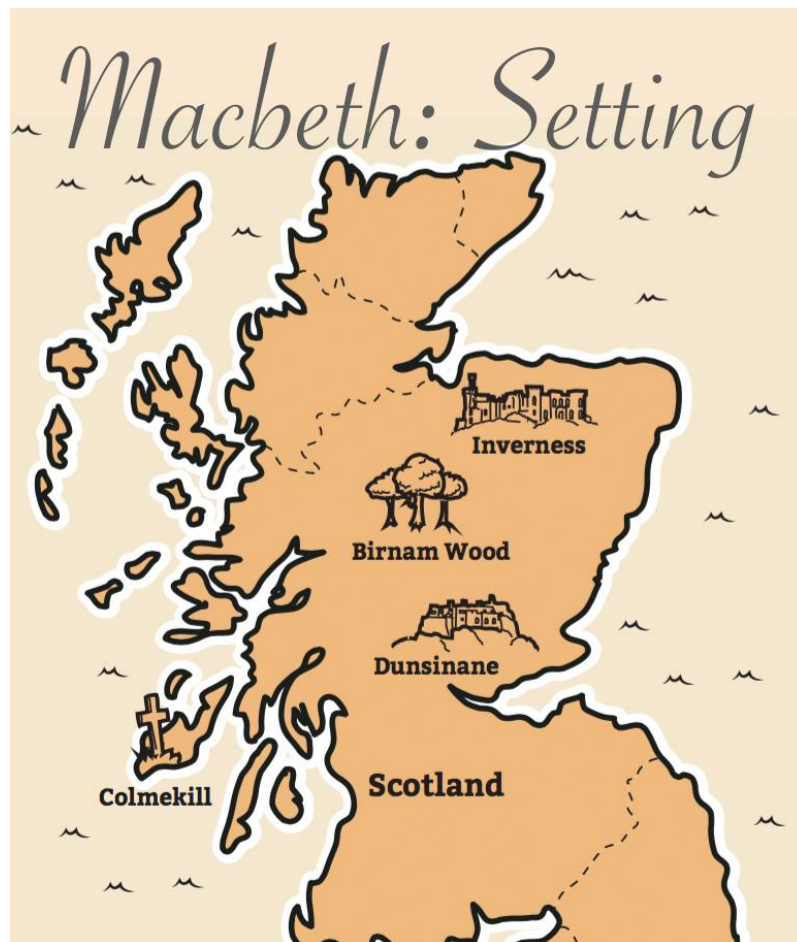
How to revise from this guide

You should be spending at least 60 minutes a week revising for English Literature from this point onwards, aiming to learn 5-7 key quotes for each character or theme. Create detailed notes on each character or theme in the form of mindmaps or grids. There is no magic formula to revision but this three-point strategy has helped many Y11s succeed in learning quotes in the past:

- Read the quote out three times

- Write it out three times
- Recite the quote three times with your eyes closed

It is also helpful to write your key quotes on sticky notes and place them all over your bedroom wall. Over time they will stick in your memory!



Plot summary:

1. Three witches decide to confront the great Scottish general Macbeth on his victorious return from a war between Scotland and Norway
2. The Scottish king, Duncan, decides that he will bestow the title of Cawdor upon the heroic Macbeth.
3. Macbeth, and another General called Banquo, happen upon the three witches. The witches predict that he will one day become king.
4. Lady Macbeth encourages her husband to murder Duncan. Macbeth agrees to the plan.
5. Macbeth then murders Duncan assisted by his wife who smears the blood of Duncan on the daggers of the sleeping guards.
6. A nobleman called Macduff discovers the body. Macbeth kills the guards insisting that their daggers smeared with Duncan's blood are proof that they committed the murder.
7. The crown passes to Macbeth but he cannot rest. He has his former good friend Banquo killed. Macduff flees to England.
8. Macbeth begins to lose his mind, haunted by the bloodied ghost of Banquo at a feast. He looks for reassurance from the witches who tell him he will remain king until Great Birnam wood moves and that nobody of woman born can hurt him.
9. Macbeth hears that Macduff has fled to England and so decides to have his wife and children killed.
10. Lady Macbeth's conscience now begins to torture her and she imagines that she can see her hands covered with blood. She commits suicide.
11. Macduff returns to Scotland with an English army concealed by branches from Birnam Wood. On the battlefield Macduff informs Macbeth he was "untimely ripped" from his mother's womb. He then kills Macbeth and the crown passes to Malcolm.



Macbeth – Seemingly a valiant and loyal warrior at the start of the play, Macbeth becomes obsessed by the predictions of the witches and stops at nothing to become king of Scotland. The audience then witnesses him lose his mind, his wife and eventually his power, as he is left a haunted and hunted man.

Key quotes:

Act 1

- Scene 2: King Duncan calls him “noble Macbeth” at the start of the play after he bravely leads the Scottish army to victory over the invading Norwegian army
- Scene 3: “If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me” – Macbeth is clearly intrigued by the predictions of the witches
- Scene 4: “Let not light see my black and deep desires” – Macbeth admits to his ambitions for power and to a darker side that he dare not show to others
- Scene 7: “He hath honoured me of late” – This shows Macbeth feels some loyalty towards King Duncan and is reluctant to follow Lady Macbeth’s plans to kill him

Act 2

- Scene 1: “Is this a dagger which I see before me, the handle toward my hand?” – Macbeth is full of fear and has visions of the dagger appearing in his hands. Is this vision his ‘deep desires’ speaking to him, or is the work of the witches, leading him to commit such violent acts?
- Scene 2: “Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?” – Macbeth is immediately full of guilt once he has killed King Duncan and needs his wife to clean him up

Act 3

- Scene 1: “Our fears in Banquo stick deep, and in his royalty of nature reigns that which would be feared” – Despite being king Macbeth cannot rest. He remains suspicious of his good friend Banquo and decides to have him killed. This shows the effect of power on Macbeth, turning him into an evil ruler
- Scene 2: “Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck till thou applaud the deed!” – Here Macbeth does not involve Lady Macbeth in the murder of Banquo. This shows Macbeth is becoming more ruthless as a leader and shows the weakening of the relationship between him and his wife.
- Scene 4: (to GHOST) “Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake Thy gory locks at me” – Macbeth believes Banquo’s bloody ghost is sat in his seat at the feast. This again shows the guilt that Macbeth feels and the stressful impact power has upon him.
- Scene 4: “blood will have blood” – Macbeth now knows there is no turning back, he must keep killing his enemies or he will be killed himself.

Act 4

- Scene 1: “Seize upon Fife, give to th' edge o' th' sword His wife, his babes” – Macbeth orders the killing of Macduff's family. Here we see the complete transformation of Macbeth into an evil and heartless king.

Act 5

- Scene 5: “She should have died hereafter. There would have been a time for such a word” – Macbeth does not go to his wife's side at her deathbed which shows how distant they had become.
- Scene 5: “Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow... Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Macbeth says these lines in a despondent tone as he rides out to his final battle. He seems to realise all his violent acts and efforts have been for nothing – death awaits him and he has achieved little as a king.



Lady Macbeth – A loyal and devoted wife or a manipulative and evil woman? Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most interesting characters, graphically demonstrating the dangerous effect of power on an individual.

Key quotes:

Act 1

- Scene 5: "Yet do I fear thy nature; It is too full o' the milk of human kindness." – Lady Macbeth thinks her husband is too kind to be King. This shows how power and ambition are often closely linked to the need to be evil and ruthless.
- Scene 5: "Come, you spirits, unsex me here and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty" – this shows Lady Macbeth feels she must turn both evil and masculine if she is to become powerful. This again shows how Lady Macbeth believes one must be ruthless to be a ruler.
- Scene 7: "I would, while it was smiling in my face, Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums, and dash'd the brains out" – this shows Lady Macbeth to be capable of imagining horrific violence. She is incredibly ambitious and completely committed to her husband becoming king.
- Scene 7: "Screw your courage to the sticking-place." – Lady Macbeth both commands and manipulates her husband into agreeing to the plan to murder King Duncan. She is clearly a very persuasive and powerful woman.

Act 2

- Scene 2: "Go get some water, And wash this filthy witness from your hand" – Lady Macbeth uses imperatives with her husband to command and take control of the situation. She personifies the blood into a 'filthy witness' to show how appalled she is with her husband.
- Scene 2: "Infirm of purpose! Give me the daggers" – Lady Macbeth shows how controlling she is by taking matters into her own hands. She is much more focused and ruthless than her husband in the first half of the play
- Scene 2: "My hands are of your colour, but I shame to wear a heart so white" – Lady Macbeth is ashamed of her husband's cowardice and shows a cold and calculating attitude in the way she handles the aftermath of the murder.
- Scene 3: "Help me hence, ho!" – Lady Macbeth pretends to faint after they discover Duncan's dead body. Here we again see her ability to manipulate events to suit her needs.

Act 3

- Scene 2 "What's to be done?" – Lady Macbeth offers her assistance in the plot to kill Banquo but Macbeth decides not to involve her. Their relationship seems to become more distant from this point of the play.
- Scene 4; "Sit, worthy friends. My lord is often thus and hath been from his youth" – This part again shows Lady Macbeth taking control of a situation, covering up for her husband's strange behaviour.

Act 5

- Scene 1: "Out, damned spot! out, I say!" – The horrifying events of the play eventually catch up with Lady Macbeth who sleepwalks through the castle reciting her terrible crimes. She loses her mind and the blood that she repeatedly tries to wash from her hands becomes a symbol of her guilt.
- Scene 1: "All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand" – Lady Macbeth rediscovers her feminine side in this final scene, referring to her "little hand" and "perfumes". The pressure from the power and guilt is too much for her.



Banquo – At the start of the play Banquo and Macbeth are the best of friends having fought side by side in defeating the Norwegians. However, the Witches promise him that his children will be future kings of Scotland and this puts him in great danger with Macbeth. Macbeth has Banquo murdered but his ghost comes back to haunt him at the feast.

Key quotes:

Act 1

- Scene 3: “If you can look into the seeds of time, and say which grain will grow. Speak, then, to me, who neither beg nor fear your favours nor your hate” – Banquo urges the witches to reveal his own future, making it clear he is not afraid of their predictions. He seems slightly jealous of the great things they say of Macbeth and this shows Banquo’s own ambitions for power.
- Scene 3: “Were such things here as we do speak about? Or have we eaten on the insane root that takes the reason prisoner?” – Here Banquo shows he can barely believe what the witches have said to them both. He admits that their great predictions could take them both “prisoner”, again demonstrating the effect of power on the individual.

Act 3

- Scene 1: “If Thou hast it now—king, Cawdor, Glamis, all, as the weird women promised, and I fear Thou played'st most foully for't” – Banquo sees that all of the witches’ predictions have come true. However, he is increasingly suspicious that Macbeth has become the king “foully”, suggesting he is behind the death of King Duncan.
- Scene 1: “But that myself should be the root and father of many kings” – In this soliloquy Banquo shows he has not forgotten that the witches predicted that his children and grandchildren would be inherit the crown. Again this demonstrates the impact of the witches and the enticing effect of power upon each character.
- Scene 1 – Macbeth: “Our fears in Banquo stick deep, and in his royalty of nature reigns that which would be feared” – Despite being king Macbeth cannot rest. He remains suspicious of his good friend Banquo and decides to have him killed. This shows the effect of power on Macbeth, turning him into an evil ruler
- Scene 4: (Macbeth to GHOST) “Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake Thy gory locks at me” – Banquo comes back to haunt Macbeth at his feast, his bloody ghost sitting in Macbeth’s seat. This again shows the guilt that Macbeth and the stressful impact power has upon him.



Weird sisters (The witches) – The weird sisters appear only twice in the play yet their words and actions have great influence. Do the witches bring about all the evil in the play through their spells and sorcery e.g. the floating dagger and Banquo’s ghost? Or are the witches just meddling old women, skilled in the arts of persuasion?

Key quotes:

Act I

- Scene 1: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair; Hover through the fog and filthy air.” – The witches appear in “fog and filthy air” which sets up a dark and confusing atmosphere for the play. “Foul is fair” shows they believe the evil acts that will happen through the play are perfectly reasonable – the characters deserve what will come their way.
- Scene 3: “I’ll drain him dry as hay. Sleep shall neither night nor day” – This suggests the witches are actually playing with Macbeth and enjoy seeing him tortured by a lack of sleep.
- Scene 3 – Banquo: “So withered and so wild in their attire, that look not like th’ inhabitants o’ th’ Earth” – The witches look so “wild” that Banquo questions whether they are even human.
- Scene 3: “All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter!” – The witches plant the seed in Macbeth’s mind that he will be king. The use of the word “shalt” makes it seem quite definite that Macbeth will take the crown.
- Scene 3: “Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none. So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!” – The witches mischievously predict that Banquo’s children will be kings, leaving both Macbeth and Banquo stunned and confused. This prediction creates immediate tension between the supposed best friends of Macbeth and Banquo.

Act 4

- Scene 1: “Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn, cauldron bubble” – This famous line again shows the witches enjoying the trouble that their sorcery brings Scotland.
- Scene 1 – first apparition (ghost): “Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! Beware Macduff.” – The witches conjure ghosts who give Macbeth an urgent warning to beware of Macduff. This makes Macbeth set on killing Macduff and his family.
- Scene 1 – second apparition: “for none of woman born shall harm Macbeth” – The second ghost’s prediction makes Macbeth feel more confident. The language here is purposely vague. The key word here is “born” as Macduff was never actually ‘born’ in the true sense, he was “ripped” from his mother’s womb in a caesarean birth.
- Scene 1 – third apparition: “Macbeth shall never vanquished be until Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill” – The third prediction makes Macbeth feel very secure as he says “that will never happen”. The witches seem to play with Macbeth’s hopes and fears, watching his rise and fall with amusement.



Macduff – Macduff suffers greatly at the hands of Macbeth: firstly, he is sickened when he is the one who discovers King Duncan’s dead body; then he is distraught when he hears that his wife and children have been killed on Macbeth’s orders. In the final act Macduff returns to Scotland for revenge, kills Macbeth and presents his decapitated head to the new King of Scotland, Malcolm.

Key quotes:

Act 2

- Scene 3: "O horror, horror, horror! Tongue nor heart cannot conceive nor name thee!" – Macduff is appalled when he discovers Duncan’s murdered body. The repetition of “horror” emphasises Macduff’s shock, he is a pure character who cannot understand why anyone would do such a hideous thing. However, some see Macduff as naïve in that he is not aware of the evil that some are capable of.
- Scene 3: “O gentle lady, 'Tis not for you to hear what I can speak” – Macduff says this to Lady Macbeth in an effort to protect her from seeing Duncan’s corpse. Shakespeare presents Macduff as the archetype heroic male, protecting the innocent lady.
- Scene 4: “They were paid to betray their master” – Here Macduff blames King Duncan’s guards for killing him, believing Macbeth’s plan. Is Macduff again presented as naïve for so easily believing Macbeth’s explanations?

Act 4

- Scene 3: "I will do so. But I must also *feel* it as a man" – Macduff insists he will get his revenge but must first grieve for his murdered wife and children. This shows Macduff to be in touch with his emotions, his sadness contrasting Macbeth’s distant reaction to the death of Lady Macbeth.

Act 5

- Scene 8: "I have no words; my voice is in my sword." – This shows Macduff to be a man of clear actions rather than endless words. Again, he is the direct contrast of Macbeth, a man of so many words but so little strength.
- Scene 8: “Hail, king! For so thou art. Behold where stands The usurper’s cursèd head. The time is free” – At the end of the play Macduff is clearly presented as the play’s hero, killing the villain Macbeth, declaring Scotland “free” from tyranny and hailing the new King of Scotland, Malcolm.



Power and Ambition – This is perhaps the main theme within Macbeth. Shakespeare uses the characters to show the effect of power and ambition on an individual. The first half of the play shows the evil that takes place due to unhealthy ambitions, whilst the second half illustrates the lonely and stressful impact of power. The play is not a happy one and the audience are left to consider whether power is actually a curse to hold.

Key quotes:

Macbeth

- Act 1, Scene 4: “Let not light see my black and deep desires” – Macbeth admits to his ambitions for power and to a darker side that he dare not show to others. Here Shakespeare suggests that we all have our dark ambitions (“deep desires”) but are often ashamed to admit them.
- Act 3, Scene 1: “Our fears in Banquo stick deep, and in his royalty of nature reigns that which would be feared” – Despite being king and having all the power, Macbeth cannot rest. In fact, his newfound power only brings further insecurity as he looks to kill anyone who might be a threat around him, including his best friend Banquo. This shows the effect of power on Macbeth, turning him into an evil ruler.
- Scene 5: “Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow...Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” At the end of the play Macbeth realises his pursuit of power has been pointless. He seems to realise all his violent acts and efforts have been for nothing – death awaits him and he has achieved little as a king.

Lady Macbeth

- Act 1, Scene 5: “Come, you spirits, unsex me here and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty” – this shows Lady Macbeth feels she must turn both evil and masculine if she is to become powerful. This part shows how Lady Macbeth believes one must be ruthless when in power.
- Act 2, Scene 2: “Infirm of purpose! Give me the daggers” – Lady Macbeth shows how controlling she is by taking matters into her own hands. She is much more focused and ruthless with power than her husband in the first half of the play.
- Act 5, Scene 1: “Out, damned spot! out, I say!” – The horrifying events of the play eventually catch up with Lady Macbeth who sleepwalks through the castle reciting her terrible crimes. The stress of power causes her to lose her mind and the blood that she repeatedly tries to wash away becomes a symbol of her guilt.

Banquo

- Act 1, Scene 3: “If you can look into the seeds of time, and say which grain will grow. Speak, then, to me, who neither beg nor fear your favours nor your hate” – Banquo urges the witches to reveal his own future, making it clear he has his own ambitions. He seems slightly jealous of the great things they say of Macbeth and this shows Banquo’s own thirst for power.
- Act 1, Scene 3: “Were such things here as we do speak about? Or have we eaten on the insane root that takes the reason prisoner?” – Here Banquo shows he can barely believe what the witches have said to them both. He admits that their great predictions could take them both “prisoner”, again demonstrating the effect of power on the individual, making them obsessed by the idea of holding the crown.

Evil and the supernatural – The play begins with the supernatural and evil as we watch the witches meeting under stormy skies to tell us that “Fair is foul, and foul is fair”. The witches use their supernatural powers to cast spells and sorcery over the characters who then seem powerless to prevent the evil from happening.

Key quotes:

The witches

- Act 1, Scene 1: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair; Hover through the fog and filthy air.” – The witches appear in “fog and filthy air” which sets up a dark and evil mood for the play. “Foul is fair” shows they believe the evil acts that will happen through the play are perfectly reasonable – the characters deserve what will come their way.
- Act 1, Scene 3: “I’ll drain him dry as hay. Sleep shall neither night nor day” – This suggests the witches are actually playing with Macbeth and enjoy seeing him tortured by a lack of sleep. This makes the audience wonder whether Macbeth can be blamed for his actions – are his dark desires being controlled by the witches?
- Act 1, Scene 3 – Banquo: “So withered and so wild in their attire, that look not like th’ inhabitants o’ th’ Earth” – The witches look so “wild” that Banquo questions whether they are even human, it is as if they have emerged from hell.
- Act 4, Scene 1 – first apparition (ghost): “Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! Beware Macduff.” – The witches conjure ghosts who give Macbeth an urgent warning to beware of Macduff. This makes Macbeth set on killing Macduff and his family. Is Macbeth a weak character simply looking for reasons to kill, or is he actually being controlled by these supernatural forces?

Macbeth

- Act 2, Scene 1: “Is this a dagger which I see before me?” – Macbeth becomes obsessed by supernatural forces and has visions of the dagger appearing in his hands. Is this vision his ‘deep desires’ speaking to him, or is the work of the witches, leading him to commit such violent acts?
- Act 3, Scene 4: (Macbeth to GHOST) “Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake Thy gory locks at me” – Banquo comes back to haunt Macbeth at his feast, his bloody ghost sitting in Macbeth’s seat. This again shows how controlled Macbeth is by the supernatural, he believes every vision in front of him.

Lady Macbeth

- Act 1, Scene 5: “Come, you spirits, unsex me here and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty” – this shows Lady Macbeth feels she must turn to the evil spirits if she is to take power. There is a strong link between the evil spirits and power within the play.



Trust and commitment – There are many early examples of trust and commitment between the different characters. However, as Macbeth begins his rise to power, the trust and commitment between himself and those around him begins to unravel. In the second half of the play the only opinions Macbeth trusts are those of the witches and his only commitment is to maintaining his grip on power.

Key quotes:

Macbeth

- Act 1, Scene 2: King Duncan calls him “noble Macbeth” at the start of the play after he bravely leads the Scottish army to victory over the invading Norwegian army. King Duncan clearly trusts Macbeth who is very much committed to fighting for his king.
- Act 1, Scene 7: “He hath honoured me of late” – This shows Macbeth feels committed and loyal towards King Duncan and is reluctant to follow Lady Macbeth’s plans to kill him. However, his wife’s persuasion is too much for him and he soon forgets his loyalty to Duncan.
- Act 3, Scene 2: "Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck till thou applaud the deed!" – This shows Macbeth no longer trusts Banquo to keep the witches’ predictions a secret and feels he must kill him. He does not involve Lady Macbeth in the murder of Banquo, showing he is becoming more ruthless as a leader and perhaps suggesting a weakening of the relationship between him and his wife.
- Scene 5: “She should have died hereafter. There would have been a time for such a word” – Macbeth does not go to his wife’s side at her deathbed which shows how the trust and commitment between them has disappeared.

Lady Macbeth

- Act 1, Scene 7: “I would, while it was smiling in my face, Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums, and dash'd the brains out” – this shows Lady Macbeth to be capable of imagining horrific violence. She is incredibly ambitious and completely committed to her husband becoming king.
- Scene 2: “Infirm of purpose! Give me the daggers” – Lady Macbeth shows how controlling she is by taking matters into her own hands. She is much more focused and ruthless than her husband in the first half of the play and at times does not trust him to do the right thing.
- Act 3, Scene 2 “What’s to be done?” – Lady Macbeth offers her assistance in the plot to kill Banquo but Macbeth decides not to involve her. Their relationship seems to become more distant from this point of the play and the trust between them disintegrates.
- Act 3, Scene 4; “Sit, worthy friends. My lord is often thus and hath been from his youth” – This part again shows Lady Macbeth taking control of a situation, covering up for her husband’s strange behaviour. She maintains her commitment to her husband because she knows their power can only be maintained together.

