

GCSE English Literature

Macbeth - Grade 9 Analysis · AQA Set Text

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AQA Set Text

28 entries

A grade 9 response treats Macbeth not as a story but as an argument about the human will. The top band rewards a conceptualised thesis, a relentless focus on Shakespeare's methods (form, structure, language), and embedded Jacobean context that illuminates meaning rather than decorating it. This sheet gives you conceptualised readings, decoded quotations and ready thesis lines - use them to build a controlled, original argument, not to summarise plot.

THEMES - conceptualised readings (AO1 / AO2 / AO3)

Ambition

Shakespeare frames ambition not as a sin Macbeth catches but as a force already latent in him: the Witches name a desire rather than plant one. He calls it '*Vaulting ambition*' that '*o'erleaps itself*' - the equestrian metaphor makes ambition a horse that throws its rider, so the tragedy is self-destruction, not fate. Structurally, ambition inverts the natural order Jacobean called the Great Chain of Being; James I's audience would read regicide as cosmic, not merely political, rupture. Grade 9 move: argue ambition is dramatised as a **moral velocity** - once moving it cannot decelerate, which is why Macbeth must keep killing.

The supernatural

The supernatural is deliberately ambiguous: Shakespeare never lets us decide whether the Witches cause or merely predict. Their paradox '*fair is foul, and foul is fair*' dissolves moral categories in the play's first scene, infecting Macbeth's own first line '*So foul and fair a day*' before he has met them - language itself is contaminated. For a Jacobean audience steeped in witch-panic and James I's *Daemonologie*, evil is real but works by suggestion, not compulsion. Grade 9 move: read the supernatural as a **mirror**, externalising desires Macbeth already owns, so it deepens rather than removes his guilt.

Guilt

Guilt in Macbeth is somatic - it lives in the body and the senses before the conscience. Macbeth's hands will '*the multitudinous seas incarnadine*'; the Latinate excess shows guilt outrunning language. Shakespeare structures it as a chiasmus across the couple: his guilt is loud and hallucinatory early (the dagger, Banquo's ghost), hers silent and buried until it erupts in sleepwalking - '*will these hands ne'er be clean?*' Grade 9 move: argue guilt is the play's **true antagonist**, the conscience the Witches cannot reach, proving Shakespeare's moral universe punishes from within.

Kingship

Shakespeare builds kingship as a sustained contrast: Duncan's grace, Edward's holy healing, Malcolm's tested virtue, all set against Macbeth's tyranny. Macbeth admits a good king's virtues - '*justice, verity, temperance*' - are exactly what he lacks, condemning himself by the standard he names. The play flatters James I (Banquo's descendant) and endorses Divine Right: the legitimate line is restored and nature heals. Grade 9 move: argue Shakespeare dramatises kingship as **stewardship versus ownership** - Macbeth seizes the crown as property and so can never wear it as office.

Gender

Gender is weaponised: Lady Macbeth equates masculinity with cruelty, daring Macbeth '*when you durst do it, then you were a man*', and asks spirits to '*unsex me here*'. Shakespeare exposes a brittle Jacobean ideal - to be a man is to kill - and then dismantles it, since her rejection of femininity ends in madness and his hyper-masculine violence in isolation. Grade 9 move: argue the play interrogates rather than endorses gender, presenting manhood-as-violence as a **cultural lie** that destroys both who perform it.

CHARACTERS - arc, key moment, critical reading

Macbeth

Arc: a celebrated warrior whose imagination - his greatest faculty - becomes his ruin. He sees consequences vividly ('*we still have judgement here*') yet acts against his own foresight, making him a tragic hero of **willed** rather than blind error. Key moment: '*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow*' - the deadened anaphora shows a man who has killed feeling itself. Critical reading: A.C. Bradley sees nobility corrupted; a modern existentialist reading sees a man who chooses meaninglessness. Grade 9 move: track how Shakespeare hollows his language from rich imagery to flat monosyllables as his soul empties.

Lady Macbeth

Arc: the play's early engine of will who is destroyed by the conscience she denied she had. She invokes darkness - '*come, thick night*' - to anaesthetise feeling, then proves unable to sustain it. Key moment: she cannot kill Duncan because he '*resembled my father*', a crack of humanity beneath the steel. Critical reading: a feminist lens reads her ambition as the only power a Jacobean woman could seize, channelled through a husband. Grade 9 move: argue Shakespeare structures the couple as **communicating vessels** - as he hardens she softens, their guilt conserved between them.

Banquo

Arc: Macbeth's foil and conscience-in-the-flesh - he hears the same prophecy yet does not act, proving the Witches compel no one. He warns that evil tells '*honest trifles*' to '*betray's in deepest consequence*', a thesis for the whole play. Key moment: his ghost at the banquet, visible only to Macbeth, dramatises a guilt that public power cannot suppress. Critical reading: Banquo flatters James I as his ancestor, so Shakespeare keeps his hands clean. Grade 9 move: read Banquo as the **road not taken**, the moral control case against which Macbeth's choice is measured.

The Witches

Arc: agents of ambiguity who frame the play and then vanish, leaving humans to damn themselves. Their '*paradoxes*' and equivocations (the apparitions that promise safety while spelling doom) work by exploiting what Macbeth wants to hear. Key moment: '*none of woman born*' - Macbeth mistakes a riddle for a guarantee, his fall engineered by his own misreading. Critical reading: are they fate, the supernatural, or psychology made visible? Shakespeare refuses to say. Grade 9 move: argue the Witches are dramaturgical **catalysts, not causes**, so the play preserves free will and therefore tragedy.

KEY QUOTATIONS DECODED - language, form, structure, deployment

'Fair is foul, and foul is fair'

Chiastic paradox in trochaic tetrameter (the Witches' chant-rhythm sets them apart from the blank verse of mortals). It collapses the moral binary the rest of the play tries to rebuild. Deploy in any answer on the supernatural, appearance/reality or moral order - it is the play's thesis statement, planted in line ten.

'Look like th' innocent flower, but be the serpent under't'

Lady Macbeth's antithesis of flower and serpent draws on the Edenic Fall, casting her as tempter. The imperative voice shows her directing the deception. Deploy for appearance versus reality, gender (she instructs the warrior in cunning) and the motif of concealment that runs to the sleepwalking scene.

'Is this a dagger which I see before me'

The hallucination dramatises a conscience at war with intent before the murder; the air-drawn dagger is guilt projecting forward. The interrogative form shows a mind interrogating itself. Deploy for the psychology of guilt and to argue Macbeth's imagination both enables and condemns his crime.

'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood'

The classical hyperbole admits the murder is metaphysically indelible; blood becomes the play's central symbol of irreversible guilt. The rhetorical question answers itself - no. Deploy for guilt, and pair with Lady Macbeth's later '*a little water clears us*' to show structural irony as their positions invert.

'Out, damned spot!'

Fragmented prose (not verse) marks Lady Macbeth's psychological collapse - Shakespeare strips her of poetic control. The imagined bloodstain literalises guilt as contamination. Deploy to track her arc and to argue the unconscious mind exacts the punishment her waking will refused.

'Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player'	The theatrical metaphor reduces existence to performance and noise ' <i>signifying nothing</i> '; Macbeth has reached nihilism. Spoken on hearing of his wife's death, its flatness shows feeling extinguished. Deploy for the play's vision of ambition's end - meaninglessness - and to discuss Shakespeare's metatheatrical self-awareness.
'I am in blood stepp'd in so far'	The wading metaphor frames evil as a river already crossed past the midpoint, where returning is as hard as going on. It explains the escalation of his violence as grim logic, not appetite. Deploy for the structure of his moral decline and the theme of damnation by momentum.
'Unsex me here'	The coinage demands the removal of gender so cruelty can enter; femininity is figured as an obstacle to murder. The verb's violence shows the cost of her ambition. Deploy for gender, the supernatural (she invokes spirits) and to argue Shakespeare exposes the equation of manhood with killing as a destructive ideology.
'Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself'	The equestrian image makes ambition a rider who springs too hard and falls on the far side; the metaphor builds self-defeat into the desire itself. It comes in a soliloquy where Macbeth has argued himself out of the murder. Deploy to argue the tragedy is self-authored - he names his own undoing and proceeds anyway.
'Something wicked this way comes'	The Witch's vague, ominous deixis (' <i>something</i> ') now applies to Macbeth himself - the language once used of the supernatural is used of the man, marking his transformation into the evil he sought. Deploy to show whole-text patterning: Macbeth becomes the thing the play opened by fearing.

CONTEXT (AO3) - illuminating, not decorative

Divine Right of Kings	Jacobians held the monarch was chosen by God, so regicide was not only treason but sacrilege - a wound to the cosmos. This is why Duncan's murder triggers unnatural events (horses eating each other, day turned to night). Use it to explain why nature itself recoils, not to label Macbeth a 'bad king'. Method link: the pathetic fallacy after the murder dramatises Divine Right as physics.
King James I and the play's patronage	Shakespeare wrote for a king who claimed descent from Banquo, feared witches and wrote <i>Daemonologie</i> . The play flatters him: Banquo is noble, his line is shown stretching to the ' <i>crack of doom</i> ', witchcraft is real and dangerous. Use this to read the play's politics, but argue Shakespeare's art exceeds the flattery - the moral interest is universal, not courtly.
The Gunpowder Plot (1605)	The recent attempt to blow up Parliament made treason and equivocation live anxieties; Jesuit 'equivocation' (lying under oath with mental reservation) is mocked by the Porter and embodied by the Witches' double-meaning prophecies. Use it to give the theme of deception a sharp topical edge and to date the play's nervous fascination with hidden treason.
Witchcraft and the Jacobean imagination	Belief in witches was widespread and state-endorsed; thousands were executed. An audience would find the Witches genuinely frightening, not pantomime. Use this to take their threat seriously - but the grade 9 move is to note Shakespeare keeps their power suggestive, never coercive, so human responsibility survives. Method link: their rhyming, riddling speech sets them outside the human moral order.
The Great Chain of Being and natural order	The universe was imagined as a fixed hierarchy from God to king to subject to beast; disorder at the top spread downward. Macbeth's usurpation therefore disorders all nature, and order returns only when the rightful line is restored. Use it to explain the play's symmetry - the closing harmony is not sentiment but cosmology - and the recurring imagery of clothing that does not fit the usurper.

GRADE 9 THESIS LINES - conceptualised openers

On ambition and the will	<i>'Shakespeare presents Macbeth's tragedy not as a fall caused by external evil but as a self-inflicted wound of the will: the Witches name a desire they do not create, and Macbeth's imagination, which lets him foresee damnation, is the very faculty that fails to stop him.'</i> Build by tracking his language from rich verse to nihilistic monosyllable.
On the supernatural and responsibility	<i>'By refusing to resolve whether the Witches cause or merely mirror Macbeth's ambition, Shakespeare preserves the free will on which tragedy depends, making the supernatural a test of character rather than a sentence upon it.'</i> Build using Banquo as the control case who hears the same prophecy and resists.
On guilt as the true antagonist	<i>'Macbeth dramatises a moral universe that needs no external judge: guilt, somatic and unstoppable, is the conscience the Witches cannot reach and the punishment the crown cannot buy.'</i> Build through the structural inversion of the couple - his loud early guilt, her buried guilt erupting in sleep.
On gender and the lie of violent manhood	<i>'Through Lady Macbeth's weaponising of masculinity and Macbeth's descent into hollow violence, Shakespeare exposes the Jacobean equation of manhood with cruelty as a destructive fiction that annihilates everyone who performs it.'</i> Build by linking 'unsex me' to her madness and 'be a man' to his isolation.