



Macbeth Knowledge Organiser

Essential question: How do we avert the dangers of unchecked ambition?

The Genre & the Historical Context

- The play is a **tragedy**: not simply a 'sad' story, but a specific category of drama that features a 'good' man experiencing a disaster due to personal failing (their **tragic flaw**) and/or fate
- Written a year after the Gunpowder Plot (an attempt to kill **King James I**); the downfall of traitors and the restoration of the 'rightful' heir (Malcolm) would have appealed to the King – a politically wise move on Shakespeare's part. King James (who the play was performed for) was supposedly related to Banquo, as alluded to in the Witches' prophecy 'you shall get kings'
- Divine right of the King**: the belief that the right of the King to rule was given to him by God, making any attack on the King not just an act of **treason** but a grave sin
- Belief in **witchcraft** was widespread in the time of the play; there were laws against witchcraft (which King James strengthened). Witches were thought to have a range of powers, yet in Macbeth they do not perform any actual 'magic' – they are threatening and sinister, but not necessarily supernatural

Central Tensions, Themes and Ideas

Ambition and power: Macbeth and his wife have an **obsessive** desire for power and are prepared to do anything to gain it. However, Shakespeare does not allow them even a moment of enjoyment once they achieve their goal; instead they are consumed with **paranoia** and **guilt**. Once the initial crime has been committed, Macbeth's actions become more bloody and cruel as he desperately attempts to hold on to power; his rule is characterised by fear and violence. In the final moments of the play it is clear that his men have **no loyalty** to him 'those in command, move only in command, nothing in love'

Loyalty and leadership: The play considers frequently what makes a **good leader**; as well as showing us an example of someone who was a strong leader ('brave Macbeth') becoming a **tyrant**, Malcolm and Macduff's conversation in Act 4 reflect on the moral **responsibilities** of a King. **Treachery** is a constant in this play and is present from the very first scene – the battle Macbeth performs so well in is a rebellion by another traitor.

Masculinity and femininity: The partnership of Macbeth and his wife did not meet the gender expectations of the time period. Lady Macbeth appears to surpass her husband in ambition and **violent cruelty**, explicitly asking to be 'unsexed' so she can perform whatever dark actions her ambition requires. Lady Macbeth provokes Macbeth to action through insulting his manhood, and Macbeth then uses this technique when encouraging the murderers to kill Banquo; these taunts contrast with the ideas expressed by Malcolm and Macduff about what it means to be a man.

Guilt and justice: One of the things that makes Macbeth and Lady Macbeth such interesting characters is that they do not pretend that what they are doing is right; Macbeth is very clear when he reflects on the **immorality** of killing Duncan (his king, cousin and guest) simply for his 'vaulting ambition'. Lady Macbeth assures him that 'a little water' will wash away the guilt, yet ironically she is driven mad by the metaphorical blood on her hands. Shakespeare suggests that **natural justice** will punish those who defy the natural order of the world.

Key Characters – Protagonists and Antagonists

Macbeth (Thane of Glamis): A distinguished general who has been loyal to King Duncan and served him well; the Witches' prophecy and his wife's urging kindle an **ambition** that turns into an all-consuming **obsession**; he acts immorally, betraying his king and killing his friends; as the play progresses he becomes **tyrannical** and **paranoid**; his death is presented as **just** and necessary for the restoration of order

Lady Macbeth: Defies the traditional perceptions of the time of females as weak or **passive**; she initially appears to be the stronger, crueiler and more ambitious partner in her marriage; she plans and helps carry out Duncan's murder, **tempting** and encouraging Macbeth (here, she does fit the stereotype of the time of women as seductive Eve-type characters who corrupt men); her famous sleepwalking scene betrays the **guilt** she feels over her actions, which ultimately leads to her madness and suicide

Banquo: Macbeth's friend and co-leader of the army (both are said to have fought bravely); he does not appear as intrigued or as tempted by the Witches' prophecy as Macbeth is; he is murdered (his son **Fleance** escapes being murdered with him) as Macbeth's paranoia and cruelty grows and he sees him as a threat; his bloody ghost appears to haunt Macbeth forcing him to realise that 'blood will have blood'

Duncan (King of Scotland): Is described by Macbeth as a **noble and effective king** (a variation from the reported history), yet he appears to be too trusting since Macbeth is the second Thane of Cawdor to betray him; he is Macbeth's cousin, king and guest (making his murder all the more immoral) and the rest of the nobles appear to be genuinely distraught at his death

Macduff (Thane of Fife – Macbeth's nemesis): Another highly ranked Scottish lord, he provides a striking **contrast** with Macbeth's **disloyalty and ambition**; he appears to be the first person to suspect Macbeth's guilt and refuses to attend his coronation and later leads to England in support of **Malcolm**; the plot twist that he was born by caesarean (making him 'not of woman born') forces Macbeth to realise that the Witches have misled him and to accept his downfall and death

Key Symbols, Images and Motifs

Blood: Is referenced many times throughout the play, especially in relation to **guilt**; Lady M assumes that 'a little water' can wash it away, but by her final scene she is being driven mad by a 'damn spot' that she cannot wash from her hands. Blood symbolizes the guilt that sits like a **permanent stain** on the **consciences** of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, one that hounds them to their graves.

Milk and children: The Macbeths are notably childless, a problem in a world where producing an **heir** was essential for success; Lady M rejects milk, wishing her breast to be full of 'gall' (poison) and suggests she would kill a child for power; by contrast, Duncan, Banquo and Macduff are loving fathers who care for their children, implying their admirable leadership

Nature: The play is full of references to animals, many of which were assumed to be ill-omens (ravens) or have **supernatural** powers

Clothes: Honour is frequently referred to as a garment to be worn; when Macbeth is first told he is Thane of Glamis he asks why he is being 'dressed in borrowed robes'; this suggests the **impermanence** of such title and power – like clothes, they can easily be worn by multiple people

The Weather: Macbeth's grotesque murder spree is accompanied by a number of unnatural occurrences in the natural realm. From the thunder and lightning that accompany the witches' appearances to the terrible storms that rage on the night of Duncan's murder, these **violations of the natural order** reflect **corruption** in the moral and political orders.

Vocabulary & Concepts

Fate
Equivocation
Conscience
Obsession
Tyranny
Machiavellian
Regicide
Treason
Usurper

Loyalty
Valour
Resentment
Corruption
Masculinity
Turmoil
Angst
Prophecy
Malevolence

Key Literary / Structural Devices

Dramatic irony
Foreshadowing
Antithesis
Soliloquy
Aside
Metaphor
Repetition
Hamartia
Nemesis

Hubris
Symbolism
Motifs
Juxtaposition
Pathetic fallacy
Euphemism
Catharsis
Rhyming couplet
Iambic pentameter

Key Quotes

Witches: Fair is foul and foul is fair
Captain: Brave Macbeth – well deserves he that name
Macbeth: Stay you imperfect speakers, tell me more.
Macbeth: The Thane of Cawdor lives. Why do you dress me in borrowed robes?
Banquo: And oftentimes, to win us to our harm, the instruments of darkness tell us truth
Duncan: There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face. He was a gentleman on whom I built an absolute trust [on Thane of Cawdor, executed for treason]
Macbeth: If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me without my stir
Macbeth: Stars, hide your fires, let not light see my black and deep desires
Lady M: Yet do I fear thy nature; it is too full of the milk of human kindness
Lady M: Come you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here and fill me from crown to the toe topfull of direst cruelty

Lady M: Come to my woman's breasts and take my milk for gall
Lady M: Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under't
Macbeth: He's here in double trust [about Duncan]
Macbeth: I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, but only vaulting ambition
Macbeth: I dare do all that may become a man
Lady M: When you durst do it, then you were a man
Lady M: 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: False face must hide what false heart doth know
Macbeth: Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more: Macbeth does murder sleep'
Macbeth: Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?

Lady Macbeth: My hands are of your colour, but I shame to wear a heart so white
Lady Macbeth: A little water clears us of this deed.
Macduff: Oh horror, horror, horror, tongue nor heart cannot conceive
Macduff: Most sacrilegious murder hath broke open The Lords' anointed temple
Donaldbain: There's daggers in men's smiles
Banquo: Thou hast it now... and I fear thou played'st most foully for't
Macbeth: To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus.
Macbeth: Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown... For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind.
Lady M: Things without remedy should be without regard; what's done is done.
Macbeth: O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!
Macbeth: Thou canst not say I did it; never shake thy gory locks at me!
Macbeth: Blood will have blood

Macbeth: I am in blood stepped so far that should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er
Macbeth: This deed I'll do before this purpose cool
Ross: Alas poor country, almost afraid to know itself. It cannot be called our mother, but our grave
Macduff: I must also feel it as a man
Lady M: Yet who would have thought the old man to have so much blood in him?
Lady M: What will these hands ne'er be clean? ... what's done cannot be undone
Doctor: Unnatural deeds do breed unnatural troubles
Angus: Now does he feel his title hang loose upon him, like a giant's robes on a dwarfish thief
Macbeth: Life is but a walking shadow... it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing
Macbeth: I 'gin to be weary of the sun and wish th'estate of the world were now undone

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Writing the Essay

Remember the marking hierarchy:

- The topic** Everything you write must be a genuine exploration of the essay topic
- The text** You must use the text as evidence for your arguments, using more than just the obvious quotes and details. Make subtle connections across the entire text
- Written expression** You must write fluently, with precise vocabulary choices and with a cogent structure to your essay

Essay Planning Method			
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Take the topic and brainstorm associations and implications of key words, linked to the central tensions, dilemmas and themes of the texts. Then, take the prompt statement and add the question stem 'Is it true that...' to it. Develop your thesis and supporting arguments around this. 			
Essay Structure			
Introduction: The 'inverted pyramid' method <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Discuss: How does the topic reflect one of the central dilemmas of the text? (Topic, Text details, Context) Define: Signpost your main and supporting arguments. Refine: What will your overall stance and thesis be? How does this reflect the writer's underlying concerns? 			
Main Body: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Main argument... Furthermore... However... (Optional) In this way / Consequently / Yet... 	<p><i>Logically ordered + coherent.</i></p> <p>What is the first main idea you wish to explore?</p> <p>Develop your main argument further, exploring different aspects of the text</p> <p>Here you begin to offer a subtler reading of the topic, by unpicking the implications / assumptions of the prompt statement</p> <p>NOTE: You must not contradict what you have previously argued – instead, you are now steering the essay into a more nuanced discussion of its subtext</p> <p>This is where you develop your deeper insight and interpretation & explore the subtext to the topic</p>		
Conclusion: Flip the pyramid. Essentially / Ultimately... <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Generalisation – What is the final thesis you want to offer into the topic? Overview of the most telling detail of the text which echoes this. Definitive statement on this topic, and your final insight into the writer's underlying motives and purposes. 			
Active Verbs			
The writer shows	The writer describes	The writer stresses their feelings	The writer develops an idea
suggests	portrays	stresses	develops this...
implies	depicts	emphasises	associates... with...
demonstrates	conveys	underlines	elaborates on...
reveals	illustrates	highlights	embeds... within...
indicates	characterises	underscores	justifies... by...
connotes	identifies... as...	intensifies	this is mirrored in...
denotes	illuminates	entrenches	echoes... in...
contrasts		accentuates	
distinguishes		asserts	
reflects		reiterates	
Discourse Markers			
Express similarities	Express differences	Consequences, causes and effects	Phases of discussion
additionally,	however,	because...	initially
similarly,	on the other hand,	consequently,	furthermore,
in addition,	alternatively,	therefore,	moreover,
equally,	whereas...	given that...	in addition,
furthermore,	although...	so long as...	in this way,
moreover,	yet	by contrast,	ultimately, / essentially,
	nonetheless,	as a result,	finally, / In conclusion,