Macbeth Study Guide

Name:



Contents

[Scene Summaries 3](#_Toc347166038)

[Act One 3](#_Toc347166039)

[Act Two 4](#_Toc347166040)

[Act Three 5](#_Toc347166041)

[Act Four 6](#_Toc347166042)

[Act Five 7](#_Toc347166043)

[Key Quotations 9](#_Toc347166044)

[Character Profiles 13](#_Toc347166045)

[Macbeth 13](#_Toc347166046)

[Lady Macbeth 14](#_Toc347166047)

[Banquo 14](#_Toc347166048)

[Duncan 15](#_Toc347166049)

[Themes 16](#_Toc347166050)

[Past Exam Questions 18](#_Toc347166051)

[Sample Essay 19](#_Toc347166052)

# Scene Summaries

## Act One

Scene 1

* The three **witches** are introduced and their ability to see the future (prophesy) is implied
* They intend to meet with **Macbeth** “when the battle’s lost and won” – we are alerted that appearances will be deceptive throughout the play and we cannot necessarily trust what we see

Scene 2

* We hear of **Macbeth’s** prowess as a soldier
* Duncan’s trust in **Macbeth** is emphasised – he plans to confer additional honours on him
* The extreme violence of **Macbeth’s** nature (when in battle) is also mentioned

Scene 3

* The **witches** wait for **Macbeth**, discussing their various demonic exploits
* **Macbeth** and **Banquo** encounter the **witches**, and receive two separate prophecies – one each. **Macbeth** will be Thane of Cawdor and King; **Banquo’s** heirs will be kings.
* **Macbeth’s** immediate reaction is crucial – he ‘starts and seems to fear’, suggesting that the witches have hit a nerve. Was kingship already on his mind?
* The **witches** vanish and **Ross**, another lord enters, bringing news that **Macbeth** is now Thane of Cawdor as the previous holder of the title is to be executed for treason
* In an aside, **Macbeth** reveals to the audience that his thoughts are very much focused on the second part of the prophecy – kingship
* He is still conflicted at this point as to whether he will have to act in order to become king

Scene 4

* **Macbeth** meets with **Duncan** to receive his new honours
* Duncan formally declares his elder son, **Malcom**, as his heir, giving him the title Prince of Cumberland
* Again, in an aside, we gain an insight into **Macbeth’s** private thoughts. He now sees **Malcolm** as an obstacle between him and the throne

Scene 5

* We meet **Lady Macbeth**. She is reading a letter **Macbeth** has sent her, informing her of the witches’ prophecy.
* She presents herself as a cold-hearted, ambitious woman. She suspects she will have to manipulate **Macbeth** into killing **Duncan** as he is too soft to do so independently
* News arrives that Duncan and his followers are on their way to the castle, as is Macbeth himself
* **Lady Macbeth** calls on dark spirits to remove her femininity in order that she may have the resolve to carry out the murder she is already planning
* **Macbeth** arrives ahead of the royal party and quickly confers with **Lady Macbeth**. She makes her intentions immediately clear; **Macbeth** does not commit.

Scene6

* The royal party arrives at **Macbeth’s** castle. Both sides are courteous and friendly.

Scene 7

* **Macbeth** **and Lady Macbeth** discuss how to kill **Duncan**.
* **Lady Macbeth** puts huge pressure on **Macbeth** to commit the murder, arguing that he is not a man unless he does so, and insisting that she would kill her own child if she had promised him that she would.
* **Macbeth** is intimidated by the violence he witnesses in his wife but his determination not to proceed with the murder diminishes throughout the scene until he finally succumbs to her demands.

## Act Two

Scene 1

* **Banquo** and his son, **Fleance**, encounter **Macbeth** walking in the courtyard at night.
* Once they leave, **Macbeth** begins his famous ‘Is this a dagger’ soliloquy. He debates the murder one last time before leaving the stage to kill **Duncan**.

Scene 2

* Macbeth returns to Lady Macbeth, having committed the murder offstage.
* Lady Macbeth drugged Duncan’s guards to facilitate her husband’s crime, and comments that she would have killed Duncan herself had he not looked so much like her own father.
* Macbeth is already having second thoughts about the murder. He found that he could not finish a prayer and has begun to hear voices (‘Macbeth does murder sleep’).
* Lady Macbeth pours scorn on his concerns and criticises him for bringing the bloody daggers back with him when he was supposed to have left them with the guards.
* She leaves to replace the daggers and daub blood on the faces of the guards to throw suspicion on them.
* When she returns, they hear knocking on the door of the castle. Again, Lady Macbeth takes charge, telling Macbeth to put on his nightgown so it will appear as if they have just woken.

Scene 3

* The porter provides a comic interlude, to break the tension created in the previous scenes.
* Macduff and Lennox, two other lords, enter and ask for Macbeth
* Macbeth appears and Macduff goes to present himself to the king. Lennox tells Macbeth of the unusually (and crucially, unnaturally) stormy night that he and Macduff have encountered
* Macduff returns from the king’s chamber in a state of distress, having discovered the murder.
* The alarm is raised and both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth express convincing horror and revulsion at the crime that has been committed under their roof.
* Malcolm and Donalbain are informed of their father’s death. When Malcolm asked who killed him, Lennox explains that the evidence pointed to the guards, and Macbeth adds that, in his fury at discovering the king dead, he killed the guards.
* Malcolm and Donalbain say privately to each other that some of those present may have been involved in the murder. They plan to leave immediately for fear they too are in danger. Malcolm intends to go to England; Donalbain to Ireland.

Scene 4

* Ross converses with an ‘Old Man’ – the purpose of the scene is to inform the audience of the terrible changes that have afflicted Scotland since Duncan’s murder. True kingship has been violated and the country is greatly affected.
* Macduff enters, bringing news that Malcolm and Donalbain have absconded. This has caused some to believe that they are guilty, and has cleared the way for Macbeth to be crowned King of Scotland.

## Act Three

Scene 1

* Macbeth is now King of Scotland. A feast is planned to celebrate that.
* Macbeth is growing increasingly paranoid and plans to kill Banquo and his son Fleance in order to prevent the witches’ second prophecy being fulfilled.
* Two murderers are dispatched to kill Banquo and Fleance.

Scene 2

* Lady Macbeth is worried about Macbeth’s behaviour. He seems to be brooding far too much over their killing of Duncan.
* Their partnership begins to break down in this scene; Macbeth does not tell her that he has hired men to kill Banquo and Fleance. Her influence was necessary for him to kill Duncan, but he is now acting independently.

Scene 3

* The murderers kill Banquo, but Fleance escapes

Scene 4

* The feast scene
* Lady Macbeth plays the gracious hostess
* The murderers return to the castle to tell Macbeth that they have killed Banquo but that Fleance escaped
* Just before Macbeth takes his place at the table to commence the feast, Banquo’s ghost appears and sits in his place
* Macbeth completely loses his composure and the assembled lords are alarmed to see him acting so erratically
* Lady Macbeth does what she can to smooth over the disruption and speaks sharply to Macbeth in an attempt to correct his behaviour
* The ghost exits, and Macbeth becomes calmer, but when the ghost returns, his behaviour becomes even more disturbed and the assembled lords take their leave
* Macbeth resolves that he has gone so far in bloody acts that he may as well keep on going

Scene 5

* We meet Hecate, the spirit who rules over the witches
* She admonishes the witches for interacting with Macbeth without her knowledge
* They are to meet him the next day to deliver him his fate
* The downfall of Macbeth has begun

Scene 6

* The tide is turning against Macbeth
* Lennox and another lord discuss events, and it is clear that they suspect Macbeth has murdered Banquo and was involved in Duncan’s death even though they speak ironically
* It is agreed that Macbeth is a tyrant against whom they must move
* Malcolm is acknowledged as the true heir

## Act Four

Scene 1

* The witches meet and cast a spell (double, double…)
* Macbeth arrives and demands to know how they were able to predict his future
* A succession of apparitions appear – an armed head; a bloody child; a child crowned, with a tree in his hand
* The apparitions warn Macbeth to be wary of Macduff; that none of woman born can harm him; and that he cannot be defeated until Great Birnam wood moves to Dunsinane hill
* Macbeth is pleased by this, then asks if Banquo’s descendants will ever rule.
* A succession of eight kings followed by Banquo appears, confirming Macbeth’s fears
* The witches vanish and Lennox enters to tell Macbeth that Macduff has fled to England
* In an aside, Macbeth resolves to take Macduff’s castle in his absence and kill his wife and children

Scene 2

* Ross tells Macduff’s wife of her husband’s flight to England
* She fears for her safety and that of her children
* Ross leaves and a messenger arrives warning Lady Macduff to find a refuge. He, too, leaves.
* Almost immediately a murderer enters and kills Lady Macduff’s brave and clever young son with whom she has been talking. Lady Macduff flees.

Scene 3

* Malcolm and Macduff meet in England
* Neither completely trusts the other at first and they play with words until they are sure of the loyalty of each
* Malcolm at first pretends he would be a terrible ruler and Macduff despairs of finding a fit ruler for Scotland
* Malcolm reveals his true nature and his desire to reclaim his kingdom
* Mention is made of the King of England’s ability to heal the sick – this is what true kingship looks like and it is in stark contrast to the pestilence Macbeth has brought on Scotland
* Ross enters, bringing news of Scotland’s continued woes but also of the beginnings of a rebellion against Macbeth
* Ross also has the awful task of breaking to Macduff the news of the attack on his castle. He says that Lady Macduff was killed along with all the children
* The men are resolved to act against Macbeth

## Act Five

Scene 1

* We learn of Lady Macbeth’s descent into madness
* She is sleep-walking and continuously trying to wash blood from her hands

Scene 2

* Rebel forces, supplemented by English soldiers, gather near Birnam wood

Scene 3

* Macbeth is aware of the mounting rebellion but insists that the witches’ prophecies will hold true`
* Lady Macbeth’s doctor informs Macbeth of his wife’s illness. Macbeth is frustrated that the doctor can no more heal his wife than he can heal the country that is turning against him.

Scene 4

* Malcolm orders his soldiers to carry branches (from Birnam wood) before them to conceal their approach

Scene 5

* Macbeth prepares for the final battle. From within the castle, he hears women crying at his wife’s death
* He does not really mourn for his wife. Instead he reflects on the briefness and futility of human life
* Word reaches him that Birnam wood is moving
* Despite the increasingly desperate situation, Macbeth shows admirably bravery and determination

Scene 6

* The soldiers carrying branches from Birnam Wood reach Dunsinane and begin their attack

Scene 7

* Macbeth is surrounded and defeat seems certain. However, he fights on regardless, clinging to the hope that ‘no man born of woman’ can defeat him.
* Macduff appears on the battlefield. He is determined to find Macbeth and personally kill him in order to avenge the deaths of his family

Scene 8

* Macbeth and Macduff meet on the battlefield
* Macbeth informs Macduff of the protection that is on him, but Macduff announces triumphantly that he was ‘from his mother’s womb untimely ripped’
* They fight and Macbeth is killed

Scene 9

* Malcolm is crowned King of Scotland

# Key Quotations

|  |  |  |
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| Character | Quote | Uses |
| Witches | Fair is foul and foul is fair; Hover through the fog and filthy air | Showing the deceptive nature of the witches / setting tone for play |
| Captain | Brave Macbeth – well he deserves that name | How Macbeth is regarded at outset – capacity for greatness crucial in tragic hero |
| Third Witch | All hail, Macbeth! that shall be King hereafter | When referencing first prophecy |
| Banquo | Why do you start, and seem to fear things that do sound so fair? | Usurping throne was in Macbeth’s thoughts before the witches appeared |
| Macbeth | My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical, Shakes so my single state of man that function Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is But what is not | Macbeth’s acknowledgement that he is thinking about killing Duncan, but that the very idea appals him (this is before he speaks with Lady Macbeth) |
| Duncan | There’s no art To find the mind’s construction in the face | Appearances v reality – we cannot know what someone is thinking from how they appear |
| Macbeth | The Prince of Cumberland! That is a stepOn which I must fall down, or else o’er-leap,For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires!Let not light see my black and deep desires | Macbeth’s growing determination to take action to ensure the fulfilment of the prophecy |
| Lady Macbeth | Yet do I fear thy nature,It is too full o’ th’ milk of human-kindness To catch the nearest way | LM’s belief that M is too weak and her determination to force him to act |
| Lady Macbeth | Come, you spiritsThat tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,And fill me from the crown to the toe top fullOf direst cruelty | LM is so determined to succeed that she invokes demonic spirits and tries to remove her femininity |
| Lady Macbeth | Look like the innocent flower,But be the serpent under’t | Her advice to M |
| Macbeth | We will proceed no further in this business | He attempts to stop their plan before they actually kill Duncan |
| Lady Macbeth | When you durst do it, then you were a man | She calls his masculinity into question when he attempts to back out of the plan |
| Macbeth | False face must hide what the false heart doth know | Appearance v reality – his inability to hide his true feelings will later precipitate his downfall |
| Macbeth | Is this a dagger which I see before me, The handle toward my hand? | Macbeth’s mind is extremely troubled even before he kills Duncan |
| Macbeth | I could not say ‘Amen’ When they did say ‘God bless us!’ | Macbeth believes his actions have damned him |
| Lady Macbeth | Infirm of purpose! Give me the daggers | LM is still the more resolute of the two and takes it upon herself to tidy up loose ends |
| Ross | By the clock ‘tis day, And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp. | The murder of the king has interrupted the natural order of the kingdom |
| Banquo | Thou hast it now: King, Cawdor, Glamis, all,As the weird women promised; and I fearThou play’dst most foully for’t | Spoken when alone. He already suspects Macbeth has acted to hasten his fate |
| Macbeth | Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown,And put a barren sceptre in my gripe | Macbeth is determined to kill Banquo in order to prevent Banquo’s descendants benefitting from his actions |
| Lady Macbeth | Nought’s had, all’s spent,Where our desire is got without content: | LM realises that they have committed terrible acts but cannot enjoy the fruits for fear of being overthrown |
| Macbeth | Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, Till thou applaud the deed | Fracturing of the LM/M partnership – he does not share his plans to kill Banquo with her |
| Lady Macbeth | When all’s doneYou look but on a stool | LM’s reaction to M’s fit of conscience during the feast – far from sympathetic! |

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| Macbeth | I am in bloodStepped in so far that, should I wade no more,Returning were as tedious as go o’er | Macbeth acknowledges that he has gone so far in his murderous deeds, that he may as well keep going to the bitter end |
| Lennox | Our suffering countryUnder a hand accursed! | Beginnings of revolt against Macbeth |
| Second Apparition | For none of woman born Shall harm Macbeth | First part of the second prophecy |
| Third Apparition | Macbeth shall never vanquished be untilGreat Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hillShall come against him | Second part of the second prophecy. Both parts keep Macbeth resolutely on his downward spiral |
| Malcolm | And sundry blessings hang about his throneThat speak him full of grace | Re: King Edward the Confessor of England, used here as an example of proper kingship in contrast to Macbeth |
| Lady Macbeth | Out, damned spot! Out, I say! … Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? | Lady Macbeth’s increasingly fragile grip on reality as her guilt drives her into madness |
| Macbeth | I’ll fight, till from my bones my flesh be hacked | Macbeth’s valour in the face of insurmountable odds helps us retain some small degree of sympathy |
| Macbeth | Out, out, brief candle!Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor playerThat struts and frets his hour upon the stageAnd then is heard no more. It is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,Signifying nothing. | Macbeth’s reaction to hearing of LM’s death. He has lost the ability to value life, and instead sees it as futile |
| Macbeth | Blow wind, come wrack!At least we’ll die with harness on our back. | Macbeth’s bravery at the bitter end allows us to summon some sympathy for him |
| Macbeth | They have tied me to a stake; I cannot fly,But bear-like I must fight the course | As above |

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Macbeth | I bear a charmed life, which must not yieldTo one of woman born | Spoken to Macduff – M clings to the second prophecy to the very end |
| Macduff | Macduff was from his mother’s womb Untimely ripped |  |
| Macbeth | Lay on, Macduff, And damned be him that first cries ‘Hold, enough!” | Macbeth’s final words |

# Character Profiles

## Macbeth

Macbeth is presented as a Shakespearean tragic hero. The requirements for such a role are easily defined. It must be a man of high standing, with the potential for greatness. However, a combination of a fatal flaw in his own personality or character and the workings of fate bring about his downfall. A Shakespearean tragedy inevitably ends with the death of the tragic hero.

Macbeth is introduced to us in glowing terms. He appears to have single-handedly saved Scotland from two separate invasions! He is a brave and determined soldier, but there is a suggestion that his blood-lust goes beyond normal parameters.

In his first meeting with the witches, his ambition is exposed. This is his fatal flaw that brings about his downfall. The witches prophesy that he will become king of Scotland. They say nothing to suggest he would have to do anything to hasten this fate. However, as soon as they mention kingship, he reacts in a guilty manner, indicating that he has already set his sights on the throne. The bloody path he carves on his way to the crown only confirms his destructive determination.

When first faced with the reality of killing Duncan, Macbeth is horrified that he is even able to contemplate such a crime against the natural order. Lady Macbeth’s scornful goading of him is required to put him firmly on his path to annihilation. She must call his masculinity into question and disparage him for a full scene before he is able to commit the murder. Even after he has done so, he is deeply troubled by his actions, believing that he has damned his soul.

He soon learns to act independently. When he decides he must kill Banquo, he refuses to share his plan with Lady Macbeth, formerly his “dearest partner of greatness”. He is now irrevocably on a downward trajectory that will end with his own death. Although he is able to act alone now, he is still not able to accept the reality of his actions. He is haunted by ghosts and his paranoia escalates.

During the course of his downfall, Macbeth commits inexcusable and unforgiveable atrocities, including the killing of Macduff’s young family. When he learns of his wife’s death, he is at best indifferent. Our sympathy for him is essentially eliminated over the course of the play. However, as a tragic hero, we must retain some sympathy for him at the end. He cannot devolve into a simple villain. It the final battle, the courage and bravery that Macbeth displays in the face of overwhelming odds allows us to feel regret at the waste of such a man. Had certain events not coincided with his own fatal ambition, he could have been a truly brilliant man.

## Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth’s role in the events of the play has divided critics and directors for years. Is she a heartless would-be killer, who drives a conflicted man to murder? Or is the ruthless ambition that she displays in Act One only part of a more complex personality that is so greatly affected by what she has done that she takes her own life in despair? Perhaps she is both.

Her immediate decision that Duncan must be killed is startling. Although Macbeth had already allowed the thought to cross his mind, he was disgusted with himself for so doing. Lady Macbeth has no such scruples. She is resolute in her desire to make her husband king. The vitriolic diatribe she unleashes on him when trying to force him to take action is staggering. Theirs is clearly a very complex relationship, but they are both dangerously ambitious.

Once she has forced Macbeth to act on his murderous desires, she does all she can to play the supportive wife. She helps tidy up the first murder and acts as a gracious host (and queen) when Macbeth’s guilty conscience gets the better of him at the feast. She remains sharp when dealing directly with Macbeth however. She is also increasingly isolated. She goes from being an equal partner in their scheming to a mere bystander. Once she is pushed away, her mind begins to dwell on the crimes she has committed. She develops insomnia and her mental state deteriorates. By the time she kills herself, she is almost totally estranged from her husband and only the female servants mourn her passing.

## Banquo

Banquo’s purpose is to show us that Macbeth acted of his own free will in choosing to murder Duncan. In order for Macbeth to be a tragic hero in the Shakespearean sense, he must be a free agent. If we can blame the witches, then Macbeth’s actions are not his own. However, Banquo also received an attractive prophecy but did nothing to either hasten or prevent it. It is important that we see this option was open to Macbeth. He could simply have accepted the position of Thane of Cawdor and waited for fate to make him king.

Banquo also alerts us to Macbeth’s guilt from a very early stage. When the witches make their prophecy, it is Banquo who asks Macbeth why he ‘starts and seems to fear’. Later, Banquo comments that Macbeth has ‘it now: King, Cawdor, Glamis, all, /As the weird women promised;’ but is brave enough to add ‘and I fear / Thou play’dst most foully for’t’. Banquo pays for this honesty with his life, and his son only barely escapes.

King James I was king of England when Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*. He was also King James VI of Scotland, and claimed to be descended from both Duncan and Banquo’s lines (Banquo and Duncan were both real historical figures). The blameless nature of these characters is part of Shakespeare’s attempt to flatter his monarch.

## Duncan

We see very little of Duncan in the play. He is killed at the start of Act Two, and said little before that. However, it is clear that he is a good and respected king. Both his sons demonstrate great sense, patriotism and courage and we can assume they learned these traits from their father. Crucially, Duncan is the true king. Macbeth is merely a usurper. This becomes immediately apparent when Macbeth kills him. When Macduff and Lennox arrive, moments after Macbeth has murdered Duncan, they comment on the unnatural storm they had to battle on their way to the castle. For the rest of the play, the natural world demonstrates its anger at the usurper. A seemingly endless night descends on Scotland. The evilness of Macbeth’s reign is contrasted with the sanctity of that of the English king, Edward the Confessor. When Macduff visits Malcolm in England, he notices that the king has the ability to cure people of a skin disease. This is what true kingship looks like – God’s anointed ministering to his people. In Scotland, Macbeth has sent mercenaries after Macduff’s wife and children – the very antithesis of Duncan and Edward.

# Themes

(Taken from skoool.ie)

**Kingship**The king was a sacred figure and therefore his murder took the form of a sacrilege. Duncan was Scotland’s lawful king. No earthly individual had the right to put an end to his rule. This was for God to do. Shakespeare obviously intended us to see Duncan as embodying an ideal of kingship, as one who possesses those ‘king-becoming graces’ listed out by Malcolm. Duncan’s importance les in his representative function, which is that of kingship. He is a symbol of order, harmony and goodness. He is not a fully rounded character.

After Macbeth’s encounter with the witches his latent ambition for kingship is spurred on. This is further consolidated by his wife Lady Macbeth. Greatness for her is the attainment of the ‘golden round’, which she believes will bring fulfilment for both of them. She finally convinces her husband in a series of impassioned speeches that to be worthy of kingship he must kill for it. Murder is the price to be paid for kinship. The murder has cosmic repercussions. A mousing owl devours a falcon. Duncan’s horses devour one another. Darkness covers the face of the earth.
When Macbeth becomes king he reigns like a tyrant. It is only with the victory of Malcolm that order and harmony are restored to the country of Scotland. The leafy branches disguising the troops are symbolic of the new life and hope for Scotland.

**Evil**This play deals with evil inherent in humankind and also with supernatural evil.  We see the hell-on-earth, which ensues when humankind surrenders to the seductive power of evil in this play.  Evil is portrayed in the action particularly in the murder of Duncan and Macduff’s family. We also see the profound and absolute evil in the witches.  The witches are intended to represent the metaphysical world of evil spirits. Their meetings take place in conditions suggestive of cosmic disorder. Their function on a symbolic level is to mirror the spirit of evil roaming around Scotland. All their actions are a perversion of the natural order. It is Banquo who recognizes the satanic quality of the witches in his question,’ can the devil speak thus?’ He also recognizes their manner of working ‘ the instruments of darkness tell us truths, win us with honest trifles, to betray’s in deepest consequence.’

Evil works in the play through deception. The witches as instruments of evil operate in terms of false appearance. As agents of the devil they seek to reverse the normal order of things and by so doing obscure reality. The essence of their intention is embodied in the line,’ air is foul and foul is fair.’ However, the crime to which they incite Macbeth is committed by him and the responsibility for succumbing to the temptation is Macbeth’s alone. Macbeth is his own betrayer. The witches are merely catalysts who bring to the surface the latent evil, which lies buried in his subconscious mind.

**Loyalty and Betrayal**Both Loyalty and Betrayal dominate this play. From the opening of the play we witness how Cawdor has betrayed his own country by informing Norway about their intentions in the war. As a result of this Cawdor is punished and Macbeth gains his title. It is Duncan’s tragedy that he is naïve and fails to see through character. His immediate appointment of Macbeth to replace Cawdor will eventually mean his own death.

The witches too betray Macbeth by tempting him with prophecies, which turn out to be false. It is only at the conclusion of the play when Macbeth has been defeated that he realizes how the witches have operated,’ these juggling fiends…that palter with us in a double sense.’

Macduff demonstrates a deep sense of loyalty by fleeing to England and organizing an army to defeat Macbeth. As a result of his act of heroic loyalty to his country his family are brutally slaughtered.

Lady Macbeth manifests a misguided loyalty to her husband. Lady Macbeth loves her husband with a genuine if perverted fervour. In her obsession with the achievement of earthly power she calls on the powers of darkness to take her over body and soul. She believes that by doing this both of them will come to have ‘solely sovereign sway and masterdom.’ At the Banquet scene she makes a prodigious effort to remain loyal to her husband and shield his reputation before the lords of Scotland. It is also loyalty, which causes her to faint when the murdered body of Duncan is found in order to prevent Macbeth from exposing his fear before the others.

Both these characters have betrayed their own humanity by falling victims of evil, and both end up the ‘prey of wicked dreams.’ They are truly tragic figures who show in their lives how evil is totally self-destructive.

# Past Exam Questions

2009

1. “Macbeth’s murder of Duncan has horrible consequences both for Macbeth himself and for Scotland.”

Write a response to this statement. You should refer to the play in your answer.

1. “*Macbeth*” has all the ingredients of compelling drama.

Write a response to this statement, commenting on one or more of the ingredients which, in your opinion, make *Macbeth* a compelling drama.

2007

1. “The relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth undergoes significant change during the course of the play.”

Discuss this statement supporting your answer with the aid of suitable reference to the text.

1. “Essentially the play *Macbeth* is about power, its use and abuse.”

Discuss this view of the play, supporting your answer with the aid of suitable reference to the text.

2004

1. “Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* invites us to look into the world of a man driven on by ruthless ambition and tortured by regret.”

Write a response to this view of the play, supporting the points you make by reference to the text.

1. “The play, *Macbeth*, has many scenes of compelling drama.”

Choose one scene that you found compelling and say why you found it to be so. Support your answer by reference to the play.

2003

1. “We feel very little pity for the central characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare’s play.”

To what extent would you agree with the above view? Support your answer by reference to the play.

1. “In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare presents us with a powerful vision of evil.”

Write your response to the above statement. Textual support may include reference to a particular performance of the play you have seen.

# Sample Essay

1. “Macbeth’s murder of Duncan has horrible consequences both for Macbeth himself and for Scotland.”

Write a response to this statement. You should refer to the play in your answer.

Macbeth is a tragic hero in the Shakespearean tradition. This means that he must, of his own free will, give in to a fatal flaw in his character and precipitate his own downfall. In the case of Macbeth, the flaw is ambition, and the irrevocable decision he makes is to kill Duncan, the king of Scotland, and take his throne. This sets him on a downward trajectory that sees him lose control of his actions, the support of his peers, his wife and ultimately his own life. Over the course of his decline, we also see Scotland suffer terribly. This is connected to the medieval belief that the fate of the country was tied closely to that of its king. When the true king was killed and a usurper crowned, the country reacted violently, sinking into darkness and unnatural weather.

Macbeth begins the play on a high note. Scotland is under attack, but he leads the charge against the various invaders and secures decisive victories for the army. The captain who reports to Duncan on the progress of the battles is fulsome in his praise: “Brave Macbeth – well he deserves that name.” Duncan is in full agreement, and calls Macbeth ‘worthy’. He plans to bestow additional honours on Macbeth in gratitude for all he has done to ensure the safety of the country. However, we in the audience are already aware that events will not run as smoothly as Duncan seems to hope. The witches, introduced in the very first scene, are waiting to meet Macbeth, “when the battle’s lost and won”. Paradoxical and contradictory language like this alerts us that deception will be evident throughout the play, and things will not be as they seem.

Sure enough, when Macbeth meets the witches, he is extremely interested in the future they predict for him. The witches call out prophecies for both Macbeth and Banquo. Macbeth, they promise, will be Thane of Cawdor and “shall be King hereafter.” To Banquo they say that, while he will not be king himself, he shall “get kings” – his descendants will be kings. Macbeth’s reaction to his predicted future is crucial. Banquo asks, “Why do you start, and seem to fear things that do sound so fair?” The heavy implication is that the witches have touched on a subject that Macbeth has already contemplated. This is confirmed for us when he says in an aside, “My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical, shakes so my single state of man that function is smothered in surmise.” From this line we know that Macbeth is already thinking of murdering Duncan. However, the very fact that he is able to form the thought disgusts and terrifies him. It will take some persuasion to move him from merely thinking ambitiously to acting decisively.

Such persuasion comes in the form of Lady Macbeth, and by Act Two, Scene Two, Duncan is dead. Almost immediately, Macbeth is aware of the destruction he has brought on his own soul. Just as he committed the murder, one of the guards stirred. Macbeth asks Lady Macbeth why “I could not say ‘Amen’ when they did say ‘God bless us!’ By killing the king, he has sinned against God (the king being God’s anointed) and has fallen from grace. This is only the beginning of his problems, however.

Having dispatched Duncan, and watched his sons flee the country, Macbeth is now able to take the throne as he had hoped. The reality doesn’t match his expectations. Now that he has the throne, he has to keep it. The most immediate issue is that of succession. The witches’ prophecy for Macbeth has come true. But what if they were just as accurate for Banquo? If Banquo’s descendants become kings of Scotland, Macbeth’s struggle to become king will have only a short-lived outcome. He complains that “Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown, and put a barren sceptre in my gripe.” Lady Macbeth is in agreement: “Nought’s had, all’s spent, where our desire is got without content.”

Despite being still in complete accord with her husband’s ambition, Lady Macbeth is now excluded from his plans. This is part of one of the lesser consequences for Macbeth. Having killed Duncan, he finds that he must increasingly isolate himself, first from his comrades, but also from his “dearest partner of greatness”. When he is planning to kill Banquo, he tells her “be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, till thou applaud the deed.”

His inability to cope alone with the aftermath of his actions quickly becomes apparent in the feast scene. Banquo’s (extremely fresh) ghost enters the hall and takes Macbeth’s seat. As the ghost is visible only to Macbeth, his fearful reaction is inexplicable to the assembled guests. Lady Macbeth’s efforts to smooth over his behaviour are in vain and the feast breaks up in disarray. Macbeth’s decision to kill Duncan placed him on an increasingly violent path which is more that his psyche is able to cope with.

The ultimate consequence for Macbeth is that his own life is forfeit. He has committed a crime against the natural order, and only his death can restore the balance. It is in the fulfilment of this consequence that we are able to summon some final sympathy for the tragic hero. By the final scenes of the play, Macbeth is completely isolated. Lady Macbeth has died and his lords have deserted him to become rebels. But rather than admitting defeat and surrendering, Macbeth fights on with a bravery reminiscent of that which was so widely praised in Act One. He shouts, “blow wind, come wrack, at least we’ll die with harness on our back” with a grim determination, but he cannot escape his fate. Macduff grimly informs him that he was “from his mother’s womb untimely ripped,” thus collapsing the final part of the second prophecy. Macbeth pays the ultimate price for killing Duncan, but redeems himself marginally in the final moments.

Scotland herself also suffers the effect of Duncan’s murder. As already mentioned, in the Middle Ages, it was believed that there was a mystical bond between the king and the nation. If the king was weak or unworthy, the country would reflect this. No sooner has Macbeth committed his regicide, than this is proved to be true. Lennox and Macduff arrive at Macbeth’s castle moments after the murder, commenting that “the night has been unruly” and that there were “lamentings heard i’the air, strange screams of death. “ The country is literally crying out in response to the killing of Duncan.

The physical effects continue for the duration of Macbeth’s reign. In later scenes, Ross remarks upon the unnatural darkness that has befallen the country: “By the clock ‘tis day, and yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp.” The old man to whom he speaks provides additional examples of the inversion that has occurred in nature – a falcon has been killed by a mere mousing owl (in a close echo of the main plot) and Duncan’s prize horses ran wild and ate each other.

Overall, it is clear that Macbeth’s murder of Duncan has horrible consequences both for Macbeth himself and for Scotland. Macbeth pays with his life, but not before first losing everything of importance and enduring great mental distress. While Scotland suffers greatly during Macbeth’s reign, it is not destroyed. The rebel forces defeat Macbeth and Malcolm is acclaimed as the true king. The natural balance is restored and the country is free to flourish again.