

Macbeth Knowledge Organiser (GCSE English Literature – AQA)

Scene	Plot and character	Symbols	Quotations	Vocabulary	Historical context	
Act 1: Exposition	1.1	Three witches meet and plot against Macbeth, who is currently leading the Scottish army in a battle against the Norwegians.	Storm: the witches' power over nature. Also foreshadows chaos. Fog: creates an ominous mood, reinforcing the witches' ambiguous nature. Could represent Macbeth's inability to see the righteous path.	1. Witches: "Fair is foul and foul is fair: / Hover through the fog and filthy air."	A. Ambiguous: more than one interpretation B. Enigmatic: mysterious, hard to understand C. Malevolent: evil D. Trchaic tetrameter: an unnatural rhythm, 8 syllables per line (stressed/unstressed) E. Inevitability: an event cannot be prevented	Witchcraft: Most Jacobean (17 th C) believed in witches; witch-hunting and execution was common. King James I wrote a book called <i>Daemonologie</i> in which he supported and encouraged the trials of witches, who he believed were controlled by the devil.
	1.2	Duncan learns that Macbeth and Banquo have won the war. Macbeth has decapitated the Scottish traitor, Macdonwald. Another traitor (the Thane of Cawdor) will be executed.	Macdonwald's decapitated head: this symbolises the consequences of treachery. The fact that Macbeth severs Macdonwald's head indicates Macbeth's loyalty to King Duncan.	2. Captain: "Unseamed him from the nave to the chops." 3. Duncan: "O valiant cousin!"	F. Tragic hero: a noble person of high rank whose error in judgement leads to downfall G. Virtuous: moral; having good qualities H. Patriotic: loyal to one's country I. Courageous / valiant: brave J. Relentless bloodlust: desire for bloodshed	Hypermasculine Society: exaggerated expectations of "male" behaviour. Men need to show courage on the battlefield: society celebrates violence used in the service of the king. For Macbeth, this mentality is difficult to change in peace-time.
	1.3	Macbeth and Banquo meet the witches, who prophesy that Macbeth → Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, King . Banquo's son → king	Wasteland setting: the witches exist outside of civilisation; they are wild, dangerous and unknowable.	4. Banquo: "to win us to our harm / The instruments of darkness tell us truths." 5. M: "This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill – cannot be good."	K. Hubris: excessive pride and arrogance L. Hamartia: a fatal flaw in a protagonist's character that leads to his/her downfall M. Credulous: believes others easily N. Soliloquy: a speech to the audience – other characters do not hear this	Fate versus Free Will: Jacobean Christians debated whether mankind was fated (pre-destined) to go to heaven or hell, or whether they had free choice. Was Macbeth fated to commit horrific deeds, or did he choose to do it out of free will?
	1.4	Malcolm will be Duncan's heir.		6. M: "my black and deep desires."	O. Power-hungry: desiring control P. Ruthless / callous: having or showing no mercy to others. Q. Unconventional: acting in a way which is different to the stereotype R. Imperative verbs: command verbs S. Blank verse: 10 syllables per line (unstressed/stressed). No rhyme.	Patriarchal societies: Men dominate and women are subservient; they are expected to obey male relatives and are regarded as the weaker, inferior sex. Women are denied the same rights and privileges as men. However, Queen Elizabeth I had been on the throne until her death in 1603, suggesting that in some situations women could hold power.
	1.5	Macbeth has sent Lady Macbeth a letter explaining what the witches have said. She calls on the spirits to "fill" her with "direst cruelty". Macbeth arrives and they plot.	Milk: feminine symbol of compassion. LM rejects this, asking the spirits to replace milk with poison (death and destruction). Flower: innocent, fragile, natural – being "fair". Serpent: Biblical allusion to the "foul", malevolent devil.	7. LM: M is "too full o' the milk of human kindness." 8. LM: "unsex me here". 9. LM: "I feel now / The future in the instant." 10. LM: "Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it."	T. Façade: the appearance of honesty U. Benevolent: kindness and generosity	The Ideal King: kings needed integrity, loyalty to their people, and godliness.
	1.6	Lady Macbeth welcomes Duncan to her castle.		11. Duncan: "Our honoured hostess."	V. Equivocating: to avoid committing yourself, or saying one thing but meaning another W. Doubtful: unsure. X. Emasculated: made to feel weaker / masculinity is threatened	Machiavellianism: writer Niccolò Machiavelli advocated using intelligence and cunning – not brute force – to gain power. Shakespeare explores the consequences of this ideology: what happens when a Machiavellian character gains power?
	1.7	Macbeth equivocates, doubting whether or not he can commit the murder. Lady Macbeth persuades him by questioning his masculinity.	Spurs: spikes used to push a horse faster. Macbeth needs a "spur" to propel him to realise his ambition to be king; he admits that he would not murder Duncan without another force (LM? The witches?).	12. M: "Vaulting ambition, which overleaps itself." 13. LM: "Screw your courage to the sticking-place / And we'll not fail." 14. LM: "When you durst do it, then you were a man."	Y. Afflicted: suffering greatly, deeply troubled Z. Phantasmagorical: having a shifting or deceptive appearance, like a dream AA. Regicide: the act of killing a king BB. Usurp: to take a position of power illegally	The Divine Right of Kings: The belief that monarchs were appointed by God and had absolute power over their people, being answerable only to God. The Great Chain of Being: The belief that God had designed an ordered system for everything in the universe within which every creature and person had an allotted place. It was an offence against God for anyone to try to alter their station in life.
Act 2: Rising Action	2.1	Macbeth meets Banquo on the way to Duncan's chamber. Alone again, he sees a mysterious dagger leading him to the murder.	Diamond: Duncan gave this to LM, emphasising the betrayal. The dagger: it could be the witches leading Macbeth to the murder. Or, it could represent guilt.	15. M: "heat-oppressed brain". 16. M: Duncan's "virtues will plead like angels."	CC. Remorse: guilt, regret DD. Dread / apprehension: fear, anxiety, horror EE. Elision: an event is not shown on stage. <i>Duncan's murder is elided.</i>	
	2.2	Macbeth meets Lady Macbeth, who becomes angry as he still has the daggers. She plants them on the drugged guards and they go to bed.	Blood: inescapable guilt. Water: connected to Christian baptism: washing away one's sins. Macbeth thinks he will never cleanse his conscience.	17. M: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?" 18. LM: "A little water clears us of this deed."		
	2.3	The Porter answers the gate to Macduff, who discovers the murder. Macbeth kills Duncan's guards, blaming the murder on them, and Macduff becomes suspicious. Duncan's sons flee.	The gate: the gates of Macbeth's castle are like the gates of hell. The opening of the gates symbolises how Scotland has now been plunged into a hellish state of horror and chaos.	19. Macduff: "Horror! Horror! Horror!" 20. M: "His silver skin laced with his golden blood."	FF. Dismayed / distraught: discouraged, upset	Fear of Tyranny: When James became King in 1603, many people feared that he would not be benevolent; many previous kings had been tyrannical. A group of Catholic rebels planned the Gunpowder Plot in an attempt to assassinate James. "Macbeth" has been interpreted as a warning to King James I to avoid becoming a tyrant, as the consequences of this are disastrous.
	2.4	Macduff discusses Macbeth being made King. Macduff doesn't attend the coronation.	Nature: order and righteousness in the world. Yet here, natural chaos reflects moral and political chaos.	21. Old Man: "'Tis unnatural, / Even like the deed that's done."	GG. Tyrannical: a leader who uses power unfairly and for their own purposes. HH. Disorder: chaos	

Scene	Plot and character development		Symbols	Quotations	Vocabulary
Act 3: Climax	3.1	Banquo recalls the witches' prophecies. Macbeth invites him to a banquet that night, but secretly ponders the threat Banquo poses to his safety. Macbeth orders Banquo's murder.	Fruitless crown: Macbeth regrets his childlessness; there will be no dynasty of kings.	22. Banquo: "I fear / Thou play'st most foully for it." 23. M: "a fruitless crown."	
	3.2-3.3	Macbeth discusses his troubles with Lady Macbeth: he is unhappy that others may suspect the truth. He refuses to tell Lady Macbeth that he has arranged Banquo's murder. Outside the castle, the murderers kill Banquo, but Fleance escapes.	Snake: threats to Macbeth's kingship and absolute power. A Biblical allusion to the devil; Macbeth sees these threats as evil.	24. LM: "Tis safer to be that which we destroy, / Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy." 25. M: "Full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife." 26. M: "Be innocent of the knowledge."	II. Corrupt: dishonest, deceptive, immoral
	3.4	Macbeth hosts a feast. He discovers Banquo is killed, but Fleance lives. Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost and appears to have a fit. Lady Macbeth tells the guests her husband is unwell, before losing her determination to help Macbeth.	The banquet: should symbolise Macbeth's power, but as it deteriorates into chaos it represents his illegitimate kingship and unbalanced state of mind.	27. M: "I am cabin'd, cribb'd, confined, bound in / To saucy doubts and fears." 28. M: "Never shake / Thy gory locks at me." 29. M: "I am in blood / Stepped in so far"	JJ. Plagued / tormented: worried, haunted, afflicted by an idea
	3.5	Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft, promises to give Macbeth a false sense of security. Lords discuss Banquo's death and their suspicions of Macbeth. Macduff goes to England for help.			
Act 4: Falling Action	4.1	Macbeth visits the Witches and is given new prophecies: o armed head: to beware of Macduff o bloody child: no man born of woman can harm Macbeth o crowned child with tree: Macbeth is safe until Birnam Wood moves o line of kings: Banquo's heirs		30. M: "How now, you secret, black and midnight hags!"	
	4.2	Macbeth sends murderers to Macduff's castle to kill his family. Macduff has already gone to England to raise an army.	Innocent victims: represent the depths of Macbeth's malevolence.		KK. Pathos: a feeling of pity
	4.3	Macduff discovers his family have been killed. He rounds up the English armies ready to take revenge		31. Macduff: "an untitled tyrant bloody-sceptered." 32. Macduff: "I must also feel it like a man."	LL. Integrity: making right decisions MM. Distraught: extremely upset NN. Vengeance: punishment
Act 5: Denouement	5.1	Lady Macbeth sleepwalks, acting out washing her hands.	Hand-washing: a desperate attempt to wash away guilt	33. LM: "Out damned spot! ... Hell is murky!" 34. LM: "All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand." 35. LM: "What's done cannot be undone."	OO. Deranged: mad, irrational PP. Vulnerable: weak, threatened QQ. Prose: speech with no rhyme or rhythm.
	5.2 – 5.4	Macbeth boasts that he has nothing to fear. Yet Macduff and Malcolm's army approaches and Macbeth puts on his armour. The army use branches off trees as camouflage	Macbeth's armour: Macbeth's readiness to fight and his belief that he is invincible. It also reminds us of his heroic status in 1.2.		
	5.5-5.7	Macbeth hears that Lady Macbeth is dead – we assume suicide. Macbeth is terrified to learn that the wood is starting to move. The battle commences outside the castle. Macbeth strikes everyone he can see, suddenly afraid of nothing.	Candle blown out: the fragility and vulnerability of life.	36. M: "She should have died hereafter." 37. M: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow." 38. M: "Out, out, brief candle."	RR. Nihilistic: a profound sense of the meaninglessness of life and morality SS. Defiant: resisting or fighting against another power
	5.8	Macbeth fights Macduff, only to find that Macduff was not "born of woman" but through caesarean section. Macduff triumphs, cutting off Macbeth's head. Malcolm is made king.	Macbeth's decapitated head: Macbeth's body is physically distorted to reflect his unnatural and immoral acts. Links to 1.2.	39. Macduff: "Behold the usurper's cursed head." 40. Malcolm: "This dead butcher and his fiend-like queen."	TT. Anagnorisis: a moment of realisation UU. Downfall: the tragic hero's destruction VV. Nemesis: an arch-enemy
	Big ideas: characters			Big ideas: themes	
<p>The supernatural world: Shakespeare uses these "instruments of darkness" to cast a shadow of malevolence over the play. It is ambiguous whether Macbeth acts of his own free will or whether he is the victim of the supernatural.</p> <p>Macbeth, the tragic hero: Shakespeare uses Macbeth to show the destructive consequences of unchecked ambition on society, family, and one's own psychological state.</p> <p>Lady Macbeth: Lady Macbeth's manipulation of her husband positions her as the catalyst of his downfall. Like Macbeth, her death serves as a warning against unchecked ambition.</p> <p>King Duncan: Whilst Duncan may appear to be the ideal king – he is benevolent, virtuous, and godly – his death serves as a stark warning to King James I: leaders should not be overly trusting, as this can lead to disaster.</p>			<p>Power: Shakespeare exposes the corrupting effect of power. He reveals the lengths people will go to in order to obtain power and hold on to it.</p> <p>Ambition: Shakespeare crafts a cautionary tale about the consequences of unchecked ambition. He implies that it can never be fulfilled and therefore quickly grows into a monster that will destroy any-one who gives into it.</p> <p>Guilt: Shakespeare conveys the inescapability of guilt. Despite the attempts of some characters to suppress their guilt, Shakespeare shows how it will inevitably take hold and individuals must suffer the consequences of their actions.</p> <p>Appearances: Shakespeare suggests that often people and events are not truly as they seem. Appearances can be deceptive and the reality behind them is often dark and unpleasant.</p>		
<p>Malcolm: Malcolm is a model for the ideal king: he is benevolent, virtuous, courageous in battle, and also cautious in trusting others.</p> <p>Banquo: A character foil for Macbeth, Banquo represents the righteous path the tragic hero should have taken. Banquo is also tempted by the witches, but he remains loyal to the King; he symbolises integrity.</p> <p>Macduff: Macduff is the archetype of the avenging hero, who does not want vengeance for its own sake, but wishes to restore order and morality to Scotland.</p>			<p>Regicide: Shakespeare teaches his audience a moral lesson: kill the king and pay the price. Macbeth's punishment reflects this and sends a message to any potential traitors.</p> <p>Fate and free will: Shakespeare asks his audience to consider the extent to which we control our own destinies. Is it Macbeth's fate to be a traitor or is he alone responsible for his actions, and did he freely choose his path?</p> <p>Gender: Shakespeare challenges traditional gender norms surrounding masculinity and femininity. Denied power in a patriarchal society, Lady Macbeth rebels against the submissive role society has assigned her. Shakespeare uses Lady Macbeth to show how restricting women's freedom leads to bitterness and a desire to gain power by whatever means necessary. Alternatively, Shakespeare could use Lady Macbeth to demonstrate women's inability to cope with power.</p>		