Macbeth

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Context of and introduction to the play

The play, *Macbeth*, is about a Scottish tyrant, his bloody reign and his downfall. Shakespeare chose to write a play about Macbeth in order to please the new Scottish-born king of England, King James I. When Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603, King James VI of Scotland came to the throne of England and was crowned James I of England. He soon showed that he meant to support drama by becoming patron of a select company of actors, The Lord Chamberlain’s Men. This company, later named The King’s Men, was made up mostly of actors from the Globe Theatre, and Shakespeare was their chief playwright. Whenever the king wished, The King’s Men could be called upon to act in his palaces and sometimes to write new plays for a royal occasion. Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* to entertain King Christian of Denmark, the queen’s brother, when he visited England. It was put on in the Great Hall of Hampton Court in August 1606.

While the plays were used to entertain the court and important visitors, they were also an important way of spreading propaganda. In the days before any mass media, play performances were the best way of getting ideas across to a lot of people. In January 1606, a man called Guy Fawkes and seven other men were put to death for their attempt to blow up the king and the government in the Houses of Parliament. This became known as “The Gunpowder Plot.” King James I wanted the people of England and Scotland to be aware of the evil of killing a rightful king and of the chaos the kingdom would be thrown into should this happen. Shakespeare makes this powerfully clear in *Macbeth* where the murderer himself – Macbeth – points out how monstrous it is to murder an anointed king. However, sometimes Shakespeare’s effort to portray King James’ ancestors in a favourable light seems to have affected his creative genius. For example, the least successful scene in the play, Act 4, Scene 3, is centred on Malcolm, who was King James’ ancestor. In comparison to the energy and action of the rest of the play, this scene seems strangely stilted and much too long. No wonder directors of the play since James’ death have often cut the scene to a fraction of its length.

Shakespeare loosely based *Macbeth* on a historical source, *The Chronicles of Scotland*, which was compiled in 1577 by Raphael Holinshed. However, Shakespeare made some changes to Holinshed’s account to please King James I, while, at the same time, making his play more dramatic and appealing to his more ordinary audience. For example, in the *Chronicles*, Banquo joins Macbeth in murdering the king – but, since King James was a descendant of
Banquo, this part of the history had to be changed. So in Shakespeare’s play, Macbeth commits the murder alone, dramatically increasing his isolation as a result of his evil deed.

The way in which Shakespeare portrays the witches is another example of how he changed the original account, both to suit the king and to entertain the wider audience. King James I was enthralled and terrified by witches, so much so that he had written a book about them and how to detect them. In the *Chronicles*, the witches are portrayed more as fairy soothsayers than as witches. But Shakespeare’s frightening, evil hags, who give the play its brilliant and sinister opening and who, we feel, are always lurking in the background, must have been much more to James’ taste as well as more dramatic for others watching the play.
Key literary features of a Shakespearean tragedy

*Macbeth* shares with other of Shakespeare's great tragedies *King Lear, Othello* and *Hamlet* a number of distinctive features:

1. The play's chief protagonist, the tragic hero, is a great man of noble birth. Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, is King Duncan's greatest warrior.
2. The hero has a fault usually in the form of an unfulfilled desire that will eventually lead to his undoing and downfall. Macbeth's fault is his evil ambition, a secret desire to be king of Scotland.
3. When the hero achieves the fulfilment of his desire, his fortunes and his morale begin to decline rapidly. Macbeth through murdering King Duncan becomes King of Scotland, but far from being satisfied, he is tortured with anxiety and seeks to get rid of all who he sees as threatening.
4. The hero starts to lose control of himself and the situation. Macbeth deteriorates into becoming a blood-thirsty tyrant who murders even innocents.
5. The hero is destroyed and the situation is restored to order. Macbeth is killed fittingly by Macduff, and Malcolm, the rightful king, restores order and harmony.

Structure of the tragedy

All Shakespeare's plays have five acts. It would be convenient if the five main components of the play's action – the introduction, the rising action, the climax or turning point, the falling action and the denouement corresponded with the five acts, but they do not. In *Macbeth*, only the first two scenes are the introduction to the play and then from the third scene in Act 1 to the third scene in Act 3 are the events leading to the fulfilment of the hero's desire (the rising action). Act 3 scene 4 is the turning point (the climax) when reaction hardens against the hero. Macbeth realises at the banquet that his dream of founding a line of kings has been foiled by the escape of Banquo's son, Fleance, from his assassins. From the banquet to Macbeth's last duel with Macduff there is a sharp decline (falling action) that ends in his death and the restoration of the situation to harmony (denouement).
The action of the play

The setting at the start of the play is a stormy battlefield in Scotland. Macbeth and Banquo, captains in the Scottish army, have fought courageously and have helped to defeat the invading Norwegian army. The grateful King Duncan of Scotland decides to reward Macbeth.

**Act 1**

**Act 1, Scene 1**

The three witches first appear in this short scene. In the background a battle is being fought amidst a great storm. Thus, the play begins with strife, uproar, and violent forces of nature.

**Act 1, Scene 2**

King Duncan learns of the victory against the rebel MacDonald, of a second victory won by Macbeth against Norway and the traitorous Thane of Cawdor and of Macbeth’s bravery. Duncan bestows Cawdor’s title upon Macbeth and condemns the thane to death. Macbeth, not present, does not yet know of this new honour.
Conflict and resolution

In any good story there is conflict. This includes plays and films. Conflict creates tension and interest and, in fact, creates what we call drama.

In *Macbeth*, there are three levels of conflict – conflict introduced by the witches, conflict in the minds of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and conflict in Scotland caused by Macbeth’s tyranny. The witches are the drivers of the conflict and Macbeth and, indirectly, Lady Macbeth are their chosen instruments. The following sections discuss the three levels of conflict and how they create tension and interest and, finally, lead to the resolution of the play.

**Conflict introduced by the witches**

The meeting of the three weird and bearded sisters in a storm in the opening scene of the play tells the audience that conflict is coming. Their plan to meet Macbeth on the heath and their strange evil chant, “Fair is foul,” show they are up to no good. Just the mention of Macbeth’s name by the witches creates tension in the play. It starts the audience wondering why they have singled out Macbeth.

The impression that the witches are evil and powerful and bent on causing conflict is strengthened in Act 1, Scene 3, where they wait for Macbeth and Banquo. One witch has a grudge against a sailor’s wife for not giving her chestnuts and they all join gleefully in a plan to punish the woman: they condemn the woman’s husband to a slow death by sending an off-shore wind that will trap his ship at sea. Their ability to command winds and their chosen form of punishment, out of all proportion to what the poor woman has done, tell us a great deal about the witches and what is to come. We can see that they have supernatural powers and amuse themselves by playing with the lives of human beings.

Macbeth meets the witches only twice in the play, but it is plain that they set in motion all the forces that cause him and Lady Macbeth to murder the king and plunge Scotland into a reign of terror. Their first prophecy feeds Macbeth’s greed and ambition, so, despite his noble and courageous character and his conscience, he gives in to his wife’s determination that he will be king and murders Duncan. Their second prophecy gives Macbeth a wild, false hope that nobody can harm him and he can continue his bloodthirsty reign unchecked. Both prophecies create dramatic tension in the play. The fascinated audience watches the defeat of Macbeth’s conscience,
so that the dagger he sees in his mind becomes the real dagger with which he murders his king. The second prophecy makes Macbeth so bloodthirsty that, after the slaughter of Lady Macduff and her children, the audience longs for him to be checked and punished.

Conflict in the human mind

The witches are behind the two murders that cause great conflict in the play, but we are also gripped by conflict that seems to have nothing directly to do with the witches. This is the conflict that takes place in the mind. At first, it is a conflict between good and evil in Macbeth. As the fire of evil ambition is stoked in Macbeth by his wife, he grapples with his conscience. Later, after he has murdered Duncan, the conflict in his mind changes. It becomes an increasingly desperate attempt to fight the “scorpions” that are the fears in his mind (Act 3, Scene 2, line 36).

The conflict in Lady Macbeth’s mind, which eventually completely overwhelms her, is equally absorbing. This is because her inability to free herself from the evil of Duncan’s murder causes a great change in her. The ambitious, dominant woman of the early part of the play becomes a distracted, lost creature, endlessly trying to wash her hands of Duncan’s blood in her sleep. The Jacobean audience would have waited in suspense, wondering whether she would repent and be redeemed. But there is no saving Lady Macbeth. She dies by her own hand, and, in the eyes of Shakespeare’s audiences, is unredeemed and condemned forever.

Conflict in Scotland caused by Macbeth

The first indication of the conflict between Macbeth and Scotland is when Malcolm and Donaldbain realise that they must flee, or suffer the same fate as their father. The tension that this creates in the play is steadily increased by Macbeth’s tyrannical rule. Scotland becomes a disturbed, unhappy place with spies planted “in every house” and where nobody is safe. Macbeth orders Banquo – once his close friend – and Banquo’s son, Fleance, to be murdered, because of the witches’ prediction that Banquo’s descendents will be kings. Macbeth also has Lady Macduff, her children and her whole household slaughtered because Macduff has escaped to England. Macbeth’s bloodthirsty acts create suspense, and we are moved by Ross’s description of the desolate state to which Macbeth has reduced Scotland. Scotland has become a country that “cannot / Be call’d our mother, but our grave” (Act 4, Scene 3, lines 167–175). We wait in suspense for justice to be done.
The resolution

The dramatic tension of the play ends only when Macbeth realises he has been fatally misled by the witches. At this moment, when all is lost to him, something of the old Macbeth returns. As Birnam Wood begins to move, his heroism reasserts itself and he fights courageously until at last he is killed, fittingly, by Macduff, whose family he has slaughtered. Macduff beheads Macbeth and carries the head on a pole to the new king, Malcolm. So, as is symbolised in this gruesome deed, justice is at last done. The “dead butcher and his fiendlike queen” are indeed dead. Malcolm, the rightful heir, is about to be crowned king, and he promises to restore Scotland to peace and safety.

Characters

Shakespeare’s portrayal of character in Macbeth is unusual because Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are the only two vigorous and developing characters in the play. We see deeply into their minds and are absorbed by the changes that take place within them. With the partial exception of Banquo, the other characters in the play make speeches and are a very necessary part of the action, but they have little individualisation. They aren’t as memorable as many minor characters are in other Shakespeare plays. King Duncan, for example, is important not for his personality, but because he has all the virtues of kingship: he has an ordered kingdom, he inspires loyalty and he is generous and gracious.

Macbeth as a tragic hero

All the typical stages of the tragic hero are portrayed in the character of Macbeth and its development in the play. Macbeth is a man of great stature: the battle hero of Scotland. He has a flaw: his ambition to be king. His ambition leads him to murder King Duncan and to usurp the throne. However, Macbeth is unable to enjoy the benefits of his new status. The murder brings only fear and suspicion of everybody around him: he becomes isolated from people as he develops a habit of killing in an effort to maintain his position and he relies on his belief that the witches’ prophecy to Banquo cannot come true. In the end, as Malcolm’s forces, backed by English troops, close in on him, he comes to a full understanding of what has happened to him and he realises he has been tricked by the witches.
Act 2 Scene 1
Banquo and his son Fleance are going to bed when they encounter Macbeth, who is preparing himself for his grim task.

3 she: the moon.

4 husbandry: economy, good housekeeping.
5 candles: the stars.
that: Banquo, preparing for bed, perhaps gives his cloak to Fleance.
6–7 A heavy . . . sleep: I feel as heavy as lead, and my bed is calling to me, yet I don’t want to sleep.
8–9 Restrains . . . repose: control the nightmares (‘those cursed thoughts’) that come when the body is at rest; Banquo is afraid of the thoughts provoked by the witches’ prophecies.
8 cursed: cursed.
9 Give . . . sword: Banquo is tense and alert even inside the castle.

ACT 2

SCENE 1

Macbeth’s castle: enter Banquo, and Fleance, with a Torch-bearer before him

Banquo
How goes the night, boy?

Fleance
The moon is down; I have not heard the clock.

Banquo
And she goes down at twelve.

Fleance
I take’t, ’tis later, sir.

Banquo
Hold, take my sword.—There’s husbandry in heaven, Their candles are all out.—Take thee that too.
A heavy summons lies like lead upon me, And yet I would not sleep; merciful powers,
Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature Gives way to in repose.

Enter Macbeth, and a Servant with a torch

Give me my sword—

Who’s there?
Macbeth
A friend.

Banquo
What, sir, not yet at rest? The king’s abed.
He hath been in unusual pleasure
And sent forth great largess to your offices.

This diamond he greets your wife withal,

Gives Macbeth a diamond
By the name of most kind hostess, and shut up In measureless content.

Macbeth  

Being unprepar’d,
Our will became the servant to defect, Which else should free have wrought.

Banquo  

All’s well.

I dream’d last night of the three weird sisters; To you they have show’d some truth.

Macbeth  

I think not of them; Yet when we can entreat an hour to serve, We would spend it in some words upon that business, If you would grant the time.

Banquo  

At your kind’st leisure.

If you shall cleave to my consent, when ’tis, It shall make honour for you.

Banquo  

So I lose none In seeking to augment it, but still keep My bosom franchis’d and allegiance clear, I shall be counsell’d.

Macbeth  

Good repose the while.

Thanks, sir; the like to you.

[Exeunt Banquo, Fleance, and Torch-bearer

Macbeth  

[To Servant] Go bid thy mistress, when my drink is ready, She strike upon the bell. Get thee to bed.  [Exit Servant

Is this a dagger which I see before me, The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee: I have thee not, and yet I see thee still. Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but A dagger of the mind, a false creation, Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?

16 shut up: went to bed, closed up the curtains of his bed.

17–19 Being . . . wrought: because we were not prepared, we had to manage with very little (‘defect’ = deficiency) and could not be as generous (‘free’) as we wished.

25 If . . . ’tis: if you will follow my advice, when the time comes.

26–7 So . . . augment it: provided that I don’t lose honour by trying to increase it.

28 bosom franchis’d: heart free from obligation.

29 the while: meanwhile.

36–7 sensible . . . sight: able to be felt as well as seen.

39 heat-oppressed: heat-oppressèd; over-heated, disturbed.
Act 2 Scene 1

40 yet: still
palpable: tangible.

42 marshall’st me: are guiding me, beckon me.

44–5 Mine . . . rest: either my eyes are deceived, or else they are better than all my other senses.

46 dudgeon: hilt, handle.
gouts: splashes (from the French goutte = drop).

48–9 informs . . . eyes: takes shape in this way before my eyes.

51 celebrates: performs the rites (‘offerings’).

52 Hecate: goddess of the moon and of witchcraft; the name has only two syllables here.

53 Alarum’d: aroused, called to action (see 1, 2, Os.d.).

54 Whose . . . watch: i.e. the wolf’s howl tells the time to Murder.

55 Tarquin’s . . . strides: Murder, personified in line 52, is now compared to the Roman tyrant, Tarquin, who came in the night to ravish (= rape) his friend’s wife, Lucrece; the story is told in Shakespeare’s narrative poem The Rape of Lucrece.

design: aim.

56 firm-set: stable.

58 prate: blab, tell tales.

59 take . . . time: break this deadly silence which is so appropriate for the present moment.

61 Words . . . gives: the cold breath of words only cools down hot deeds.

63 knell: funeral bell rung to announce a death.

40 I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw.
Thou marshall’st me the way that I was going,
And such an instrument I was to use.
Mine eyes are made the fools o’th’other senses,

45 Or else worth all the rest. I see thee still,
And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,
Which was not so before. There’s no such thing:
It is the bloody business which informs
Thus to mine eyes. Now o’er the one half-world

50 Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain’d sleep. Witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate’s off’rings, and wither’d murder,
Alarum’d by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl’s his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,

55 With Tarquin’s ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost. Thou sure and firm-set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabout,
And take the present horror from the time,

60 Which now suits with it. While I threat, he lives;
Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.

A bell rings

I go, and it is done. The bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell. [Exit
"I go, and it is done. The bell invites me" (Act 2, Scene 1, line 62). Lennie James as Macbeth, Tricycle Theatre, London, 1995.
Macbeth
I'll call upon you straight; abide within.

[Exeunt Murderers

It is concluded. Banquo, thy soul’s flight,
If it find heaven, must find it out tonight.  

[Exit

SCENE 2

Macbeth’s castle: enter Lady Macbeth, and a
Servant

Lady Macbeth
Is Banquo gone from court?

Servant
Ay, madam, but returns again tonight.

Lady Macbeth
Say to the king, I would attend his leisure
For a few words.

Servant
Madam, I will.  

Lady Macbeth
Nought’s had, all’s spent

Where our desire is got without content.
’Tis safer to be that which we destroy
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.

Enter Macbeth

How now, my lord, why do you keep alone,
Of sorriest fancies your companions making,

Using those thoughts which should indeed have died
With them they think on? Things without all remedy
Should be without regard; what’s done, is done.

Macbeth
We have scorch’d the snake, not kill’d it;
She’ll close, and be herself, whilst our poor malice

Remains in danger of her former tooth.

But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds

suffer,

Ere we will eat our meal in fear, and sleep
In the affliction of these terrible dreams
That shake us nightly. Better be with the dead
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave.
After life’s fitful fever, he sleeps well;
Treason has done his worst; nor steel nor poison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing
Can touch him further.

Lady Macbeth
Come on. Gentle my lord,
Sleek o’er your rugged looks, be bright and jovial
Among your guests tonight.

Macbeth

So shall I, love,

And so I pray be you. Let your remembrance
Apply to Banquo, present him eminence
Both with eye and tongue; unsafe the while, that we
Must lave our honours in these flattering streams
And make our faces vizards to our hearts,
Disguising what they are.

Lady Macbeth
You must leave this.

Macbeth
O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!
Thou know’st that Banquo and his Fleance lives.

Lady Macbeth
But in them Nature’s copy’s not eterne.

Macbeth
There’s comfort yet, they are assailable;

Then be thou jocund: ere the bat hath flown
His cloister’d flight, ere to black Hecate’s summons
The shard-born beetle with his drowsy hums
Hath rung night’s yawning peal, there shall be done
A deed of dreadful note.

Lady Macbeth
What’s to be done?

Macbeth
Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,
Till thou applaud the deed. Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Quick quiz questions

These questions are straightforward ones that you will find useful for checking how well you have read the play. You and a partner might like to use them to test each other.

**Act 1**
1. What have the witches been planning in the opening scene of the play?
2. Who gives King Duncan the news of Macbeth and Banquo’s victory over the rebel forces?
3. What reward does King Duncan decide to give Macbeth for this victory?
4. How does the First Witch punish the sailor’s wife, who would not give her some chestnuts?
5. What do the witches prophesy for Macbeth?
6. What do the witches prophesy for Banquo?
7. What does Macbeth first decide to do about the witches’ prediction that he will be king?
8. How does Lady Macbeth learn about the witches’ prophecy?
9. What does she believe could stop Macbeth from fulfilling his ambition to be king?
10. Lady Macbeth’s attendants bring news of two people coming to the castle. Who are they?
11. What does this news of their arrival make her decide to do?
12. Macbeth, at first, is persuaded to murder Duncan, but then changes his mind. Give one reason that he has for this change of mind.
13. What taunt does Lady Macbeth use to persuade Macbeth a second time to murder Duncan?

**Act 2**
1. Banquo hands Macbeth a gift from King Duncan for Lady Macbeth. What is the gift?
2. When Banquo mentions that he had dreamed about the witches, what is Macbeth’s response?
3. What signal does Lady Macbeth give to tell Macbeth that she has drugged Duncan’s servants?
4. What is Macbeth carrying when he returns to Lady Macbeth after the murder?
5. What does Macbeth want to do when he hears the two men praying?
Contextual questions

Question 1
Act 1, Scene 5, lines 1–29, from “They met me in the day of success ...” to “To have thee crown’d withal.”

1.1 Refer to line 1.
   1.1.1 Who does the word “they” refer to in line 1? (1)
   1.1.2 Quote two words that show that Macbeth is keen to convince his wife that “they” are truthful. (1)
   1.1.3 Even before the king’s message comes that he is Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth shows he is fascinated by the witches. Quote a phrase (two or three words) that shows this. (1)
   1.1.4 Explain why Macbeth is hailed by the king’s messengers as “Thane of Cawdor”. (3)

1.2 Refer to lines 9–13.
   1.2.1 Identify two phrases that show that Macbeth regards Lady Macbeth as his comrade and close confidante. (2)
   1.2.2 What action of Macbeth’s illustrates that he regards her as his partner? (2)

1.3 Macbeth uses the word “greatness” twice in his letter. What does this show about what is on his mind? (2)

1.4 Refer to lines 14–15.
   1.4.1 What does Lady Macbeth mean when she says “and shalt be / What thou art promis’d”? (2)
   1.4.2 Quote one word from the second half of line 14 that shows that Lady Macbeth is very determined. (1)
   1.4.3 What does this tell us about her relationship with Macbeth? (2)

1.5 “yet I do fear thy nature, / It is too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way”. Does this mean that Lady Macbeth is afraid of her husband? Or does it mean something else? Explain your answer. (4)

1.6 Explain what Lady Macbeth says about Macbeth’s ambition in lines 17–19 (“Thou wouldst ... should attend it”). What, according to her, is his weakness? (2)

1.7 Name the two forces that Lady Macbeth believes will combine to make Macbeth take the crown. (2)

[25 marks]
Quick quiz answers

Alternative answers are indicated by a slash (/).

Act 1
1. They have been planning to meet Macbeth.
2. A wounded captain gives the news.
3. He decides to make Macbeth Thane of Cawdor.
4. She sends an off-shore wind to stop the sailor’s ship ever getting to shore.
5. They prophesy that Macbeth will be Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland.
6. They prophesy that Banquo’s descendants will be kings of Scotland.
7. He decides to leave it to chance.
8. Macbeth sends her a letter.
9. Macbeth is too full of the “milk of human kindness” (he has a conscience).
10. They are King Duncan and Macbeth.
11. She will persuade Macbeth to murder Duncan.
12. Choose one of several reasons: King Duncan is a relative of Macbeth’s. / He is Macbeth’s king. / He is their guest. / He has just given Macbeth a reward. / He is a good and honourable king.
13. She tells him he is not a real man.

Act 2
1. It is a diamond.
2. He says that he never thinks of them.
3. She rings a bell.
4. He is carrying two daggers.
5. He wants to say “Amen” to their prayer.
6. “Sleep no more.”
7. He is still quite drunk.
8. Macduff discovers the murder.
9. He kills Duncan’s attendants/grooms.
10. Macbeth is overdoing it. / She is shocked he has killed the attendants. / She is feeling the strain of planning and carrying out the murder. / She is pretending to faint to draw people’s attention away from Macbeth.
11. They flee to England and Ireland.
12. They fear they will be blamed for the murder. / They fear for their lives.
5. Macbeth trusts in the witches’ prophecies.
6. Each soldier must cut down a branch to carry.
7. They need to disguise their numbers.
8. Lady Macbeth has killed herself.
9. He is told that Birnam Wood is coming to Dunsinane.
10. It is young Siward.
11. That he cannot be killed by a man born of a woman.
12. Macduff wasn’t “born” of a woman.
13. Macduff cuts off Macbeth’s head and puts it on a pole.
14. He is to be crowned in Scone.

Answers to contextual questions

Question 1
1.1.1 “They” refers to the witches ✓.
1.1.2 “perfectest report” ✓
1.1.3 “burned in desire to question” ✓ / “stood rapt” ✓
1.1.4 The king has decided to give the title and possessions of the Thane of Cawdor ✓, whom he has just executed for treachery ✓, to Macbeth as a reward for defeating the rebels ✓.
1.2.1 “my dearest partner of greatness” ✓ and “lay it to your heart” ✓
1.2.2 Macbeth writes at once ✓ to tell his wife about the witches’ prophecy ✓.
1.3 Macbeth is thinking about becoming great by becoming king ✓ and Lady Macbeth becoming his queen ✓.
1.4.1 Lady Macbeth means he will become king ✓ just as the witches have promised ✓.
1.4.2 “shalt” ✓
1.4.3 Lady Macbeth is the dominant one ✓ in the relationship. Macbeth must do as she wants ✓.
1.5 Lady Macbeth is not afraid of her husband ✓. She is worried ✓ that his conscience ✓ will not allow him to murder the king ✓.
1.6 Macbeth has the ambition to be great, but he is not ruthless ✓ enough to achieve greatness. His weakness is that he has a conscience or is too kind ✓.
1.7 Lady Macbeth’s persuasion ✓ and supernatural forces ✓

[25 marks]
Essay questions and guidelines

In your literature exam, you will have to choose between doing a *Macbeth* essay or a *Macbeth* contextual question – you cannot do both. It is advisable to read through both options before you decide which to do. If you choose to do the essay question, it is very important to take the time to think about and plan your essay before you start. Make sure that you are clear in your approach before you start writing. You will lose marks if you ramble, contradict yourself or write off the topic.

Your essay will be marked against a rubric that awards 15 marks for content and 10 marks for language and structure. Therefore, it is important that you pay attention to these three elements as you write your answer. Remember, when you write a literature essay, your knowledge and understanding of the play are being tested. You must base your answer on the play and substantiate all your opinions and points with proof from the play. Be very careful to avoid simply telling the story of the play instead of answering the question. Try to refer to the essay question as often as possible to ensure that you are on topic.

The first step is to analyse the question / topic. Underline the key words and be sure that you understand exactly what you are being asked to discuss or explain. Take five minutes to plan your essay. Your introduction must outline your stance on the topic, then argue your points in the body of the essay and conclude by summarising your main arguments and reiterating your stance. Each paragraph should deal with a separate point and should have a topic sentence that clearly states the point you are making. The rest of the paragraph is the supporting proof from the play. Plan your essay carefully, as you will have a lot of information to convey in a limited number of words, as literature essays are usually only 400–450 words long (Home Language).

Essay 1 below is a sample essay to show you the organisation, structure and type of language. It is one way of answering this question. Your approach may be different. Remember that you will be assessed on how you engage with the play and how well you can structure your answer. Essays 2 to 4 have notes to guide you in your planning of the essays and examples of how to develop your points.

The rubric your educator will use to assess your work is provided on page 142 (English Home Language). Study the rubric before starting to write, so that you understand how your task will be assessed.
1. “A tragic hero is a great man who has a fatal flaw in his make-up, which leads to his destruction. The audience identifies with him throughout and he never loses their sympathy.”

Write an essay in which you show how far Macbeth’s character conforms with this definition of the tragic hero and the hero’s emotional effect on the audience.

Suggestions for writing your essay
The most important steps in writing this essay are to analyse and understand the topic, and to develop a well-structured and well-supported argument. Use the notes in the margin to guide you. Remember:
• Sum up how you will answer the question in the introduction.
• Keep to the essay topic.
• The stipulated length of the essay will limit you to only a few examples to substantiate your point – it is better to have a few examples, fully developed.

In many ways, Macbeth conforms with the pattern of the tragic hero in all Shakespearean tragedies. He has heroic stature and he has a fatal flaw – his ambition that leads to his destruction. In a significant way, too, the audience identifies with him emotionally, as he reveals the effects on his mind and spirit of the evil growing within him.

However, in choosing to immerse himself in evil, Macbeth becomes a “bloody butcher” and thus moves far beyond our sympathy.

The first Act establishes Macbeth as a battle hero, who, through his skills at arms and his strength and courage, has won victory for Scotland over rebel and Norwegian forces. His already important position in the kingdom as Thane of Glamis is increased by the grateful king who makes him Thane of Cawdor as a reward. But it is also in Act 1 that we already learn of his fatal flaw. Macbeth is ambitious and, secretly, he wants much more than to be a thane: he wants to be king. The dark side of his nature starts to show itself when the king proclaims his son, Malcolm, as heir. In an aside, Macbeth reveals that he, himself, has “dark and deep desires” to be king.

The insight that we are given into Macbeth’s hidden desires is an example of the intimate relationship that occurs throughout the play between Macbeth and the audience. In the earlier parts of the play, when Macbeth still has a conscience and a sense of guilt, there are moments when we are moved to sympathy for him. Such a moment comes just
after he has murdered Duncan and returns to Lady Macbeth to stare in shocked horror at his bloodied hands. His vision that they will never be washed clean of Duncan’s blood is deeply moving, as in these lines:

*Will all great Neptune’s oceans wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No: this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incardinine,
Making the green one red.* (2, 2, 63–66)

Macbeth involves us just as strongly when he has lost all sense of moral conscience. He is no mindless killer, but deeply aware of the consequences of choosing bloodshed as a solution to his fear and suspicion. The most terrifying of these insights is his description of himself wading in a river of blood. He realises that he can never turn back (to repentance) because his evil has destroyed all his moral will. The only way forward is to continue to kill, and he sees the emptiness and joylessness of this.

So great is our involvement with Macbeth and so compelling his force as a tragic hero, that our response to his death is usually ambivalent. We feel satisfaction at the defeat of the “bloody butcher” and the return to just rule, but far stronger and more lingering is our fascination with him.

2. Does Macbeth determine what happens to him, or is it determined by supernatural powers known to the witches? Support your opinion with examples from the play.

*Suggestions for writing your essay*

This essay requires you to decide whether you believe what happens to Macbeth is because of the choices he makes, or whether you believe Macbeth is controlled by destiny in the form of the witches. You might decide it is a combination of both. You will get marks for both views. As with most essays, there are a large number of points that you could bring up, but you have to be selective. It is much better to develop a few points well, than to give a number of undeveloped points. At the end, conclude your view in one or two sentences.

*Macbeth determines what happens to him.*

- The witches only hail Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor and King. They do not instruct him to do anything. He interprets their salutation as a directive and spur to action because it accords with what he wants (his “dark and deep” ambitious desires). In the space of 24 hours he goes from being hailed as king to killing the rightful king.