Macbeth

Revision Guide
**Social Context (AO4)**

*Macbeth* was written in the early years of the reign of James I of England (James VI of Scotland), probably in 1604-5. After nearly fifty years of rule, Queen Elizabeth I had died leaving no direct heirs and the throne was passed to her cousin James. There had been fears of uprising at the queen’s death – after an earlier heirless death, that of Edward VI in 1553, a faction at Court had sought to secure its own power by placing Lady Jane Grey on the throne instead of Edward’s sister, Mary. The situation was even more dangerous on Elizabeth’s death in 1603, for Scotland was a traditional enemy of England and the fear of a popular revolt against the King of Scotland becoming King of England was very real.

In the event, however, the transfer of power went off without a hitch. In part this was probably due to the fact that James had a decent record as King in Scotland – he was perceived as having brought decades of religious strife to an end, and had maintained peace at home and abroad. Another factor in play was undoubtedly that he was a man; while England had been (largely) devoted to Elizabeth, there remained a general feeling that being ruled by a queen was somehow not quite right. James, with his statesmanship and his famously rambunctious and masculine Court (actually a thin veil for his bisexuality), was a popular choice, in the event.

The roots of *Macbeth* are inextricably linked to James’ Scottishness, of course. Scotland was, for his audience, alien enough to allow Shakespeare to portray shocking events such as regicide but close enough to allow him to draw allegorical meanings out: the loyal warrior-hero Macduff, and the moral king-in-waiting Malcolm, are probably meant to reflect the two sides of James which most appealed to his new English subjects.

Modern productions of *Macbeth* are often at a loss as to how to deal with the three witches. For all that it is a play that deals with power and deceit, *Macbeth* has superstition and the supernatural at its heart. Today’s cynical audience, increasingly distant from the culture which took Exodus 22:18 so literally, may find it hard to believe in the witches, but the Seventeenth Century audience would have had no such problem. King James himself wrote a treatise on how to deal with witchcraft, and interrogated suspected witches himself. Within half a century of the first performance of *Macbeth* the eastern counties of England would endure the reign of terror of Matthew Hopkins, the self-proclaimed ‘Witchfinder General’. This pre-enlightenment society, where scientists – or natural philosophers, as they termed themselves – were just as likely to be exploring alchemy as physics (see the career of Isaac Newton), took signs and portents very seriously. Belief in God was practically universal, denial of God an heretical crime, and if God existed then so must the full gamut of the forces of evil.

*Macbeth* deals with a debate that was beginning to emerge in the last years of Elizabeth’s reign, and would come to a head in the reign of James’ son, Charles I: where does true authority lie – in the person of the King, or with the representatives of the people? Macbeth himself recognises that he has no grounds for killing Duncan and seizing the Crown, apart from ‘vaulting ambition’: in all respects Duncan has been a good King and, in killing him, Macbeth is committing a crime not only against the man but against God, for the conventional view was that Kings held their crowns by Divine Right. James was a particularly strong proponent of this view, writing his
treatise ‘Basilikon Doron’ as a handbook for his son, stressing the relationship between King and God. However, the rising merchant and urban classes – who provided much of the Crown’s income from 1580-1640 – were beginning to insist on the role of Parliament in effective and just government. By 1649 the concept of Divine Right would have been totally undermined, and the successful general Oliver Cromwell would replace the executed Charles I by Parliamentary will. *Macbeth* foreshadows these events, with a strong military leader taking power from an inept King (it is hard to feel sympathy for Duncan when he confesses that he had built an ‘absolute trust’ on one treacherous Thane of Cawdor – and then he makes precisely the same mistake again). Shakespeare’s presentation of regicide would have being daring and disturbing for his early 17th Century audience, hence the reason the killing takes place off-stage (actually showing the murder of a king would have been just too controversial)
By the time Shakespeare was writing Macbeth, English theatre was established as a form. In just fifty years the concept of theatre had moved from the Medieval ‘Mystery Play’, presenting Biblical stories to the masses, to a popular entertainment based around particular venues and companies. Shakespeare’s reputation preceded him – by the time he wrote Macbeth he had already given the public Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet and Julius Caesar, all plays which share thematic links with Macbeth. More particularly, Shakespeare had established his own style – not least in his use of the soliloquy as a way to explore the inner workings of a character’s mind. Hamlet is often seen as the play having the most important soliloquies, but there is no doubt that this technique is vital to the success of Macbeth. Following the progress of Macbeth from loyal soldier to treacherous regicide over the course of Act 1, the audience comes to view him as more than just a simple tyrant or pantomime villain: this is a man who has a conscience as well as ambition, and the use of soliloquy allows us to understand this in a way that no other dramatic technique would.

As with all theatre in the Early Modern period, Shakespeare had to strike a balance between presenting complex social and moral ideas – suited to the educated courtiers, gentry and merchants in his audience – and providing drama and spectacle on stage to engage the mass of penny-paying groundlings. As is often the case – for example, in Marlowe’s Dr Faustus – this balance actually helps to structure the play. One moment we have high drama in the conversation between Macbeth and his wife directly after the murder, and the next we have the filthy speech of the Porter. However, this alternation between serious and comic is less pronounced than it is in plays such as Dr Faustus or Romeo and Juliet; instead, Shakespeare tends to combine elements of the two within the same scene – so it is that the banquet scene has the horrific ghost of Banquo (undoubtedly always seen on stage in original productions: the opportunity for lashings of blood and gore would not be passed up) but also Macbeth’s musings on guilt. Even the scene in which Malcolm tests Macduff’s loyalty by declaring his supposed moral weaknesses achieves this duality – it is at once a string of ribald innuendo and desire while also being an exploration of how far it is right to follow a corrupt prince for the good of the nation.

Hamlet and Othello are clearly tragedies, their eponymous protagonists heroic but for their obligatory tragic flaw. However, it is hard to read Macbeth as a tragic hero. Instead he seems to fulfil the role of the anti-hero, as with Satan in Milton’s Paradise Lost or Faustus in Marlowe’s play. If Macbeth has a hero as such it must surely be Macduff, yet in many regards he is only a bit-player in the plot, absent for much of the text. To this extent Macbeth breaks with tradition; perhaps because of the effective use of soliloquies as outlined earlier we frequently find ourselves sympathetic to Macbeth, despite our moral repulsion at his actions.

Macbeth is loosely based on an historical king of Scotland; a Macbeth did kill King Duncan (in battle, not in bed) in approximately 1040, and reigned for around ten years – a reign of fairness and the promotion of Christianity, by all accounts. Time is clearly an unfixed quantity in Shakespeare’s play – one could imagine the events being staged as occurring over a passage of mere weeks, or over many years. Shakespeare is not interested in historical accuracy: his appropriation of Macbeth’s name is a result of the need to bring a Scots connection in honour of the new king, rather than a desire to add to his collection of History plays.
Aspects of the Gothic (AO2, AO3, AO4)

Power
It is a much later aphorism that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, but this seems to define the core of Macbeth nicely. Power is a recurrent theme in Gothic texts. In Paradise Lost Satan resents God’s power and yearns for his own; Dr Faustus revolves around the idea that knowledge is power (and yet ironically, once he has access to unlimited knowledge Faustus fails to capitalise on it); Frankenstein and Dracula explore the power of life and death. Macbeth sits well in this tradition – we have all sorts of power, from the physical power of Macbeth who can slice a man in two on the battlefield through the power of women over men to the power of guilt to drive one to madness.

Title
There is a tendency for Gothic texts to have an eponymous (anti-)hero – ie their name is also the title. Frankenstein, Dracula, Dr Faustus, The Monk (OK, not a name, but kind of), Christabel, Hamlet, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde – all the way down to modern Gothic texts such as Stephen King’s Carrie. Not really a good analytical point, but quite a nice throwaway remark if the question’s right.

Night-time Action
Macbeth is full of the imagery of darkness. Early in the play Macbeth pleads that the ‘stars hide [their] fires / Let not light see my black and deep desires’, and from then on most of the key plot points – the killing of Duncan, the murder of Banquo, the arrival of Banquo’s ghost at the banquet, Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking – take place in darkness. Linked to this idea is the theme of sleep. On killing Duncan, Macbeth fears he ‘shall sleep no more’; his actions leave him unable to reap the benefits of the ‘Sleep that knits up the ravell’d sleeve of care’. The message is rather unsubtly put across – that night time is a time to sleep, not to murder.

Horror and Terror
There are plenty of instances of both horror and terror in the text. At a crude level the two themes meet the differing needs of the different elements of Shakespeare’s audience: the scenes of horror (Banquo’s ghost, the slaughter of Macduff’s family, the spells of the witches) provide the visceral crowd-pleasing, while Macbeth’s internal terrors (‘O full of scorpions is my mind’ ‘Or art thou but / A dagger of the mind... / Proceeding from the heat-oppressèd brain?’) echo the terrors of regicide, the murder of children, the meddling of supernatural forces in the world of man which the more cerebral members of the audience might feel. Which leads us neatly to....

The Supernatural
Modern audiences may well see Macbeth’s actions as having psychological roots – he resents putting his life on the line for Duncan’s benefit; his wife challenges his manhood when he retreats from his plan to murder the king; the witches play on his egotistical desire for power, rather than supernaturally engineering an opportunity for his advancement. However, it is simply not tenable to write off the supernatural elements of Macbeth as mere superstition. The storms and disturbances that are reported over the night of the murder of Duncan are indicators of disharmony and disorder in the world of man; Shakespeare had already used the same codes, albeit in a very different context, in A Midsummer Night’s Dream where the conflict between Titania and Oberon was played out in nature. Similarly the ghost of Banquo – easily
seen today as Macbeth’s guilt personified, and sometimes not even shown on stage in order to emphasise this psychological reading – has established literary roots: *Hamlet* and *The Spanish Tragedy* both rely on the very real presence of a ghost to drive the plot forward.

There is a notable absence of any Church figures in the play. In a society such as Shakespeare’s, where attendance at church was a requirement under the law, this would have been a notable absence. We see no funeral for Duncan, and by not showing the coronation of Macbeth Shakespeare obviates the need for a token bishop or priest. It seems that he wants to portray Macbeth’s world as being entire devoid of God – only the forces of darkness are at work in this Scotland.

The most important supernatural element in *Macbeth* is probably found in the witches (or more properly the Weird Sisters, since they are not termed ‘witches’ in the text). Despite his audience’s firm belief in witchcraft (see above), Shakespeare is careful to stress the limitations of the witches’ powers: immediately before Macbeth’s first meeting with them (1, iii) one declares, of the sailor she is toying with, that ‘his [ship] cannot be lost’. At no point do the witches actually control Macbeth’s actions; Shakespeare does not want us to be able to ‘excuse’ his actions as a result of Macbeth being under supernatural control. They may use their powers to concoct an hallucinogenic potion to allow Macbeth his visions, and they may provide Macbeth with prophecies he desires to hear, but they are not ever the instigators of events. *Macbeth* may be a play filled with supernatural elements, but ultimately it is his own unnatural desires which cause his downfall.

**Transgressive Females**

*Macbeth* is a text marked by the absence of women as much as by their presence. Shakespeare crafts a very male world – Duncan’s wife (or, perhaps more pertinently, the mother of Donaldbain and Malcolm) is presumably dead, as is Banquo’s wife / Fleance’s mother. Macbeth makes no reference to either of his parents, and Lady Macbeth (laying the foundations for hundreds of readings based on the Elektra Complex) only refers to her father. Shakespeare does provide us with one traditional mother figure, in the character of Lady Macduff; her teasing of her son about Macduff’s desertion of them makes her seem more than a mere stereotype of the dutiful wife, but she is killed at Macbeth’s whim before she can be developed as a character. We have a generic ‘Gentlewoman’ who is charged with looking after the increasingly fragile Lady Macbeth, but apart from her the other female characters are most definitely transgressive.

It is almost tempting to lump Lady Macbeth and the witches together; certainly, Lady Macbeth’s shocking speech in which she calls on the forces of darkness to ‘unsex’ her and suckle ‘bitter’st gall’ from her breasts establishes her quickly as the antithesis of the motherly Lady Macduff. In combination it is the witches and Lady Macbeth who may be read as bringing about Macbeth’s downfall – the former group by planting or nurturing the seed of ambition in his mind, and his wife by mocking and emotionally blackmailing him into action when he has actually decided against the deed. Lady Macbeth’s declaration that she would have ‘plucked [her] nipple from [her child’s] boneless gums / And dash’d the brains out’ rather than break her word as Macbeth seems about to do is perhaps her most transgressive moment – rhetorical infanticide is used as a spur to actual regicide – although there is an argument to be made that her
most transgressive act lies in her death, implied (though never confirmed) as suicide: for a Christian audience, the ultimate sin against God, rejecting His gift of life.

The witches, in contrast, are treated as almost comic figures to begin with – Banquo certainly seems not to fear them, taunting them for having beards (potentially an in-joke for the Shakespearean audience, who would be seeing men play the parts of the women on stage) and then suggesting to Macbeth that the whole episode was merely a product of having eaten wormwood. However, the sense of threat that is effected by 1. i is not undone by Banquo’s jesting, and as the play progresses so does the role of the witches in interfering with Macbeth’s fate. The text is clear that these women are external to society – we see them in ‘A desert place’, ‘a heath’, ‘a cavern’. They are liminal characters, inhabiting a world not entirely human and not entirely supernatural; to this extent it is difficult to classify them as ‘transgressive’ since their very existence is transgressive against the norms of society.

Narrative
The narrative is clearly very linear, and this is a key element in the plot – events seem almost predetermined from the moment that the unspoken thought that ‘Shakes so [his] single state of man’ crosses Macbeth’s mind. Whereas we gain different insights through different narrators in many Gothic texts (Dracula and Wuthering Heights, for example) the nature of the form of Macbeth means we cannot have the same overview. Instead – and even more, perhaps, than is the case in Dr Faustus – we follow our protagonist’s progress down the wrong road and its inevitable conclusion.

Blood
There is blood a-plenty in Macbeth. From the outset we enter a world of blood, seeing the gory aftermath of the battle writ large on the soldier reporting on Macbeth’s glory. Most notably it is associated with 2. ii – as a symbol of guilt, Duncan’s blood is viewed as easily erased by Lady Macbeth (‘A little water clears us of this deed’) while for Macbeth it is something that will never be removed. Blood is also crucial in the banquet scene, providing horror for the audience even as Macbeth gives in to his terrors.
Where does one begin when trying to sum up the greatest writer in the history of the English language?

The son of a glover from Stratford-upon-Avon, William Shakespeare had a fairly conventional upbringing – what we might anachronistically term ‘middle class’ for the sake of simplicity. Shakespeare senior was no mere artisanal worker – he was a member of the Town Council and served as mayor, and could afford to send William to the local grammar school. Here he would have received an education rooted in Latin and Greek – including Classical drama, and the ancient myths which perhaps stimulated his imagination.

It may have been the intention for William to be trained for the law by attending the Inns of Court in London. However, the Shakespeare family seemed to attract scandal; William, at the age of 18, married Anne Hathaway (eight years his senior) – presumably because he had got her pregnant. His father, meanwhile, seems to have fallen from his social position somewhat – it has been suggested that there were allegations made that he was a closet Catholic – and Shakespeare’s formal education seems to have finished at grammar school level.

No-one knows when Shakespeare saw his first play. Stratford would have hosted travelling troupes of players from time to time, and maybe Shakespeare watched a performance of a popular play in the courtyard of a local pub. Or perhaps, as some have suggested, he spent some time as a tutor to the children of a local figure in the gentry, and saw a play performed at a country house. Tantalisingly little is known about Shakespeare’s life in Stratford during his formative years – or even if he stayed in the area. Some have suggested that his fascination with setting plays in exotic locations indicates that he travelled, possibly as a soldier; others argue he was kept busy going down to London on his father’s business.

However it came about, by the 1590s Shakespeare was resident in London and beginning to write (it is generally assumed he was first a member of a company of actors and turned his hand to writing in order to provide them with fresh plays). In that one decade he would produce a range of texts, from the rather forgettable King John to the genius of Hamlet. By the time he came to write Macbeth he was perhaps the pre-eminent playwright in London (Marlowe having died in murky circumstances some years earlier). He was also a substantial shareholder in The Globe, and a respected member of the gentry back in Stratford, whenever he could return there (the Shakespeare family were granted a Coat of Arms in 1596).

Perhaps we can see, in Macbeth’s rise to power, Shakespeare’s admiration for a self-made man; perhaps it is too tenuous to claim that this is the case. Maybe his limited presentation of women in the text is a result of his suggested bi- or homosexuality and a misogynistic perception of womankind; but this hardly fits easily with the positive presentation of women in so many of his other texts. It may be more likely that the masculine nature of the text is deliberately reflective of the masculine Court of James: a story about men for the new King, now that the old Queen had allowed the world of men to reassert itself.
Ultimately it is difficult to find Shakespeare in the characters or events of *Macbeth* – and this is, of course, what makes him such a good writer: he can inhabit a range of different characters, equally bringing them all to life no matter how alien or familiar they are to him.

*Useful Links*

[http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/macbeth](http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/macbeth)
**Language, Form and Structure (AO2)**

**Useful Quotations**

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<th>SCENE</th>
<th>QUOTATION</th>
<th>DEVELOPMENT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1, i</td>
<td>Fair is foul, and foul is fair</td>
<td>The witches capture the essence of <em>Macbeth</em> – a world of inversion, where things are never as they seem. Establishes a link between the witches and Macbeth (his first line echoes this – ‘So foul and fair a day I have not seen’). The tension between reality and imagination, actuality and superstition, sets the tone for the play.</td>
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<td>1, ii</td>
<td>Unseam’d him from the nave... to the chops</td>
<td>Before even meeting Macbeth we learn of his violence and his determination – heroic qualities in this scene’s context, but tools for his darkness later.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1, iii</td>
<td>So wither’d and so wild in their attire, / That look not like the inhabitants o’ the earth, / And yet are on’t</td>
<td>Banquo’s mockery of the witches defuses some of the tension of the scene; however, it also emphasises their otherness, the way they seem not to belong to the human world.</td>
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<td>1, v</td>
<td>Come, you spirits / ...unsex me here, / ... make thick my blood; / Stop up the access and passage to remorse</td>
<td>Lady Macbeth’s conjuring of the spirits of darkness is disturbing and distinctly unfeminine, presenting her early as a transgressive female.</td>
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<td>1, vii</td>
<td>I have given suck... / I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums, / And dash’d the brains out</td>
<td>Inverting (again, inversion: nice theme, I think) the maternal expectations loaded onto women, Lady Macbeth again illustrates her transgressiveness.</td>
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<td>2, i</td>
<td>Is this a dagger which I see before me</td>
<td>The core question of the text: does Macbeth see a dagger? If so, it suggests that the witches / other supernatural forces are at work and, to an extent, controlling him – and therefore he cannot be held entirely responsible for his actions. If, on the other hand, the dagger is indeed merely the product of his ‘heat-oppresséd brain’ then it’s just an externalisation of his desires.</td>
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<td>2, ii</td>
<td>And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood</td>
<td>The transformation of the dagger brings us the first instance of horror in the text.</td>
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<td>2, ii</td>
<td>Macbeth does murder sleep</td>
<td>Works on two levels – the first being to personify Duncan as sleep (the great restorative force, the bringer of peace etc etc) and secondly to associate Macbeth with darkness; he will not sleep again, instead being left to while away the nights (presumably) scheming and plotting.</td>
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<td>2, ii</td>
<td>Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?</td>
<td>A rare reference to any form of god in the text. Macbeth realises he will never be free from the consequences of his action (contrasting to Lady Macbeth’s glib declaration that ‘A little water clears us of this deed’).</td>
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<td>2, iii</td>
<td>There’s daggars in men’s smiles</td>
<td>Donaldbain understands the true nature of power in Macbeth’s Scotland – duplicity and betrayal, such as that which led to his father’s murder. The image of the dagger links back to 2, i.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scene</td>
<td>Lines</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td>3, ii</td>
<td>Come, seeling night... / And with thy bloody and invisible hand / Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond / Which keeps me pale!</td>
<td>Macbeth now openly calls on the forces of the night to enable his plans to progress.</td>
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<td>3, iv</td>
<td>Never shake / Thy gory locks at me</td>
<td>As ever when a character tries to command the supernatural (see Macbeth’s imprecations to the witches - ‘stay, you imperfect speakers’) there is no effect. This scene relies on the gore of Banquo’s ghost for full effect, and Macbeth’s lines emphasise what is also visible on stage: horror.</td>
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<td>3, iv</td>
<td>blood will have blood</td>
<td>Kind of self-explanatory.</td>
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<td>3, iv</td>
<td>I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er</td>
<td>A strong use of blood imagery, a man wading through a river of blood (of his own letting).</td>
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<td>4, i</td>
<td>Round about the cauldron go; / In the poison'd entrails throw</td>
<td>The most stereotypical presentation of witchcraft in theatre? There is some debate as to whether this scene is a later addition (ie, not by Shakespeare); however, since it is within the text we must assume that it is legitimate – it is part of Macbeth in a de facto if not de jure sense.</td>
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<td>5, i</td>
<td>Out, damned spot!</td>
<td>A nice contrast to her earlier glib declaration that ‘A little water clears us of this deed’ – Lady Macbeth, in her madness, realises that the guilt can never be removed.</td>
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<td>5, i</td>
<td>Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him</td>
<td>An insight into the reality of murder. The Shakespearian audience would have been much more familiar with blood than today’s – from slaughtering the family pig in the autumn to attending bear-baiting and cock-fighting, the society was drenched in blood. Yet Lady Macbeth draws attention to how the blood of Duncan was shocking even to her. And of course, ‘so much blood’ is an indicator of how much guilt she now feels.</td>
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<td>5, i</td>
<td>Foul whisperings are abroad: unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles</td>
<td>The Doctor reflects the earlier association between unnatural deeds and disturbances in the natural world, while also pointing out the psychological damage to Lady Macbeth.</td>
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<td>5, ii</td>
<td>Seyton, I say</td>
<td>Macbeth has a servant called Seyton. ’Nuff said?</td>
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Specifics of Language
Macbeth’s first line (‘So foul and fair a day I have not seen’) makes reference to day, but as the play progresses he associates himself more and more with the night. Darkness, he hopes, will hide his evil actions – not just from the eyes of men but, it might be argued, from his own conscience.

Lady Macbeth’s venomous attack on Macbeth in I, vii is a masterclass in how to manipulate the male psyche. She variously accuses him of not loving her, of not being a ‘proper’ man (with all the connotations of sexual impotence that this brings) and of being a coward. It is difficult to over-estimate the impact of this on the audience: the Macbeth we have seen so far has been a strong warrior, conscious of his own ambitions and desire for power – and yet here he is, hen-pecked and under the thumb. Suffice to say, Lady Macbeth is not presented as the ideal woman at this point – although, in her ‘defence’, she only says what she does in order to spur him into action in his best interests, as she sees it.

There are a couple of nice little linguistic points which might be useful as throwaway comments, depending on the question. One is found in 2, ii: Macbeth uses Latinate words immediately followed by a much simpler Anglo-Saxon construction reiterating the same point – “my hand will rather / The multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red.” It is as if the realisation of his guilt hits him first abstractedly and then at a much more simple and real level. Another interesting point is that Macbeth begins to use the ‘royal we’ before the murder of Duncan – in 2, i he tells Banquo that “when we can entreat an hour to serve, / We w...” Despite his misgivings, Macbeth is already speaking like a King.

Structure
As mentioned above, with the occasional exception such as the Porter scene, Shakespeare does not rely on the alternation of dramatic and comic scenes – certainly not in the way Marlowe does in Dr Faustus. The linear structure of the text is important in building up the sense that Macbeth is stuck on a road he can’t get off, following it to its conclusion without being able to affect events.

Shakespeare makes no use of dramatic irony in the text: we are never in possession of information ahead of the characters. This is important with regard, for example, to the witches’ prophecies in 4, i: we are hoodwinked just as much as Macbeth is and, as the prophecies are revealed as little more than tricks and riddles in Act 5, we are as shocked as Macbeth himself.

The deteriorating relationship between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth seems to be important in her descent into madness. Early in the play she is clearly the one in control (“put this night’s great business into my dispatch”) and is treated as an equal by Macbeth. However, he begins to shield her from his actions – “Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, / Till thou applaud the deed” – and conflict between them sets in, epitomised in her frantic pleading with him to pull himself together in the banquet scene. From that point on Lady Macbeth is sidelined, Macbeth relying rather on the witches than on his wife, until she is left asking questions in her madness which she would rather not know the answers to (“The Thane of Fife had a wife – where is she now?”).
Form
Shakespeare is writing for a mixed audience (and, of course, there is a debate about how much of the text is his). The need to create a successful play is balanced against the desire to create a worthy piece of literature.

Generally all characters speak in blank verse in the text, but there are a few notable exceptions. Macbeth’s letter to Lady Macbeth is in prose, and when he meets with the Murderers he generally speaks in prose. Shakespeare tends to use prose and verse as indicators of the ignobility or nobility of a character or situation and these subtle shifts may suggest to us that Shakespeare is presenting these passages as the nadir of Macbeth’s career.

The fact that much of the action takes place at night (Gothic) would require suspension of disbelief on the part of the original audience – plays were performed in the afternoon, since there was no lighting to allow performances after dusk.
Exam / Revision Technique (AO1)

Macbeth-specific Past / Specimen Questions
At the end of the play, Malcolm describes Macbeth as a ‘butcher.’ Do you think that Macbeth is merely portrayed as a ‘butcher’?

What do you think is the significance of the witches in Macbeth?

General Gothic Past / Specimen Questions
‘Gothic texts show the supernatural intertwined with the ordinary.’ Discuss this view in relation to the texts you have been studying.

‘Gothic literature is concerned with the breaking of normal moral and social codes.’ Discuss.

‘If a text is to be labelled as Gothic, it must convey a sense of fear and terror.’ Discuss this view in relation to the texts you have been studying.

To what extent do you think gothic literature is characterised by a fascination with death?

‘Gothic settings are desolate, alienating and full of menace.’ In the light of this comment, consider some of the ways in which writers use settings in the gothic texts you have read.

Consider the view that gothic writing often explores the powerlessness of humanity when faced with the power of the supernatural.

‘Religion is central to readings of gothic texts.’ How far do you agree with this statement?

Consider the view that gothic writing explores the ‘nightmarish terrors’ that lie beneath the orderly surface of the ‘civilised mind.’

‘In gothic writing, women are presented as either innocent victims or sinister predators or are significantly absent.’ Consider the place of women in gothic writing in the light of this comment.

General
With regard to answering the questions under exam conditions, it is vital that you demonstrate to the examiner that you are familiar with the text, so a) ensure you are familiar with the text through close reading beforehand and b) use plenty of appropriate and well-criticised quotations. You must also ensure you address the questions in terms of context, both dramatic (i.e. within the play) and in terms of the Gothic. And remember to plan!!