

Top Tips

1. This entire book is longer than the play itself! You do NOT need to know everything, as a lot is surprisingly obvious, and after a little practise, language analysis begins to become natural
2. There are a ridiculous amount of quotes – just memorizing half of them will probably account for any eventuality in the exam, but it is important to do so
3. English is all about plagiarising, so feel free to copy ideas, and even points out of this book, as I'm sure many people have the same interpretation as I do, and will do again!
4. Don't print it out – 47 pages is a lot of paper and ink, so it's best to use it from a phone, tablet, or computer

DISCLAIMER: There may be a few mistakes here and there, so don't expect it to be word perfect – if you find anything, please let me know at harry@docu.co.uk

Finally, I am a student, who has collaborated with many teachers to make this a reality, and have put over 70 hours of work into it. The struggle is as real for me as it is for you, and I hope that you will find it as helpful and clear as I have.

Hope the exams go well!

Harry

Act I

SCENE 1

- Three witches meet in the middle of a battle in a thunderstorm, speaking in riddles and rhymes to prepare to entice Macbeth, with a strong sense of foreboding

“When shall we meet again?
In thunder, lightning or rain”

- Shakespeare uses the abrupt rhetorical question “When shall we meet again?” to start the play, already amplifying the dramatic nature of the setting, grabbing the audience’s attention with a surrealistic event
 - The portrayal of violent weather phenomenon to describe the scene surrounding the witches suggests that they are out of place, immediately raising the audience’s curiosity
 - The witches appear to follow the classic stereotype of what a contemporary audience would imagine a witch to look like, amplifying the sinister tone of the scene
- ⇒ The first scene of the play establishes the importance of supernatural powers throughout the play, which was taken very seriously by a contemporary audience, most of whom would have believed in witchcraft and its unheimlich nature – it was punishable by death at the time

“Fair is foul, and foul is fair
Hover through the fog and filthy air.”

- The use of the foreshadowing chiasmus “Fair is foul, and foul is fair”, emphasises how these two ideas are interconnected, perhaps showing that there is no such thing as good and evil
 - Alternatively, the statement could refer to how good and bad are one and the same thing, or that everyone has a hidden dark side behind their fairness – this is clearly seen as the play develops in the character of Macbeth
 - The disgusting description of “filthy air” further describes the scene surrounding the witches, suggesting that darker events are about to commence – the “fog” could help portray the witches as hidden throughout the play, perhaps not even there at all, emphasising their ambiguous nature
 - The rhyming couplet is also a paradox, as good surely cannot be bad(?) Shakespeare fills this scene with confusing contradictions, such as “When the battle’s lost, and won.”
 - However, this could emphasise the witches’ removal from the action of the play, because they see events from all perspectives, which could further emphasise their level of knowledge
- ⇒ Shakespeare uses this scene to introduce key themes, such as the supernatural, and fate, seen in the foreshadowing statement “There to meet Macbeth.” The fact that the witches open the play could demonstrate their significance to the plot

- Here, Shakespeare's use of the foreboding rhyme between "fires" and "desires" could show that Macbeth's jealousy and darkness has been ignited, as the tone is now similar to that of the witches
- Macbeth's dark ambitions have been revealed explicitly for the first time, although he is speaking to himself (i.e. aside) whilst Duncan and Banquo are praising him
- Macbeth's tone suggests that even before the witches revealed their prophecy, he has always thought of kingship due to his ambitious nature
- His thoughts of kingship are now stronger still, resulting in him eventually committing regicide at the start of Act II

"True, worthy Banquo, he is full so valiant, ..."

- The use of the validating response "True" suggests that Duncan and Banquo have been applauding Macbeth after he left them, amplifying the contrast between the characters
- The sense of dramatic irony is again highlighted here, as no character other than Macbeth knows about his dark ambitions, yet the audience does

⇒ Shakespeare introduces the plot of heralding Malcolm as heir to the Scottish throne as motivation to Macbeth, almost as if he is trying to provide excuses for the tragedy and peripeteia of the war hero

⇒ Shakespeare also uses this scene to show how Macbeth is not so honorable as he once seemed, and he, like many others, is lured by "Fortune" – his character contrasts with that of Duncan and Banquo, especially when they are praising Macbeth during his short soliloquy

SCENE 5

- Lady Macbeth begins reading a letter from Macbeth describing his encounter in Sc. 3; she too is convinced by the prophecy, as part of it came has already become reality
- However, she does not believe Macbeth is strong enough to kill Duncan in an attempt to gain the throne, so she calls on evil spirits after she hears of Duncan's spirit
- Macbeth arrives, and the compassion between the two characters is clearly shown, but Lady Macbeth already tries to amplify his ambition

"... my dearest partner of greatness, ..."

- The use of the hyperbolic description "partner of greatness" emphasises how Macbeth holds Lady Macbeth in very high regard, which would be unusual to a contemporary audience, who lived in a strong patriarchal hegemony
- The use of the warm endearment "dearest" suggests an equality that would not have been present in the Jacobean era, but this affection is lost to an extent as the play progresses
- Shakespeare's choice of the foreboding word "greatness" emphasises the dark undertones of Macbeth's letter, perhaps suggesting that Lady Macbeth will reach greatness before the end of the play

"It is too full o'th'milk of human kindness ..."

“Did not you speak?”

- Shakespeare’s use of many questions followed by short answers here indicates that both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are incredibly nervous
- Lady Macbeth’s interrogative tone shows that she is anxious to find out if Macbeth has succeeded

“I could not say ‘Amen’

When they did say ‘God bless us’”

- The use of the modal auxiliary verb “could” demonstrates how Macbeth is physically unable to face God because of the sinful crime he has committed
 - His close analysis of the events that have just past emphasises his guilt and fear – could he be trying to justify his actions?
 - The interpretation that he cannot face God could show his fear in revealing his crime and darkness to anybody, augmenting his insecurity and his two-sided nature
- ⇒ Shakespeare uses this scene to show that the Macbeth’s have made the decision that will ultimately lead to their downfall and that there is no going back
- ⇒ However, he also shows that Macbeth, a great war hero, can be reduced to extreme and all-encompassing fear by a simple act, which could indicate the strength of his moral compass

“Consider it not so deeply”

- The shortness of the rationalising reply “Consider it not...” demonstrates how Lady Macbeth attempts to calm Macbeth and put his fears into perspective
- Shakespeare may have used this tone to show how Lady Macbeth wants to reap the rewards of Duncan’s death instead of living in fear

“Infirm of purpose
Give me the daggers.”

- Lady Macbeth’s commanding tone shows how she acts as almost a puppeteer to Macbeth’s actions, directly telling him what to do (i.e. she is in complete control of her fear-stricken husband)
- Her readiness is in contrast with Macbeth, who cannot think straight and brought the daggers back with him

“Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand?”

- Macbeth appears not to be able to cleanse himself of the blood on his hands; this could be because he cannot forget his actions, which he sees (i.e. literally) as blood on his hand
- This is the first of many uses of water to depict the washing away guilt – Lady Macbeth tries to rid herself of the smell of blood in Act V, Sc. 1
- The use of the emotive hyperbole “great Neptune’s ocean” could amplify the hopelessness of Macbeth’s soul being redeemed, but could also signify how nothing can rid himself of his crimes

“Things without all remedy
Should be without regard; what's done, is done.”

- Her tone has changed since Macbeth has entered, convincing him that his guilty thoughts should have died with Duncan's death, although she has just said the opposite before Macbeth entered (i.e. "...doubtful joy")
- This highlights her instability once more as she is putting on a façade for Macbeth, not telling him her true feelings
- Reference to "what's done / cannot be undone" in Act V, Sc. 1 – although at this point she feels that she can forget about the past, she eventually realises that the blood will never come off her hands

“O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!”

- This venomous exclamation could show that Macbeth realises that he has been poisoned by his actions, and will be haunted by them forever
- However, it could be just out of fear that he knows Banquo and Fleance still live for now
- Lady Macbeth's reply, "But in them nature's copy not eterne.", could show that she does not consider them to be anything other than "assailable"

“Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, ...”

- Macbeth is now comforting Lady Macbeth, perhaps showing that their roles have reversed – Lady Macbeth has gained some humanity and with it guilt, whereas Macbeth has lost his humanity
- His done is endearing, using the affectionate remark "dearest chuck", showing that their relationship is still strong, but Macbeth has become more persuasive since Act I

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SCENE 3

- The two murderers are joined by a third, who all wait for Banquo and Fleance before attacking them
- They kill Banquo successfully, but in the confusion, Fleance escapes
- They decide to inform Macbeth of the events of the murder

“He needs not our mistrust, ...”

- The addition of a third murderer, as ordered by Macbeth, could show that Macbeth's paranoia is now so great that he cannot trust the murderers
- Use of a double negative to emphasise the traitorous nature of the murderers, yet Macbeth still "needs" them, which could highlight his desperation for security
- Macbeth knows that it would be incredibly difficult to break the witches' prophecy, so he adds the precaution of a third murderer

“The west yet glimmers with some streaks of day.”

- Use of light and dark imagery to depict that there may be some hope left in the world, although the setting of the sun could be analogous to Banquo's oncoming death

“He [the first apparition] will not be commanded”

- Although he does not truly know it, Macbeth is not in control, and never has been – he begins to realise that he may have asked for more than he originally wanted
 - Written in passive (“be commanded”), to divorce the witches from the apparition itself, so they are not to blame?
 - Alternatively, the prophecies describe unnatural events coming to pass (e.g. until Birnan Wood comes to Dunsinane, etc.) that will destroy Macbeth, so it could show that Macbeth is actually natural and not on the side of the witches
 - He goes on to contradict himself in an uncertain tone when he decides what to do about Macduff – he is afraid of him and his power
- Macbeth is so full of arrogance that he places himself outside of the mortal way of life, almost as if he thinks he is a God, believing that the witches’ prophecies will never come to pass; he exists as he thinks
 - He, therefore, taunts the devil, believing that none can harm him – this is his moment of false pride (HUBRIS)

“Show his eyes and grieve his heart”

- Juxtaposition of what he wants and his greatest fear – the paranoia of the unknown results in him finding out that the witches’ prophecy, that the sons of Banquo will become kings, becomes true
- The ghosts provide a direct reference to James I as an ancestor of Banquo himself – the thought of the crown being on anyone other than himself (let alone Banquo’s sons, is too much for Macbeth

“Thy crown does seer mine eyeballs.”

- First use of the word ‘eyeballs’ in the English language
- A physical representation of the pain felt by Macbeth seeing the crown on someone else

“Stand aye accursed in the calendar”

- He wants to curse this day, after the realisation of his downfall – this was not uncommon in medieval times for people of power
- The concept of a curse was part of Jacobean culture, so the contemporary audience could very possibly consider this as a real concept
- His opinion of the witches has changed to anger, and he wants to spread his anger using this curse

SCENE 2

- Lady Macduff is with her son and Ross (a thane of Scotland). Ross tells her that Macduff has fled to England, and Lady Macduff accuses her husband of cowardice
- Ross makes his excuses and leaves. Afterwards, a messenger arrives, warns them of danger, and leaves
- Murderers enter, kill Macduff’s son, and pursue Lady Macduff to kill her

“Then you’ll buy ‘em to sell again”

- The son is not just demonstrating his immense wit, but showing how wise he is – this augments the feeling of loss felt by the audience
- He understands that if getting a husband is easy, then losing one will be just as easy – a relationship like that will not last long
- His exchange with his mother is a representation of Shakespeare’s themes of loyalty and treachery and loyalty
- Lady Macbeth and her son are presented as pathetically vulnerable, both because they are not aware of why Macduff had to flee to England and because they are not aware of their fast approaching fate

- ⇒ These events are entirely the fault of Macbeth and his tyranny – this is more shocking than the previous acts because his motive is not as important or ambitious as previously
- ⇒ Furthermore, this is the first murder that is committed on stage, and the first murder of a named child in the play, massively amplifying the horrific and unspeakable nature of the son’s murder

“My dearest coz,
I pray you school, yourself. But for your husband, ...”

- Ross is a diplomat who attempts to calm Lady Macduff, having a good judge of morality and an honest compass
- Ross is effectively betraying Macbeth, as one of his lords, in contrast to his positive remarks about the war hero at the start of the play
- Lady Macbeth is quick to criticise her husband, showing her lack of patience (outspoken?)
- Ross is clearly more loyal to Macduff than to Lady Macduff, as he pretends to not be aware of where Macduff is, perhaps showing a lack of trust

“Father” “He is, and yet he’s a fatherless”

- Although Macduff is noble, he has not been a good father (Lady Macduff = disdainful?)

“Thou liest, thou shag-hair’d villain”

- Macduff’s son is brave in the face of death, perhaps taking on the hereditary role of the father of the house, trying to protect the women at all costs

SCENE 3

- In the palace of the King of England, Macduff arrives describing the horrors of Macbeth’s reign
- Malcolm is suspicious of his trust towards him and so lies to Macduff at first to test his political integrity

“Bestride our downfall birthdom; ...”

- Evocative metaphor showing their determination to protect Scotland from Macbeth’s tyranny