

Ambition and conscience

How does Shakespeare make us understand a terrible choice? A focused GCSE lesson on Macbeth, with clear teaching, independent writing and a next step.

60 MINUTES NOW + 15 MINUTES AFTER FEEDBACK

You need: a pen, this pack and a timer. Work on paper or in your own document. This sample is best used after reading Act 1. It practises part of an AQA-style response; it is not a full mock exam or a predicted grade.

1 / RETRIEVE WHAT YOU KNOW - 5 MINUTES

Who is Duncan, and why is he staying at Macbeth's castle?

What do the witches predict for Macbeth?

What is the difference between ambition and conscience?

2 / LEARN THE ANALYTICAL MOVE - 10 MINUTES

Move from a method to an argument. An argument answers the question with an idea about Shakespeare's presentation. Choose a short quotation, explain how a precise word or image creates meaning, then show why that meaning matters. A technique name alone is not analysis.

A model from a different moment: Act 1 Scene 4. Macbeth has just heard that Malcolm will inherit the throne. He says, "Stars, hide your fires; / Let not light see my black and deep desires."

Shakespeare presents ambition as something Macbeth already knows he must conceal. The command "hide" makes darkness an imagined accomplice, while "black" gives his private desire a moral darkness. Because this is an aside, the audience hears the disloyal thought beneath his public loyalty. Macbeth's secrecy therefore reveals awareness of wrongdoing before he acts.

Read actively: underline the argument; circle two precise words; put a star beside the explanation of dramatic form. Then explain aloud why this does more than say "Macbeth is ambitious".

A mind arguing with itself

Act 1 Scene 7. Duncan is a guest in Macbeth's castle. Alone, Macbeth weighs the reasons against murdering him. This selection begins part-way through his speech.

MACBETH

01 He's here in double trust:
02 First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
03 Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
04 Who should against his murderer shut the door,
05 Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
06 Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
07 So clear in his great office, that his virtues
08 Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
09 The deep damnation of his taking-off;
10 And pity, like a naked newborn babe
11 Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin horsed
12 Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
13 Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
14 That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur
15 To prick the sides of my intent, but only
16 Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
17 And falls on th' other-

Words to unlock the extract

kinsman: relative; **faculties / office:** royal powers / role; **meek:** gentle; **taking-off:** killing; **damnation:** punishment in hell; **cherubin:** angels; **sightless couriers:** invisible messengers or winds; **spur:** a rider's pointed tool; **vaulting:** leaping.

ANNOTATE IN THREE PASSES

1. Box Macbeth's duties towards Duncan. Which role makes the murder a betrayal?
2. Underline language that makes the murder morally or spiritually wrong.
3. Circle the movement in the final image. Is ambition controlled, or dangerous?

Useful context: kingship could be understood as God-given authority. The religious language lets you connect that belief to this particular murder. Explain the connection; do not add a detached history paragraph.

Make the explanation precise

Use the extract on page 2. These short tasks prepare your thinking for an independent response. You can disagree with an interpretation if you support your reading.

1. Explain a contrast. Macbeth should “shut the door” against a murderer, yet imagines bearing “the knife” himself. What would his ambition turn him from, and into?

2. Follow the image. Explain what changes between “o’erleaps” and “falls”. What does this suggest Macbeth already understands about ambition? Develop the idea beyond “he wants power”.

3. Make a judgement. Which is more convincing: Macbeth hesitates because he fears the consequences, because he recognises a moral duty, or because both matter? Defend your judgement with two short quotations.

Keep this question in mind: does recognising an action as wrong make Macbeth less responsible for choosing it, or more responsible? A convincing response can acknowledge the tension.

Spend about 3 minutes planning and 17 minutes writing. Aim for a clear opening argument and two developed paragraphs. Continue on page 5 if needed.

Starting with this speech, explore how Shakespeare presents Macbeth's conflict between ambition and conscience.

Write about the conflict in this speech and how it develops elsewhere in the play.

For this focused lesson, analyse at least two details from the extract and connect your argument to one other moment you know. Use your own wording; do not copy the teaching model. This is a shortened practice response, not the full examination task.

PLAN: My argument / two extract details / another moment

INDEPENDENT ANSWER

Continue your answer here. A developed explanation is more valuable than a string of technique names or a list of quotations.

Read your response once for the argument and once for accuracy. Make at least one useful correction.

- ☐ My opening answers the question.
- ☐ I explain how precise words or images create meaning.
- ☐ I connect the extract to another moment in the play.
- ☐ I use context only where it helps explain the text.
- ☐ I have checked sentences, quotations, spelling and punctuation.

Next: keep this first version. In the enrolled programme, you submit your work for personal feedback from your tutor. This public sample does not include free individual marking.

AFTER FEEDBACK | A SEPARATE 15 MINUTES

Turn feedback into better writing

In the programme, complete this after your tutor returns your feedback. If trying the public sample independently, use the demonstration on page 7 to identify a useful target.

1 / CHOOSE ONE PRECISE TARGET - 2 MINUTES

What is the most useful change to make? State an action, such as “explain the movement inside the image” or “make my connection to the rest of the play develop my argument”.

2 / REWRITE A PARAGRAPH - 7 MINUTES

Improve one paragraph from your first answer. Apply the target and underline the new or changed explanation. Keep the original so you can compare them.

3 / APPLY THE SKILL TO A FRESH MOMENT - 5 MINUTES

Later, Macbeth says, “To be thus is nothing, / But to be safely thus” (Act 3 Scene 1). He is now king and fears Banquo’s descendants will inherit the throne. In 3-4 sentences, explain how the contrast between “nothing” and “safely” presents what ambition has achieved. Apply your target without copying your revised paragraph.

4 / Check - 1 minute: put a star beside the sentence that best shows you have applied the feedback. Can you explain why it is stronger?

FOR PARENTS / AFTER YOUR FIRST ATTEMPT

See what useful feedback changes

Illustrative teaching demonstration. These fictional responses show the process; they are not a testimonial, a complete exam answer or evidence of a particular grade.

A FIRST RESPONSE

Macbeth is ambitious because he says “vaulting ambition”. This metaphor shows that he wants to be king. He knows killing Duncan is wrong, but Lady Macbeth makes him do it.

PRECISE FEEDBACK

You identify ambition and choose relevant evidence. Now explain the movement in “o’erleaps” and “falls”: what does Macbeth recognise about his own ambition? Link this to one reason he gives for protecting Duncan. Replace “makes him” with a precise account of his choice.

AN IMPROVED PARAGRAPH

Shakespeare presents Macbeth as conscious of the danger of his own ambition. The imagined movement from “o’erleaps” to “falls” turns an upward leap into a loss of control: the desire to rise contains the prospect of collapse. This is especially troubling because Macbeth has already recognised his duty as Duncan’s “host”. He understands that he should protect the king, yet chooses to attack him. Lady Macbeth influences that decision, but the soliloquy prevents the audience from treating Macbeth as an innocent instrument: he can explain the wrong before he commits it.

What improved? The quotation now supports an argument; the image is explained; a second detail develops the point; responsibility is treated with more care. A full response would also develop evidence from elsewhere in the play.

CHECK YOUR RETRIEVAL

1. Duncan is king of Scotland and Macbeth’s guest. **2.** Macbeth will become king. **3.** Ambition is a desire to achieve or gain power; conscience is awareness of what is right and wrong.

ABOUT THE SAMPLE

This lesson practises interpretation and textual support (AO1), analysis of language and dramatic form (AO2), and relevant context (AO3). Accurate expression matters too. The question is written by The English Practice and is not an official AQA question. GCSE support is matched to the student’s board and set texts.

Text: Shakespeare, Macbeth, Acts 1.4, 1.7 and 3.1; quotations checked against the Folger Shakespeare Library. Extract line numbers are local to this pack.

[Read the play at the Folger Shakespeare Library](#)

Assessment format: [AQA GCSE English Literature 8702 specification](#).

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