

**STUDY AND  
REVISE**  
for GCSE

# Macbeth

by William Shakespeare

- ▼ Written by experienced teachers and examiners
- ▼ Guides you to the best understanding of the text
- ▼ Get your best grade

**Shelagh Hubbard**

Series Editors:  
Sue Bennett and Dave Stockwin

 **HODDER**  
EDUCATION  
LEARN MORE

# Contents

Getting the most from this guide .....	5
<b>1</b> Introduction .....	6
<b>2</b> Context .....	8
<b>3</b> Plot and structure .....	13
<b>4</b> Characterisation .....	36
<b>5</b> Themes .....	50
<b>6</b> Language, style and analysis .....	60
<b>7</b> Tackling the exams .....	70
<b>8</b> Assessment Objectives and skills .....	79
<b>9</b> Sample essays .....	84
<b>10</b> Top ten .....	102
Wider reading .....	107
Answers .....	109

# Characterisation



## Target your thinking

- How does Shakespeare present his characters? (AO2)
- What functions do characters serve in the play? (AO1 and AO3)

### Build critical skills

Remind yourself of the meaning of the word 'equivocation' (see p. 21).

The main characters in *Macbeth* are ambiguous and not always what they appear to be at face value. Which major theme of the play does this connect them with? How does appearance differ from reality?

### GRADE BOOSTER

Remember that characters are constructs of the playwright, the director and the actor: you should not write about them as if they are real people.

It is important to note that when writing about *Macbeth* it is impossible to separate the author's use of characterisation from the themes of the play. The examples given below integrate both characters and themes throughout.

Methods of presenting characters on stage are straightforward:

- words – what a character says (in dialogue, or, particularly, in soliloquy)
- actions – what a character does
- words others say about the character
- events – and the character's involvement in them – and the effects of dramatic structure

The problem with *Macbeth* is that sometimes the words characters say are not the truth – sometimes they are downright lies, sometimes simply misleading. You will need to get under the surface of the evidence to interpret what the dialogue reveals.

## Macbeth

Shakespeare introduces us to Macbeth in a manner which immediately makes him ambiguous. In the opening scene the witches plot to meet him, thus connecting him to evil at the very start of the play. Yet he is then presented to us by the Captain's description in Act 1 scene 2 as 'brave Macbeth', a fearless soldier, a man who fights on the side of right for his king, and who dispatches the king's enemies with ruthless efficiency.

### Key quotation

...his brandished steel

Which smoked with bloody execution

...carved out his passage

Till he faced the slave...

Till he unseamed him from the nave to the chops...

(1.2 17–22)

## An ambitious man

Macbeth's fatal flaw is his ambition, which is galvanised by the witches' prediction that he will become Thane of Cawdor and then king.

### Build critical skills

Does Shakespeare offer clues that Macbeth already had unspoken desires to be king? He reacts to the witches' words by starting in surprise, then falling into spellbound silence. What might be going through his head?

When Macbeth receives the news that one of their promises has already come true, his thoughts immediately turn to murder, though he decides to leave fulfilment of the prediction to chance.

### Key quotation

*...Why do I yield to that suggestion,  
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair  
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs...  
(1.3 133–135)*

Compare Macbeth's aside in Act 1 scene 3 lines 129–141 to his similarly dark words at the end of Act 1 scene 4. This speech combines the theme of fate (the witches, the timing of Duncan's announcements) with the strength of his sinful ambition to be the king.

## Easily manipulated

Macbeth's response to the witches and Lady Macbeth's role in overcoming his crises of conscience suggest that he is, in the beginning, easily manipulated. Lady Macbeth recognises his ambition but also sees the obstacles to achieving what he wants. Her words imply that Macbeth is too good a man to go out and get something which is, at root, wrong. Yet she is sure she can change his mind. (See *Plot and structure* p. 17.)

Shakespeare clearly shows Macbeth being propelled towards evil by his wife. When he backtracks, listing reasons he should not commit the murder, she uses verbal and emotional arguments to persuade him, such as calling him a coward, questioning his manliness and reassuring him that their guilt can be concealed (Act 1 scene 7 lines 28–78). Despite his better judgement, he goes ahead with a murder which he knows is wrong.

However, although Macbeth may be manipulated by his wife in Acts 1 and 2, he goes on to murder Banquo without her input or knowledge. This manipulation is also an exploration of the nature of free will (see *Context* p. 9).

### Build critical skills

The key quotation on p. 36 is a good example of how Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a puzzle for the audience. Is it good to be able to kill so brutally on the battlefield? What links the witches, apparently in league with the devil, with Macbeth?

### Key quotation

*...I fear thy nature...  
is too full o' th' milk of  
human kindness...  
(1.5 14–15)*

### Key quotation

*...thou wouldst be great  
...but without the illness  
should attend it...  
That wouldst thou  
holily...  
(1.5 16–20)*

### A man with a conscience

Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a true tragic hero because of the combination of good and evil in his character. He does some appalling things, yet his conscience and imagination trouble and punish him. We see this through Shakespeare's use of soliloquies (see *Language, style and analysis* pp. 62–63). Any essay about Macbeth's character will require close attention to how Shakespeare presents his changing character through these speeches.

#### Key quotation

*Thou sure and firm-set earth,*

*Hear not my steps,  
which way they walk,  
for fear*

*Thy very stones prate  
of my whereabouts...*  
(2.1 56–58)

Macbeth's guilty conscience is revealed by means of subconscious imaginings and visions. His imagination is obvious from his first encounter with the witches (Act 1 scene 3), when he visualises murdering Duncan. However, the witches are not imaginary as Banquo also sees them and hears their words. Macbeth's guilty conscience before he kills Duncan is shown in his visions of accusing angels and cherubs (see *Language, style and analysis* p. 65), the dagger (see *Plot and structure* pp. 19–20), and the stones speaking out and giving him away.

Macbeth imagines night falling and the creatures of evil, 'night's black agents', gathering in the darkness as Banquo's murder is imminent. Afterwards he imagines ways the murder ('man of blood') might be revealed: moving stones, speaking trees, birds of ill omen. At the end of this scene, Shakespeare uses a powerful image of Macbeth crossing a river of blood.

*...I am in blood*

*Stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more,*

*Returning were as tedious as go o'er.*

(3.4 136–138)

Banquo's ghost is more a matter for debate – is it a product of Macbeth's imagination? It could actually be there, though it is true that no one else sees anything sitting in Macbeth's own chair. Macbeth's second encounter with the witches and the apparitions they show him in Act 4 scene 1 could also be interpreted as imaginary.

#### Build critical skills

One interpretation of the play, sometimes explored in performance, is that the witches are ever present, for example, lending their powers to Lady Macbeth, dangling the dagger and setting the scene for Banquo's murder.

Either they seem to drive him almost mad, which means they must shoulder the blame for his actions, or his own deeds do, which means what happens is his fault. Which of these interpretations seems more valid to you, and why?

## A tyrant

Once embarked on his descent into brutal violence, Macbeth's acts are shown by Shakespeare to be increasingly callous. He has spies everywhere. He lies to and cheats his one-time friend, Banquo, paying hired assassins to murder him and his son, Fleance, in a failed attempt to prevent Banquo's heirs becoming kings. Finally, taking heed of the witches' advice to 'be bloody, bold and resolute' (Act 4 scene 1), he commits the greatest atrocity in the play. Unable to reach Macduff, he orders all in Macduff's household to be massacred – a shocking act against the most vulnerable which would horrify audiences.

All of Scotland suffers under the rule of Macbeth, as shown in Malcolm's personification of the country.

### Key quotation

*I think our country sinks beneath the yoke:*

*It weeps, it bleeds – and each new day a gash*

*Is added to her wounds.*

(4.3 39–41)

Macduff's words in Act 4 scene 3 offer an ironic description of the state of the country as, unknown to him, his family are Macbeth's latest victims. This is an important image of Macbeth as a despotic leader who is destroying Scotland and its people. Many lines in this scene emphasise how Macbeth's power is maintained by fear.

At the end of the play, Macbeth is described as a 'dead butcher' – quite a fall from the god-like war hero who fought the Norwegians single-handed at the start.

## Brave soldier to the end

At the end of the play Macbeth is alone and half crazy, clinging on to the security of the witches' promises. His wife is mad with guilt, but he is so detached from her he can feel nothing. As the English army approaches, his troops desert to fight on the opposite side: we might well see him as reaping what he has sown. However, there is a moment when Shakespeare's words remind us of Macbeth's awareness of how pointless all his actions have been. His wife dies, he realises he has been tricked by the witches when he sees the trees of Birnam Wood moving, and for a moment it is almost possible for the audience to feel sorry for him. (See *Plot and structure* p. 31.)

Macbeth ends the play as he started, a soldier and a man of action on the battlefield. He even fights on with Macduff, knowing that

### Key quotation

*Things bad begun make  
strong themselves by ill.*

(3.2 55)

his death is certain, rather than be called a coward or taken prisoner, so there are elements of the hero still present at his death. However, the final scene remembers him as a usurper, cursed, a tyrant and a butcher.

## Lady Macbeth

### Build critical skills

Remember that all female roles, including Lady Macbeth, would have been played by boy actors in Shakespeare's time. What implications of this can you see for the scenes with Macbeth and his wife?

### Build critical skills

On the surface, Lady Macbeth – with her strength of character and her murderous intentions – is far from a stereotypical woman, and yet what impressions of her do you form from her soliloquy in Act 1 scene 5? Is she basically a loyal and supportive wife? Is she really evil if she needs to call for the help of the devil to kill? Is she ambitious for herself?

Shakespeare presents the heroine as a stronger character than her husband for much of the first half of the play, a reversal of the typical gender roles of the time. However, by the end, any initial judgement that she is a kind of tragic heroine in her own right has long been dismissed.

## A fourth weird sister?

Lady Macbeth is introduced as she reads the letter Macbeth has sent, describing his meeting with the witches. She is presented as both decisive and brutal in her reasoning that, in order for Macbeth to become king, he must murder Duncan.

### Key quotation

---

*Hie thee hither*

*That I may...chastise with the valour of my tongue*

*All that impedes thee from the golden round.*

(1.5 23–26)

---

Unlike Macbeth, she does not reflect on reservations of conscience. Whereas Macbeth was chosen by the weird sisters and tempted by their promise, she invites them into her body – and indeed her soul – as she summons the evil spirits to ‘unsex her’ and to take away her ability to nurture children: in other words, to make her into a man capable of doing such evil.

Look closely at Lady Macbeth's soliloquy in Act 1 scene 5 (lines 36–52). The speech is central to your understanding of her character. It is discussed on p. 17. There is also an extract-based essay answer on pp. 84–92.

Her closeness to her husband is unquestionable. Bear in mind that there are few female characters in the play and Lady Macbeth's only relationship is shown to be that with her husband. Directors interpret the physical relationship between the couple differently.

Her deviousness and powers of manipulation are obvious: when Duncan arrives, she conceals her thoughts and acts the perfect hostess as she welcomes him into her home for his final night on earth. She entertains him while her husband leaves the room to grapple with his conscience.

## Practical and cold

Lady Macbeth's contribution to Duncan's murder goes beyond ensuring her husband's will to do it. She makes all the practical arrangements, lays out the daggers and drugs the king's guards. Perhaps here, when she is alone as Macbeth goes to do the deed, Shakespeare hints at a chink in her armour: her words reveal that she has been drinking to overcome her fear, and also show that she has some 'feminine' feelings of affection.

### Key quotation

*Had he not resembled*

*My father as he slept, I had done't.*

(2.2 12–13)

Once Macbeth is back, quite clearly beside himself with guilt, her strength returns. There is a symbiotic element to their relationship: she is presented as stronger when he needs her – when he is most weak. As the play unfolds, we see them drift away from each other: his career of tyranny continues without her support and she falls apart. Shakespeare contrasts Lady Macbeth's earlier confident statement that

*A little water clears us of this deed.*

(2.2 70)

with her demented handwashing in the sleepwalking scene to demonstrate the extent of her disintegration.

### Build critical skills

When Macbeth's bizarre eulogy to Duncan looks as if it could cause suspicion, Lady Macbeth fakes a faint to draw attention away from him – or does she? Is this another sign of the weakness which will lead to her final breakdown? In performances you have seen, which interpretation does each director choose?

## A tormented soul

After Act 3 scene 4 we see little of Lady Macbeth as her husband continues on his trail of terror without her support. Presumably Shakespeare wished to maintain the focus on Macbeth but her absence also suggests the decline in their relationship. Without him needing her strength, there is nothing left for her to do but dwell on their deeds. Whatever strength she gained from the spirits ultimately cannot protect her from her conscience and she becomes mentally disturbed.



▲ In some productions Lady Macbeth uses her charms to seduce her husband into committing the murder that, on his own, he would never have done.

### GRADE BOOSTER

Some discussion of the symbiotic element of the Macbeths' relationship - swapping roles and characteristics - would show your understanding of the dramatic structure of the play.



Ironically, she is now the one whose sleep is disrupted. Where at the start of the play her words invited darkness to conceal all evil-doings, now she is said to insist on a light by her bed at all times.

### Key quotation

---

*...Unnatural deeds*

*Do breed unnatural troubles: infected minds*

*To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets.*

*(5.1 61–63)*

---

After the sleep-walking scene, no more is seen of Lady Macbeth. However, her death is marked by screams shortly after this and it is later said she died at her own hand.

### 'Fiend-like queen'

Malcolm's final comment about Lady Macbeth ('fiend-like queen' 5.9 36) emphasises her evil nature and reminds the audience of the link between her and the weird sisters.

### Build critical skills

The audience may form a more complex interpretation of Lady Macbeth's character. She may be pitied: she sells her soul to get the thing her husband most desires and he deserts her emotionally when she most needs his support. Does she break the mould of femininity as she at first requests? (See *Plot and structure* p. 17.) What is your view?

She is one of Shakespeare's strongest and most memorable female characters but you should remember that when Shakespeare wrote the play her part would have been played by a young boy actor.

### The weird sisters

It is not quite accurate to discuss the 'characterisation' of the weird sisters as they are often not presented as human, but rather as manifestations of the forces of evil. However, they have such a powerful effect on the plot that they could hardly be called 'minor', so their powers and influence are described here.

They appear on stage in just three scenes: Act 1 scene 1, Act 1 scene 3 and Act 4 scene 1. (Act 3 scene 5 with Hecate was most likely added to the play at a later date by another writer.) Nevertheless, these three scenes are critical to Macbeth's fate.

Shakespeare's decision to open the play with the short scene where the witches plan to meet Macbeth is dramatically very effective. It establishes a dark, evil atmosphere, while the reference to the names of their familiars, Graymalkin and Paddock, would have shown a contemporary audience beyond doubt that they are in league with the devil. They talk of a battle – so the immediate background of the play is of chaos, fighting and death.

The witches express themselves in a spell-like rhyme and rhythm with words that are riddles.

### Build critical skills

With the witches, nothing is what it appears. Directors have cast them as hideous old women, beautiful young ones and even children. Banquo describes them as 'withered', with 'skinny lips' and beards. They would have been played by men in Shakespeare's time, so might actually have had beards. (See *Context* p. 10.)

On film they have appeared out of nowhere. On stage they have moved around on roller skates. How would you present the witches in the first scene?

Most important of all, they want Macbeth – and they get him.

## Temptation

The witches' love of mischief and the promises they make to Macbeth and Banquo are discussed in detail in *Plot and structure* (Act 1 scene 3) on pp. 14–16.

Do you think the effect this information will have on the two men is predictable? The witches promise Macbeth the crown, then immediately snatch it away by promising the succession to his best friend. It is bound to lead to trouble: the carnage that follows must delight these trouble-makers.

## Pure evil

Ignoring Act 3 scene 5, as this is frequently cut from performances, the witches' final encounter follows Macbeth's traumatic experience with Banquo's ghost when he returns to gain reassurance about the future.

The spell they recite as they concoct their poisonous sounding potion would have reinforced beliefs about the power of witches in the seventeenth century, and still has enormous dramatic impact today.

### Key quotation

*When the battle's lost,  
and won.*

(1.1 4)

*Fair is foul, and foul  
is fair.*

(1.1 12)

### Build critical skills

How much further influence do the witches exert? Do they 'sow the seed' and then leave Macbeth to do the rest? How is Lady Macbeth linked with them? Are they an ever present influence on events?

### Build critical skills

Some directors show the witches still present at the end of the play, an on-going threat to Malcolm's apparent restoration of order to Scotland. What would you choose to do?

### GRADE BOOSTER

If you have the opportunity to write about the witches for your exam task, referring to context, language and performed versions of the play should help you present a well-informed view.

### Key quotation

*For a charm of powerful trouble,  
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.  
(4.1 18–19)*

---

The greatest indicator of their evil intentions comes in the form of the three predictions made by the apparitions (see *Plot and structure* p. 26). The witches refer to these apparitions as 'our masters', so are these words meant to come straight from the devil himself? Here the witches really do seem to be 'the fiends that lie like truth', as Macbeth later calls them when he realises they have tricked him.

## King Duncan and his sons, Malcolm and Donalbain

### King Duncan

If the witches symbolise the power of the devil, Shakespeare uses Duncan and his sons to represent God's power on earth. They represent *order* to the witches' *chaos*.

Duncan's first appearance shows him receiving news from the battlefield, where the Scottish army is holding off Norwegian invaders in league with Scottish traitors. He is full of praise and gratitude for the bravery of Macbeth and Banquo.

He is benevolent and caring: he sends for a surgeon for the wounded captain who has brought the news. He is judgemental too, punishing the traitor Thane of Cawdor by death and rewarding Macbeth with the title.



▲ Duncan meeting Macbeth in person.

Duncan next appears as he greets Macbeth in person. His greeting shows he is related to Macbeth:

*Oh valiant cousin!*

(1.2 24)

There is irony throughout this scene as he expresses his regret about the death of the Thane of Cawdor.

We see him similarly taken in by Lady Macbeth when he arrives at Macbeth's castle. In most stage productions, he is never seen again, though the imagery in the descriptions of him after the murder, from both Macbeth and Macduff, indicate the brutality of his death and the enormity of the sin that caused it.

### Key quotation

*Confusion now hath made his masterpiece:*

*Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope*

*The Lord's anointed temple and stole thence*

*The life o'th' building.*

(2.3 59–62)

### Build critical skills

How would you present Duncan on stage? The RSC (Nunn) production, symbolically, has him in shining white, a bearded God-like figure, an absolute contrast to the darkness and black costumes of most of the other characters, and certainly to the weird sisters whose early scenes are juxtaposed with Duncan's first appearance.

As he plans Banquo's murder, Macbeth still reflects on Duncan as a 'gracious' king (3.1 67). Macduff's comments to Malcolm all emphasise the holiness of Duncan and his queen:

*a most sainted King; The Queen...Oft'ner upon her knees than on her feet...*

(4.3 109–110)

## Malcolm

Malcolm is with Duncan at the camp while Macbeth fights. The Captain who brings the news is the very man who saved him from capture. It appears Malcolm is no more successful as a soldier than his father. Despite this his father still declares him heir to the throne, an act which presses forward Macbeth's thoughts about killing Duncan and Malcolm too.

### Key quotation

*He was a gentleman on whom I built*

*An absolute trust.*

(1.4 13–14)

### Key quotation

*The Prince of Cumberland!— That is a step*

*On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,*

*For in my way it lies.*

(1.4 48–50)

Malcolm gains importance when Macduff visits him in England. This long and complex scene invites us to compare Malcolm with Macbeth and Duncan, and eventually shows Malcolm to be a morally impeccable man, the right choice to free Scotland from the tyranny of an evil king.

### Key quotation

---

*...I am yet*

*Unknown to woman; never was forsworn;*

*...At no time broke my faith...and delight*

*No less in truth than life. My first false speaking*

*Was this upon myself.*

*(4.3 125–131)*

---

He assembles a combined force of English soldiers and Scots who desert Macbeth to fight alongside the rightful heir. He is presented as resourceful as his is the ingenious idea of cutting down the trees of Birnam Wood to use as camouflage. He sends Siward's troops into the castle first and he and Macduff follow on: he is clearly presented as more of a warrior king than his father.

He concludes the play with a model speech, restoring right and order to Scotland. Like Duncan, he punishes the bad and rewards the good.

*...what needful else*

*That calls upon us, by the grace of Grace,*

*We will perform in measure, time and place.*

*(5.9 38–40)*

## Donalbain

Duncan's younger son disappears after the murder and never returns. His function is to show Duncan as the father of sons (as also are Banquo, Macduff and Siward) in contrast to Macbeth's childlessness. The reason he is not on stage at the end is less to do with Shakespeare's forgetfulness as the limited number of actors in the theatre company. The same actor who was Donalbain in Acts 1 and 2 might well have been playing the Doctor, Siward, or any other soldier by Act 5.

## Banquo and his son, Fleance

At the start of the play Banquo is coupled with Macbeth as a great general and fearless soldier. Their characters quickly become distinct when they meet the witches. Macbeth is immediately intrigued by their words whereas Banquo is sceptical and speaks a prophetic warning to Macbeth.

### GRADE BOOSTER

Just as Duncan and Malcolm's purpose is to contrast with Macbeth as king, so Banquo contrasts with him as a man. Observe carefully how Shakespeare reveals their opposing qualities as the play develops. Making effective links between oppositional characters will help increase your marks.

The major contrast between Banquo and Macbeth is his resistance to temptation. Like Macbeth, he dwells on the promise made to him, and like Macbeth, his thoughts turn to evil doing. He says that his dreams allow him 'cursed thoughts', but he calls upon 'merciful powers' to protect him rather than following through to sinful deeds.

Macbeth fears Banquo's goodness: his 'royalty of nature...dauntless temper...wisdom that does guide his valour'. More to the point, Macbeth wishes to ensure that Banquo's sons do not become his successors as king, and thus determines to eradicate both him and his son, Fleance.

## Loyal to the king

After Duncan's murder, Banquo's suspicions are implied: '...I fight/ Of treasonous malice' but, ironically, he says nothing and attends Macbeth's coronation. James I claimed that he was descended from Banquo and therefore Shakespeare presents him positively to appeal to his patron.

However, it could also be argued that Banquo is flawed. Shakespeare uses soliloquy to allow him to share with the audience his thoughts that Macbeth used foul-play to make the witches' promise come true. However, he is shown to remain loyal to his new king and one-time friend, perhaps in the hope that he too might benefit. You might therefore say that Banquo is, in a way, seduced by the forces of evil. This interpretation is closer to the original *Holinshed's Chronicles* source material.

Banquo goes along with Macbeth's invitation to be chief guest at the banquet and pays with his life for his possible lack of integrity as Macbeth's hired killers ambush him and stab him to death.

### GRADE BOOSTER

Exploring different viewpoints about a character can gain you extra marks. It is one way of showing that you have thought deeply about alternative interpretations.

He does, however, assure the truth of the witches' promise – his best revenge on Macbeth – as he begs his son to save himself.

### Build critical skills

What of Banquo's ghost? Does it make sense to discuss it as part of Banquo's revenge? Whether you would include Act 3 scene 4 in evaluating Banquo's character might depend upon how you interpret the ghost. Look again at Context p. 11 and then reach your conclusion.

### Key quotation

*...oftentimes, to win us  
to our harm,*

*The instruments of  
darkness tell us truths,*

*Win us with honest  
trifles, to betray's*

*In deepest consequence.*

(1.3 122–125)

### Key quotation

*...by the verities on  
thee made good*

*May not they be my  
oracles as well*

*And set me up in hope?*

(3.1 8–10)

### Key quotation

*Fly good Fleance!...*

*Thou may'st revenge –  
O slave!*

(3.3 20–21)

### Fleance

Fleance is not so much a character as another reminder of Macbeth's childless state. He is usually played by a child actor and thus evokes feelings of affection and sympathy from the audience. He is, like King Duncan's sons, a motherless child. Remember that the play displays an absence of women in a male-dominated society.

Fleance's main contribution is not so much to the plot as to the play's historical significance as he flees (like his name) to become the ancestor of the Stewart dynasty of kings, and James I.

### Macduff, his wife and son

Macduff is similar to Banquo as a character, emerging after Duncan's death as the loyal courtier who is appalled to discover Duncan's murdered body. He has suspicions about Macbeth, but instead of keeping quiet and becoming a deferential courtier who could benefit from Macbeth's rule, he speaks out.

For example, in the aftermath of Duncan's murder he questions Macbeth's killing of the king's guards: 'Wherefore did you so?' Macduff's sparing words contrast with Macbeth's extravagant expression.

Macduff refuses to attend the coronation or the banquet and pays dearly for it. Macbeth acts on the words of the first apparition to 'Beware Macduff': Macduff's absence in England costs him his family and his entire household.

Macduff is already a positive figure to the audience for the love he shows for his country and the anguish he expresses when he fears that Malcolm may not be the saviour he hoped for. When news of his family's slaughter reaches him, he shows himself to be worthy of sympathy as a man, grappling with his grief as a husband and father before converting those feelings into fuel for his vengeance on Macbeth.

Macduff's most dramatic moment is when he puts paid to Macbeth's security and reveals the riddling half-truths the witches used to deceive him (see *Plot and structure* p. 33).

He fights for his country, his murdered king and his slaughtered family. He defeats Macbeth, cuts off his head – as was the custom with traitors – and hails Malcolm as the true King of Scotland.

#### Build critical skills

What is Shakespeare's point here? Ought Macduff to have put his country before his family? Was it sensible to leave his castle unguarded? Lady Macduff says he is a coward for running away from Scotland. What is your view?

#### Key quotation

*Macduff was from his mother's womb  
Untimely ripp'd.*  
(5.8 15–16)

**GRADE FOCUS****Grade 5**

Students will be aware of characters as having clear purposes in a text. They will select evidence from the text and discuss relevant supporting detail from performances. Their comment on language and structure will be clear and relevant. Discussion of qualities of character will be clear and precise and may begin to consider alternative interpretations.

**Grade 8**

Students will offer a more perceptive response to hidden meanings and show an ability to grasp irony and to explore alternative readings. Their comment on language and structure will include perceptive analysis. Characters will be seen to represent themes and ideas as well as being believable creations. Discussion of performances will be more detailed and demonstrate analytical qualities.

**REVIEW YOUR LEARNING**

- 1 What are the main ways Shakespeare presents characters to readers in the play?
- 2 How many female characters appear in the play? Who are they?
- 3 What are the names of the four fathers, and what main purpose do they have in the play?
- 4 Which 'characters' symbolise the opposition of good and evil, heaven and hell, order and chaos?
- 5 Who is described as '...too full o'the milk of human kindness?'
- 6 Who says these words and to whom are they speaking? 'New honours come upon him/Like our strange garments – cleave not to their mould.' What theme is being suggested by these lines?
- 7 Who says '...Unnatural deeds/Do breed unnatural troubles: infected minds/To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets.' What are the circumstances in which the lines are spoken?

**Answers on p. 110.**