

Oxford Revise | AQA GCSE English Literature: Macbeth | Answers

Mark scheme

Behind each exam question is a set of assessment objectives (AOs). The examiner will use these AOs to help mark your answer. If you answer the question accurately, you will automatically cover all the AOs.

Level	Marks	Explanation
1	1–5	<i>A simple response</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AO1 – occasional focus on the question, simple points made • AO2 – little engagement with ideas, little engagement with methods • AO3 – some misunderstandings • AO4 – phrasing might be unclear
2	6–10	<i>A relevant response</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AO1 – question focus generally secure, relevant if underdeveloped ideas • AO2 – some engagement with ideas, basic grasp of methods • AO3 – generally competent understanding • AO4 – phrasing mainly clear
3	11–15	<i>An explained response</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AO1 – focus on the question secure, points are explained using examples and explanation • AO2 – some engagement with ideas, sound grasp of methods • AO3 – competent understanding • AO4 – phrasing mainly clear
4	16–20	<i>A clear response</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AO1 – focus on the question secure, points are clear and developed • AO2 – clear engagement with ideas, clear grasp of methods • AO3 – clear and secure understanding • AO4 – clear phrasing
5	21–25	<i>A thoughtful response</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AO1 – focus on the question secure, points are clear and developed with insight • AO2 – clear and thoughtful engagement with ideas, clear grasp of methods • AO3 – clear and secure understanding with useful details • AO4 – clear phrasing

6	26–30	<p><i>A conceptual response</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AO1 – focus on the question secure, points explore ideas at a high level • AO2 – perceptive engagement with ideas, perceptive grasp of methods • AO3 – insightful understanding with useful details • AO4 – clear/fluent phrasing
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Page 98 Question 1

Relevant content may include:

AO1

- comments on Macbeth in the extract, e.g. his fear and guilt
- comments on Macbeth's refusal to look at Duncan's corpse
- comments on Macbeth's regret
- references to blood
- details about Macbeth's feelings about other murders

AO2

- language used to present Macbeth's fear and guilt
- imagery used to present Macbeth's fear and guilt
- use of dialogue to reveal Macbeth's feelings
- changes in Macbeth's feelings about murder throughout the play

AO3

- moral implications of Macbeth's actions
- Macbeth's emotions and turmoil
- Macbeth's gradual loss of guilt in further murders
- ideas about murder as a method of gaining power

Example answer

The answer given below is a full, high-mark answer.

Macbeth's feelings about murder change as the play develops. Shakespeare structures the play to show how, over the course of several murders performed or arranged by Macbeth, his levels of fear, guilt, and remorse alter. His moral doubts decline with each murder. This structural pattern is used to convey a significant tragic idea in the play: that, once the protagonist decides to cross moral boundaries, his course is set. We see how Macbeth loses his humanity in pursuit of power and, in the end, feels very little about life or death. The murders he performs are supposed to make him powerful, but ultimately, they cost Macbeth his sense of morality and also his life.

Although the play opens with an account of a murder on the battlefield – one in which Macbeth brutally ‘unseams’ his opponent – it is clear that (in the world of the play) this death is seen as justified. In fact, Macbeth is rewarded for it. A distinction is made between legitimised murder in a battle where Macbeth is defending the status quo, and the very different murder he ‘performs’ upon Duncan. This murder is very different in the sense that it is regicide and is driven by naked ambition. Shakespeare structures the play so that a lot of stage time is given over to Macbeth’s moral concerns before the murder and his subsequent feelings of remorse afterwards. The actual murder itself isn’t seen on stage, a deliberate choice to focus the audience’s attention on the effects of murder upon the perpetrator. This can be seen in the extract where the publicly brave warrior is reduced to a quivering wreck who is ‘afraid to think what I have done’. This immediate sense of guilt and remorse is a key part of Macbeth’s tragic experience, where, in choosing to commit murder, he suffers for it.

Shakespeare contrasts Macbeth’s feelings about Duncan’s murder with that of his wife’s callous and response to point out the manner in which – at this point in the play – Macbeth seems to have some sense of morality. His immediate suffering is clear. He is in mental turmoil, asking how ‘every noise appals me?’. The image of his bloodied hands turning the ‘seas incarnadine’ expresses the magnitude of his guilt – he feels that the murder and his feelings of guilt will pollute the world. It is clear that he feels he will never escape the scale of his crime. At this point in the play, Shakespeare shows us a man for whom murder has a dreadful effect, one who later complains that his mind is ‘full of scorpions’.

Yet this sense of guilt changes. Once Macbeth has committed regicide and achieved power, it seems he transforms into a man for whom murder is a way to maintain his position. In contrast to his doubt about murdering Duncan, he feels nothing about ordering the murder of Banquo and Fleance, suggesting that, once you have crossed a boundary, there is no return. Macbeth’s feelings about Banquo’s murder are initially celebratory, but, when Banquo’s ghost returns, Macbeth is a tormented soul. Shakespeare suggests here that Macbeth cannot easily escape his crimes – the ghost acts as a symbol of Macbeth’s guilt and, given that the thanes cannot see the ghost, it makes Macbeth appear unwell and unfit for office. In this way, the effect of murder upon Macbeth is to unwittingly trigger his own downfall.

By Act 4, Macbeth appears to have no feelings or concerns at all about murder. His slaughter of Macduff’s family is a punishment for the thane’s perceived threat. The murder of the innocent family (much like the attempted murder of Fleance) is a particularly evil act. It suggests that the sense of moral caution that surrounded the death of Duncan has completely left Macbeth. Even so, murder doesn’t make Macbeth safe or happy. He remains ‘cabin’d, cribb’d, confin’d’ after Banquo’s death and is a man whose way of life has ‘fall’n into the sere’. In using these soliloquies to reveal Macbeth’s inner thoughts, Shakespeare makes a key point about the nature of tragedy and the way in which terrible actions rebound upon the perpetrators. The moral message of the play is a conservative one: it shows that the effect of murder on the perpetrator is profound, bringing misery and ultimately death. Towards the climax of the play, the nihilistic position that his murders have brought him to is shaped in the glum imagery of his final soliloquy, where he sees life as ‘a tale / Told by an idiot... Signifying nothing’. For Macbeth, the effect of murder is self-destruction.

Page 99 Question 2

Relevant content may include:

AO1

- comments on Macbeth in the extract, e.g. his misery
- comments on Macbeth's despair and envy of Duncan
- details of his increasing isolation
- references to his feelings
- details about Macbeth's suffering elsewhere in the play

AO2

- language used to present Macbeth's suffering at this point
- use of dialogue to reveal Macbeth's thoughts and feelings
- use of figurative language to reveal Macbeth's thoughts and feelings
- changing levels of suffering as the play progresses

AO3

- Macbeth's feelings about the morality of his actions
- ideas about tragedy in relation to suffering
- Macbeth's attitude to death at different points
- ideas about regicide

Page 100 Question 3

Relevant content may include:

AO1

- comments on Macbeth in the extract, e.g. his loss of fear
- comments on how Macbeth recognises his change
- details of his thoughts about life
- references to his mortality
- details about Macbeth's character earlier in the play

AO2

- language used to present Macbeth's feelings at this point
- use of dialogue to reveal Macbeth's inner thoughts
- use of figurative language to present Macbeth's thoughts
- use of structural contrast to show change in Macbeth's attitudes

AO3

- Macbeth's self-reflection about fears
- Macbeth's attitude to mortality and his wife's death
- Macbeth's attitude to the value of life at different points
- ideas about the value of life

Example answer

The answer given below is a full, high-mark answer.

Shakespeare's sequencing of the play's narrative draws the audience's focus to the process and stages of Macbeth's change. We see how he transforms from a fearless, loyal warrior to a joyless tyrant, and are invited to see the nature of his actions and his own internal thoughts about the process.

Shakespeare presents a character who not only changes, but is acutely aware of these changes at each stage of the process. Yet he is unable to do anything about this pathway, even though he is aware that it may lead to misery. This key element of tragedy – its inevitability – is shown in the various changes detailed in Macbeth's journey.

The initial depiction of Macbeth is considerably different from the character we see in the final act. The audience's first introduction to the character emphasises his heroism. Shakespeare uses the dialogue of others to characterise Macbeth before he is brought on stage. We learn from the Captain that 'brave Macbeth' has defended Duncan's rule, and has fearlessly confronted a rebel and 'unseam'd him from the nave to th'chaps'. The brutality aside, this act demonstrates a key aspect of Macbeth at this stage in the play: his loyalty to Duncan and willingness to uphold the status quo. It is this loyalty that results in Macbeth being made Thane of Cawdor, and so the audience (and Macbeth) are shown how virtuous qualities such as loyalty are rewarded and how a rightfully appointed king requires the support of his thanes to govern.

The initial change in Macbeth occurs when his head is turned by the witches' suggestion that he will become king. Shakespeare uses contrast between Macbeth and Banquo to reveal how malevolent influence can be withstood. The witches awaken ambition in Macbeth and, although he realises that the prospect of regicide makes his 'seated heart knock against my ribs', he begins to change. His wife's emotional blackmail and encouragement inflame things, but Shakespeare structures the play so that enough stage time is given to Macbeth's internal doubts. Via soliloquy, we find out that he is acutely aware he should 'shut the door' against Duncan's murderer, but ultimately Macbeth commits regicide.

In the extract, we see the ultimate result of Macbeth's deeds – he has changed into a man who has 'forgot the taste of fears': his earlier worries about the business of regicide have vanished. The 'terrible dreams' and noises that earlier afflicted him have gone: no longer do 'night-shrieks' affect him. He is aware of the reason for this – that he has 'supp'd full with horrors' – and it is clear that his humanity has declined; he is no longer touched by life. Elsewhere in the play, he admits that he is 'in blood Stepp'd in so far' that to wade back would be futile. Macbeth has become unfeeling, desensitised, and empty by the end of the play. The message of this narrative is that the pursuit of ruthless ambition at any cost dehumanises people: they lose any regard for normal values and fellow-feeling.

The extract reinforces this loss of vitality. His wife's death prompts his nihilistic take on life – that it's just one day after another leading inevitably to 'dusty death'. There is utter defeat in his assessment that life is a 'brief candle'; a 'walking shadow'; a 'poor player'. These images combine to paint an image of a man who has changed from a vital warrior to an empty husk for whom life holds no joy. Life, to the changed Macbeth, signifies 'nothing'. The start of the play shows him being valued by his peers – his deeds of loyalty bring him honour and public congratulations. But, by the end, he has changed into a man for whom 'honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, I must not look to have'.

Macbeth's change is a tragic one. It is one whereby a valiant and respected man is altered by the awakening of ruthless ambition and one that results in death for the protagonist. His downfall is marked by a series of errors, all of which were avoidable, yet he chose to make them. In showing us the process of his change, Shakespeare reveals a key moral message: that humans can bring about their own downfall if they give in to their base instincts.

Page 101 Question 4

Relevant content may include:

AO1

- comments on Lady Macbeth in the extract, e.g. her dark desires
- comments on Lady Macbeth's request for the help of evil forces
- details of her wish to assume evil qualities
- references to evil actions
- details about Lady Macbeth at the end of the play

AO2

- language used to present Lady Macbeth's attitudes at this point
- use of soliloquy to reveal Lady Macbeth's inner thoughts
- changes in Lady Macbeth's feelings and actions throughout the play
- imagery to present evil thoughts

AO3

- Lady Macbeth's wish to commit evil acts
- issues about female qualities and attributes
- Lady Macbeth's attitude to murder
- attitudes and feelings inspired by ambition

Example answer

The answer given below is a full, high-mark answer.

The initial depiction of Lady Macbeth suggests an unfeeling, evil character who is content to encourage murder and practise terrible deception in exchange for power. She requests the help of evil spirits and manipulates her husband to bend him to her dark wishes. These actions reinforce her character as one whose desires can be deemed evil. Yet the play is not just about the performance of her evil acts: Shakespeare structures the narrative to allow us to see the motivations and intentions behind them, and also allow a view of the terrible consequences for her. Lady Macbeth's evil is a core part of her tragic being: her desire for power and the evil manner in which she goes about it have devastating outcomes and reinforce the play's central moral vision – that evil acts result in punishment.

In the extract, the use of soliloquy reveals the dark desires of Lady Macbeth. The death-like image of the raven croaking Duncan's 'fatal entrance' presents a macabre image of death and in performance is often given a sense of evil relish. Her invocation to spirits to 'unsex me here' alerts the audience to her need for some support in her ambitions – perhaps a hint that evil is maybe not a natural part of her make-up. She is acutely aware that she will need the maternal, feminine aspects of her personality erased: her wish to replace 'milk for gall' conjures up a terrifying image of providing death rather than life and indicates that, to some extent, her evil is a performance. Yet, while she may be aware that her desires need support, the very fact she asks for evil aid suggests that her evil is intentional: there is no sense in which her actions occur by accident. This sense of a conscious process of arranging terrible deeds is particularly unsettling.

Her invocation to 'spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts' is therefore alarming in many ways. She willingly invites the forces of darkness to assist her. Yet, for modern readers, such beliefs seem ridiculous and one way of viewing her request is to see it simply as a way of deflecting responsibility – the actions and intentions are hers alone, rather than due to the assistance of the supernatural. Read this way, her actions appear even worse – they are solely the result of her own corrupt desires. The audience is also allowed to see the manner in which she corrupts her husband. While Macbeth is clearly torn and ultimately chooses the wrong path, his wife's influence is a part of his tragedy. Her manipulation of him is an evil act: her use of emotional blackmail, insults such as 'coward', and chilling advice to 'look like th'innocent flower, But be the serpent under't' are driven by a perverted wish for power. The nature of her various deceptions is also part of her evil manner. Her easy willingness to use 'wine and wassail' to dupe the chamberlains, to cover their faces, and stand by while they take the blame for Duncan's death is abominable.

Shakespeare structures the play to show us the inner workings of Lady Macbeth's evil. Alongside her first soliloquy, Shakespeare employs dramatic irony to show the nature of her duplicity. Upon Duncan's arrival at the castle, the audience already knows she plans that Duncan shall not 'that morrow see' and yet we see her be friendly towards the king, assuring him of their best attentions. This moment consolidates the magnitude of her evil: not only is she planning murder, but she has the barefaced gall to role-play the act of the humble hostess to her victim-to-be. This charade continues once Duncan's corpse is discovered and she play-acts the role of the 'gentle lady' needing to be helped from the scene.

Shakespeare's exploration of Lady Macbeth's evil is part of the play's tragic design. Not only are we shown her feelings immediately before and after Duncan's murder, we also see the long-term effects of evil upon humans. Her mental collapse and later suicide all seem to stem from her evil acts. Her nightmarish fractured dialogue and disturbed sleep patterns suggest that it is impossible to commit evil and get away with it. Like her husband, she makes an intentional decision to choose an immoral path and ultimately ends up paying for it. Her tragic denouement is the price she pays for siding with darkness and, in showing this, Shakespeare reinforces a moral message about accepting the natural order of things rather than giving in to terrible desires.

Page 102 Question 5

Relevant content may include:

AO1

- comments on Lady Macbeth in the extract, e.g. how she feels she can control Macbeth
- comments on Lady Macbeth's desire for power and determination
- details of her intention to manipulate her husband
- references to ambition and the crown
- details about Lady Macbeth at the end of the play

AO2

- language used to present Lady Macbeth's desire
- use of soliloquy to reveal Lady Macbeth's character/inner thoughts
- imagery to present ideas about power
- the changing attitudes of Lady Macbeth

AO3

- Lady Macbeth's desire for power
- role of Lady Macbeth in encouraging Macbeth's ambition
- Lady Macbeth as a tragic character
- ideas about the morality of Lady Macbeth's desire for power

Page 103 Question 6

Relevant content may include:

AO1

- comments on Lady Macbeth in the extract, e.g. her turmoil
- comments on Lady Macbeth's isolation and suffering
- details of her memories of murder
- references to evil acts
- details about Lady Macbeth at the start of the play

AO2

- language used to present Lady Macbeth's turmoil
- use of dialogue to reveal Lady Macbeth's troubled thoughts
- changes in Lady Macbeth's control and power during the play
- her changing relationship with Macbeth

AO3

- Lady Macbeth's part in her own downfall
- ideas about mental health
- Lady Macbeth's gradual loss of power
- ideas about the moral aspects of her actions

Page 104 Question 7

Relevant content may include:

AO1

- comments on Lady Macbeth in the extract, e.g. her misery
- comments on Macbeth in the extract – his suffering
- details of their growing isolation
- references to their previous actions
- details about the Macbeths at the end of the play

AO2

- language used to present the Macbeths' unhappiness at this point
- use of soliloquy to reveal Lady Macbeth's secret thoughts
- changes in Macbeth's contentment throughout the play
- the changing relationship between the Macbeths

AO3

- the Macbeths' emotions and feelings at different points
- the effect of bad judgements upon human happiness
- the Macbeths' attitudes and thoughts about their evil actions
- the effects of immoral behaviour upon relationships

Example answer

The answer given below is a full, high-mark answer.

Part of the tragic fallout of the Macbeths' terrible crime is the disintegration of their domestic lives. They transform from respected, powerful, and contented pillars of the world they inhabit to unhappy, tortured souls. The play reveals the process by which their unhappiness develops and shows the mental turmoil and marital disintegration that comes from their crimes. In showing this, Shakespeare makes a moral point about the dangers of ambition: that attempts to gain power by foul means will destroy human contentment, not only for the victims, but also for the perpetrators.

The extract is structured so that the audience gains a brief glimpse into Lady Macbeth's growing emotional and psychological turmoil. The use of soliloquy shows her rarely-seen remorse at the actions of the couple, whereby she acknowledges that 'Nought's had' in return for their crimes and that the Macbeths are 'without content'. Not only does this reinforce the idea that the couple's ambition has been worthless, it also suggests a key element of the tragic experience: that tragic characters are made to face and acknowledge the effects of their errors. Part of Lady Macbeth's misery is being fully aware of her woes. Her misery is such that she deems it 'safer to be that which we destroy', a type of death-wish to escape her unhappy state.

Lady Macbeth's actions later in the play show how her turmoil intensifies to the point where her mental health suffers and she requires light by her at all times. Her fractured dialogue in the final act speaks of a 'mind diseas'd' – one that can only be cured by her suicide. The tragedy of this event is that her husband's response is notably unemotional. His dialogue at this point in the play reveals his sense of inevitability about life – the sense that 'all our yesterdays have lighted fools / The way to dusty death'. The level of unhappiness that the Macbeths experience by the end of the play seems inescapable and emphasises a key moral point – that, in choosing the wrong path, consequences are inevitable. For both of these characters, this means death.

The early sources of unhappiness can be seen in the extract: once Lady Macbeth has given voice to her misery, her manner immediately changes once her husband is brought into the scene. By the use of dramatic irony, the audience can clearly see how Lady Macbeth is play-acting – she is playing a role for her husband of the dutiful and upbeat wife, advising him that 'Things without all remedy / Should be without regard'. As Shakespeare has structured the scene to show us her real feelings, these words now seem hollow and amplify the nature of her tragedy – a woman bound by her choices and trapped in a position she can't escape from easily.

Macbeth's own unhappiness is central to the extract. He is tortured by his fears that his crimes will return to bite him, as shown in the figurative reference to having 'scorch'd the snake, not kill'd it'. His explicit expression of his mental anguish is plain: he is afflicted by 'terrible dreams' and eats his 'meal in fear'. Shakespeare has structured the narrative to contrast the brave, fearless warrior at the start of the play with the haunted and pessimistic king in this scene. Like his wife, Macbeth is being made to face the moral consequences of his actions and, also like his wife, he thinks that death is preferable to their current misery. His tragic acceptance that he would 'Better be with the dead' echoes the central message of the play – that utter misery results when people commit terrible crimes for their own selfish ends.

As the play progresses, Shakespeare sequences the stages of Macbeth's growing unhappiness. We are shown his fear at the appearance of Banquo's spirit, itself a symbol of guilt; his torment by the show of eight kings; his final acceptance that the 'juggling fiends' have duped him. The ultimate expression of the character's unhappiness occurs in his final soliloquy, where he accepts that 'Life's but a walking shadow'. He clearly sees life as worthless, viewing it as 'Signifying nothing'. This concluding image brings home the play's abiding moral message that anyone who crosses accepted boundaries of conduct brings about their own unhappiness.

Page 105 Question 8

Relevant content may include:

AO1

- comments on Macbeth in the extract, e.g. his ambitions
- comments on Macbeth's growing desires for power
- details of his reactions to the witches' words
- references to his emotional state
- details about Macbeth and other characters in relation to ambition

AO2

- language used to present Macbeth's ambitions at this point
- use of aside to reveal Macbeth's inner thoughts
- use of imagery to show Macbeth's feelings
- the use of Banquo's dialogue to show the growing effect of Macbeth's ambition

AO3

- Macbeth's thoughts about ambition
- ideas about the morality of Macbeth's desires
- Macbeth's attitude to the contradictory feelings ambition inspires
- the role of ambition in his tragic downfall

Page 106 Question 9

Relevant content may include:

AO1

- comments on Malcolm in the extract, e.g. his unifying qualities
- comments on Malcolm earlier in the play – his cautious, noble qualities
- details of his intentions, e.g. his promotion of the thanes
- references to his attitude towards the Macbeths
- details about Macbeth and Donald as kings elsewhere in the play

AO2

- language used to present Malcolm's attitudes at this point
- use of dialogue to reveal Malcolm's noble plans
- use of contrast to reveal differences between the kings
- the resolution of the play as part of the return to order

AO3

- ideas about the conduct of various kings
- role of Malcolm as the rightful king
- Malcolm's desire to create harmony
- Macbeth as a disrupter and bad king

Page 107 Question 10

Relevant content may include:

AO1

- comments on Macduff's feelings about his family's death, e.g. his sorrow
- comments on Macduff's feelings of anger
- details of his emotions, e.g. his wish to kill Macbeth
- references to his strength or apparent masculinity
- details about other characters' deaths elsewhere in the play, e.g. Duncan, Banquo, and the Macbeths

AO2

- language used to present Macduff's feelings about his family's death
- use of dialogue to reveal Macduff's sorrow and anger
- Macduff's changing attitudes towards Macbeth as the play develops
- figurative language to express Macduff's feelings

AO3

- Macduff's feelings and emotional response
- ideas about morality in relation to murder
- Macduff's feelings about his family
- the nature of human responses in relation to death

Page 108 Question 11

Relevant content may include:

AO1

- comments on Macbeth in the extract, e.g. his fear of the corpse
- comments on Macbeth's emotional response to his actions
- details of the murder of Duncan, e.g. the blood
- references to the magnitude of his guilty feelings
- details about Macbeth's changing attitude to murder as the play develops

AO2

- language used to present Macbeth's feelings at this point
- use of dialogue to reveal Macbeth's emotional reaction
- contrast to reveal differences between the two Macbeths' attitudes
- changing nature of the murders elsewhere in the play

AO3

- Macbeth's emotional reactions and feelings about murder
- the different attitudes between the Macbeths to Duncan's murder
- ideas about the morality of Macbeth's actions
- ideas about regicide

Page 109 Question 12

Relevant content may include:

AO1

- comments on Lady Macbeth's attitude towards deception
- comments on Macbeth as the junior partner in the plan
- details of Lady Macbeth's intended deception, e.g. the public nature of it
- references to innocence
- details about deceptive acts elsewhere in the play

AO2

- language used to present Lady Macbeth's attitude to deception
- use of dialogue to reveal Lady Macbeth's advice to her husband
- use of imagery to convey ideas about deception
- the gradual unravelling of deception as the play progresses

AO3

- Lady Macbeth's role in using deception to gain power
- ideas about the moral aspect of deception
- ideas about power and how it is gained and maintained through deception
- how lies and deceptions are always revealed in time

Page 110 Question 13

Relevant content may include:

AO1

- comments on the effects of Macbeth's guilt in the extract
- comments on Lady Macbeth's advice to her husband
- details of his guilt, e.g. the imagined voices
- references to possible madness as an effect of guilt
- details about the Macbeths' altered feelings about guilt by the end of the play

AO2

- language used to present the Macbeths' feelings of guilt at this point
- use of dialogue to reveal Macbeth's differing attitudes
- imagery used to represent the effects of guilt
- the changing attitudes towards guilt as the play progresses

AO3

- the Macbeths' differing attitudes towards guilt
- ideas about morality in relation to guilt
- the way the Macbeths change their attitudes towards guilt
- the role of guilt in shaping human conduct

Page 111 Question 14

Relevant content may include:

AO1

- comments on Macbeth's directions to the murderers in the extract
- comments on Macbeth's evil intentions towards Banquo and Fleance
- details of his instructions to the murderers
- references to his casual, evil feelings about Fleance
- details about evil acts elsewhere in the play

AO2

- language used to present Macbeth's evil intentions
- use of dialogue to reveal Macbeth's power over the murderers
- growing sense of evil seen in Macbeth's actions throughout the play
- imagery used to present ideas about evil acts

AO3

- Macbeth's evil thoughts and actions at various points in the play
- the moral aspects of evil
- Macbeth's changing attitude towards evil acts
- ideas about power and regicide

Page 112 Question 15

Relevant content may include:

AO1

- comments on Macbeth's reactions to the supernatural sights in the extract
- comments on Macbeth's desire for supernatural guidance
- details of the apparition's guidance
- references to the witches' control over the apparition
- details about other supernatural events during the play

AO2

- language used to present Macbeth's reactions to the supernatural
- use of dialogue to reveal the dominance of the supernatural
- imagery to express Macbeth's response to what he is shown
- the placing of other supernatural events in the play

AO3

- the power the witches have over Macbeth
- moral ideas about Macbeth's trust in the supernatural
- Macbeth's final realisation that he has been duped
- ideas about tragedy and the mistake of putting trust in the supernatural

Example answer

The answer given below is a full, high-mark answer.

Aside from being a powerful dramatic device, the various supernatural entities and apparitions in the play help to shed light on the character of the protagonist: their main function seems to be to tempt and taunt Macbeth, leading him to his inevitable doom. In this, they are very powerful – the witches and their associated supernatural entities have the ability to make and then destroy a king, despite having themselves no social or political power in the world of the play. Ultimately, the witches' power resides in words: their duplicity and ability to cryptically suggest the future sets up Macbeth's destruction.

In the extract, Macbeth is shown an emblem of a future king. This apparition works symbolically, taunting Macbeth with one of his greatest fears – that Banquo’s sons will become king. This idea is established earlier in the narrative when the witches tell Banquo that he ‘shalt get kings’ and torment Macbeth throughout his kingship. Here, the initially silent apparition has a very powerful effect upon Macbeth, where he automatically interprets it as a glimpse of the future, saying it ‘rises like the issue of a king’. Through his fears and vulnerability, Macbeth grants power to the supernatural. There is a great irony in the way Macbeth, the most powerful man in Scotland, is told to ‘Listen, but speak not’. This reversal of the usual power structures gives an indication of the magnitude of the witches’ influence over Macbeth. He listens while the apparition gives him cryptic reassurances that he ‘shall never vanquish’d be’, something he takes at face value until the forest appears to move in Act 5.

The scale of the witches’ power is seen in Macbeth’s joyous reaction – ‘who can impress the forest’ – and reminds the audience that it is words, cryptic suggestions, and duplicity that are at work. The witches’ power lies in Macbeth’s ridiculous desire to believe them: the absurd idea that a king would consult with the supernatural as a method of governance would be laughable if it weren’t for the dire consequences that result. The power that the witches have is also exercised by withholding information. They never give cast-iron assurances to Macbeth, but leave him wanting to know more. Shakespeare sequences Macbeth’s speech in the extract to reveal the true nature of his feelings – the speech commences with a seemingly upbeat response that the forest is immovable and the ‘Sweet bodements’ he hears superficially reassure him. Yet, at the end of the speech, his true nagging feelings emerge when he aches to know ‘shall Banquo’s issue ever / Reign?’. At this point, the witches powerfully refuse to allow an answer. In giving power to the witches, Macbeth brings himself misery – the central aspect of his tragedy is to allow himself to be seduced by promises and words. Once he is hooked, he cedes power to the supernatural and seals his fate.

Elsewhere in the play, the supernatural has a similar hold over Macbeth. Following the witches’ initial meeting with Macbeth, Shakespeare sequences events to show the effect their words have upon him – he is ‘rapt withal’ at the prospect of being king and the witches’ brief words assume a massive importance to him: they have the power to ignite his ambition and set him upon his tragic path. Banquo’s ghost also has a profound impact on Macbeth, rendering him powerless in front of his fellow thanes. This supernatural apparition has the power to make him cower, to feel ‘cabin’d, cribb’d, confin’d’ and reduce him to a chaotic mess in the eyes of those he is supposed to command. Shakespeare uses Banquo’s spirit as a symbol in this segment of the play, a symbol of the guilt that Macbeth feels about his conduct, yet also a terrifying reminder of the witches’ prophecy about Banquo’s sons. Macbeth’s tragedy is that he is trapped in a situation from which only death will release him. No matter what superficial reassurance he receives, or how many murders he commits, the powerful words of the witches dominate his waking thoughts.

The power of the supernatural to Macbeth is absolute – it initiates his tragic journey, guides his decisions, and plays with him. The witches’ power is mere words, yet it has the ability to destroy Macbeth without any consequence for the witches. Even when Macbeth realises the truth about these ‘juggling fiends’, he is powerless to alter the course they have set him on.