



ENGLISH LITERATURE

Bridging Work

Macbeth



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Introduction

A Bridge to A Level Literature

You have already studied *Macbeth*. You know the plot, the characters and many of the ideas that helped you succeed at GCSE. Those skills remain important at A Level, but they are developed in new and more sophisticated ways.

At GCSE, you were often asked to explain what Shakespeare presents and how he presents it. At A Level, the conversation broadens. Ideas become more complex and debatable. Analysis of language, form and structure moves beyond methods you might have explored at GCSE and invites you to explore craftsmanship and constructs. Context is no longer a collection of facts used to support an argument, but a lens through which interpretation can be generated and challenged.

You will also begin to think about texts in relation to one another. Shakespeare's tragedies do not exist in isolation: they belong to wider literary traditions, genres and theatrical practices. Comparing texts allows us to explore how writers revisit similar concerns and produce different effects.

Perhaps the most significant change is that interpretation becomes central. You will encounter the views of critics and scholars, consider how directors and actors make interpretative choices in performance, and explore how audiences have responded to texts and productions across different periods. Rather than searching for a single "correct" reading, you will learn to evaluate multiple perspectives and develop arguments of your own.

This booklet uses *Macbeth* as a starting point for that journey. Through contextual reading, critical debate and close textual analysis, you will see how a strong GCSE response can evolve into an A Level one.

How the Booklet Works

You will notice that this booklet does not ask you to write a complete essay immediately. Instead, each chapter focuses on a different aspect of literary study and gradually builds your confidence and understanding.

As you move through the booklet, you will work with the same essay question, the same line of argument and the same analytical paragraph. You will revisit these repeatedly, refining and extending them as each new assessment objective is introduced.

1. **Chapter 1** introduces the shift from GCSE to A Level and explores how literary study becomes increasingly interpretative.
2. **Chapter 2** introduces the assessment objectives and shows how GCSE skills evolve at A Level.
3. **Chapter 3** focuses on AO1 and AO2, helping you construct a line of argument and develop an analytical paragraph through close analysis of Shakespeare's methods.
4. **Chapter 4** introduces AO3, showing how contextual reading can deepen interpretation.
5. **Chapter 5** explores AO4 through comparison with *Hamlet*, demonstrating how texts illuminate one another.
6. **Chapter 6** introduces AO5 through literary criticism, revealing that interpretation is an ongoing conversation rather than a search for certainty.

You should complete the booklet in order. Read the extracts carefully, annotate the articles, respond to the reflection questions and write in the spaces provided. Do not worry about producing perfect answers. The purpose of this booklet is to encourage curiosity, exploration and confidence.

You may find that your opinions change as you progress through the chapters. This is not a sign that your earlier ideas were wrong. Instead, it reflects the nature of literary study itself: interpretations develop as we encounter new evidence and new perspectives.

Although much of this booklet focuses on refining a line of argument and developing a single analytical paragraph, this is not the final destination. By the end of the booklet, you should use everything you have learned to produce a complete essay response to the original question.

You may wish to print this booklet out and hand write your work, you may wish to type your work so it is easier to consciously edit and adapt. Whichever you choose, be prepared to submit your essay in September within the first two weeks of you starting.

Your final essay should include:

1. an introduction containing your line of argument;
2. multiple analytical paragraphs;
3. close analysis of Shakespeare's methods;
4. relevant contextual understanding;
5. comparative insight;
6. engagement with critical interpretations;
7. and a conclusion that draws together your argument.

The paragraph you have developed throughout this booklet should become one part of this larger response.

You are not expected to have all the answers before September. Instead, you are invited to approach literature with curiosity, confidence and a willingness to explore.

Welcome to A Level Literature.

Booklet Key

Key Information

Task instruction

Model/exemplar

Chapter 1

The Question

You have already studied *Macbeth*. You know the plot, the characters and many of the ideas that helped you succeed at GCSE. You have analysed Shakespeare's methods, learnt quotations and developed interpretations supported by evidence from the text.

Those skills do not disappear at A Level.

However, A Level Literature invites you to engage with texts differently. Rather than simply identifying what Shakespeare presents, you begin to explore the ways in which literature generates debate, encourages multiple interpretations and resists straightforward answers.

To experience this shift, begin with two questions.

The GCSE Question

Read the following extract from Act 2 Scene 2 of *Macbeth*.

In this scene, Macbeth has just murdered King Duncan and returned to Lady Macbeth.

MACBETH: Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep' – the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast –

LADY MACBETH: What do you mean?

MACBETH: Still it cried, 'Sleep no more!' to all the house:
'Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor
Shall sleep no more: Macbeth shall sleep no more.'

LADY MACBETH: Who was it that thus cried? Why, worthythane,
You do unbend your noble strength, to think
So brainsickly of things. Go get some water,
And wash this filthy witness from your hand.

GCSE Task

Starting with this extract, explore how Shakespeare presents guilt in *Macbeth*.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents guilt in this extract;
- how Shakespeare presents guilt in the play as a whole.

The A Level Question

Consider the A Level standard question below. Read the information that follows and respond to the task.

"Macbeth's overwhelming guilt makes him a more tragic and sympathetic figure than a villain."

In the light of this view, explore Shakespeare's presentation of guilt in *Macbeth*.

This question does not simply ask you to identify examples of guilt in the play. Instead, it offers an interpretation and invites you to engage with it.

You may agree.

You may disagree.

You may find yourself doing both.

Before deciding what you think, spend some time with the question itself.

Task:

Explore the question:

1. Read the statement several times.
2. Annotate it as you would annotate a passage from the play.
3. Circle, underline or make notes around the statement itself (above).
4. Use the prompts below to help inform your annotation.

Consider:

- Which words seem most significant?
- Which words are difficult to define?
- Which words seem open to debate?
- Which assumptions does the statement make about Macbeth?
- Which moments from the play immediately come to mind?

Gathering Evidence

Rather than deciding immediately whether you agree or disagree, begin by collecting evidence. Imagine that you are preparing for a debate. Read the information below and complete the table that follows.

1. Evidence that supports the statement

What moments in the play suggest that Macbeth's guilt makes him tragic or sympathetic?

You might consider:

- his horror after Duncan's murder;
- his inability to sleep;
- his vision of Banquo's ghost;
- his reflections on fear and despair;
- his response to Lady Macbeth's death.

Use quotations wherever possible.

2. Evidence that challenges the statement

What moments in the play suggest that Macbeth should be viewed primarily as a villain?

You might consider:

- his decision to murder Duncan;
- the murder of Banquo;
- the slaughter of Macduff's family;
- his growing emotional detachment;
- his refusal to change course.

Again, support your ideas with evidence from the text.

3. Looking for Tension

Strong literary arguments rarely emerge from certainty.

As you gather evidence, look for moments that complicate your thinking.

For example:

- Does Macbeth become less sympathetic as the play progresses?
- Can guilt explain behaviour without excusing it?
- Is suffering enough to redeem wrongdoing?
- Does Shakespeare encourage audiences to admire Macbeth's courage whilst condemning his actions?

Make a note of any moments that resist easy judgement. These moments of tension are often where the most interesting arguments begin.

Task:

Using the prompts and guidance above, complete the evidence table below.

Evidence to support the statement	Evidence to challenge the statement

From Ideas to Argument

You have now gathered evidence, explored different perspectives and identified points of tension.

The next step is not to choose one side and ignore the other.

Instead, begin to shape your own viewpoint.

Read the examples below.

1. A straightforward response:

Macbeth is shown sympathy because he feels guilty.

2. A more developed response:

Macbeth's guilt encourages sympathy because it reveals that he understands the horror of his actions.

3. A more nuanced response:

Macbeth's guilt initially encourages sympathy because it suggests he retains a conscience; however, Shakespeare complicates this response through Macbeth's willingness to commit further acts of violence.

Notice that the final example acknowledges complexity.

It does not abandon judgement.

Instead, it refines it.

Task:

Drawing on the notes you have made, write a line of argument responding to the question. You do not need to completely agree or disagree.

You might begin with phrases such as:

- Although...
- While...
- To some extent...
- However...
- Ultimately...

Remember:

- Your aim is not to produce the perfect answer.
- Your aim is to begin thinking like a literary critic: gathering evidence, weighing interpretations and arriving at a viewpoint that is thoughtful, tentative and supported by the text.

Your line of argument:

Looking Ahead...

You have just begun doing something that A Level Literature students do every day.

You have moved beyond identifying examples of a theme and started to engage with an interpretation.

You have gathered evidence, recognised complexity and begun constructing an argument of your own.

In the next chapter, you will revisit your thesis and begin to develop it further, exploring how literary arguments become increasingly sophisticated through close analysis of Shakespeare's methods.

Chapter 2

The Assessment Objectives

In Chapter 1, you explored an A Level question, gathered evidence from across the play and developed a provisional argument of your own.

Without realising it, you had already begun engaging with some of the skills expected of A Level Literature students.

The Assessment Objectives (AOs) explain how literary thinking develops from GCSE to A Level. They are not simply a checklist for examiners; they describe the different ways in which we engage with texts as readers and critics.

Importantly, A Level does not replace the skills you developed at GCSE. Instead, it elevates them.

GCSE to A Level

GCSE Literature	A Level Literature
AO1: Maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response. Use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.	AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.
AO2: Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.	AO2: Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts.
AO3: Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written.	AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.
AO4: Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.	AO4: Explore connections across literary texts.
—	AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

As you read through the table, what do you notice?

Perhaps the most striking changes are:

- GCSE skills are still present, but they become broader and more conceptual;
- AO4 changes entirely;
- A new AO5 is introduced, recognising that literary interpretation is often contested.

You have already begun engaging with AO1. Now, revisit your argument and consider how each of the AOs can deepen and develop it.

AO1: Argument

At GCSE, you developed a personal response supported by evidence from the text.

At A Level, that response becomes more conceptual and sustained.

Task:

Read the line of argument you wrote at the end of Chapter 1.

Does it:

1. move beyond retelling events?;
2. establish a clear viewpoint?;
3. acknowledge complexity?;
4. suggest that alternative interpretations may exist?

You may wish to revise it.

Revised line of argument:

A02: Writer's Craft

At GCSE, you explored how writers use language, form and structure to create meanings and effects. Strong GCSE responses already move beyond simply identifying techniques; they explain what those methods contribute to the audience's/reader's understanding of the text.

At A Level, that analysis becomes broader and more ambitious.

You begin to consider how the distinctive features of a text's form shape meaning.

For drama, this means thinking not only as a close reader, but also as a theatre critic:

- Why has Shakespeare chosen to place this moment here?
- How would this scene work in performance?
- What do these dramatic choices encourage audiences to think and feel?
- How do the conventions of tragedy shape our interpretation of Macbeth?
- How do private moments of guilt become public moments of drama?

The question shifts from: "What effect does this method have?" and towards: "How has Shakespeare constructed meaning through the possibilities of dramatic form?"

Consider the responses below.

GCSE

The repetition of "sleep no more" shows that Macbeth feels guilty.

This is a valid observation. It identifies a method and explores its meaning.

A Level

Shakespeare's repeated invocation of sleep dramatises guilt as an inescapable punishment. Positioned immediately after Duncan's murder, Macbeth's fragmented speech reveals the psychological consequences of regicide whilst marking the beginning of his tragic disintegration. Through this intensely theatrical moment, Shakespeare allows the audience to witness the collapse of Macbeth's inner world before the wider consequences of his actions unfold.

Both responses explore meaning.

The difference is that the A Level response also considers:

- the dramatic placement of the moment;
- Macbeth's speech as part of Shakespeare's construction of tragedy;
- the relationship between Macbeth's private experience and its effect on an audience;
- how Shakespeare uses the resources of drama to shape interpretation.

Task:

Return to the extract from Act 2 Scene 2.

Choose one or two quotations from the table you devised and write a response exploring how Shakespeare constructs meaning through dramatic form.

You might consider:

- where this moment appears in the play;
- how an audience might respond to it in performance;
- what Shakespeare reveals or withholds;
- how speech, staging or dramatic conventions contribute to meaning;
- how this moment contributes to Macbeth's development as a tragic protagonist.

Remember: you are not looking for techniques to identify.

You are exploring how Shakespeare, as a dramatist, has crafted this moment and shaped the audience's understanding of guilt.

Your Response:

[illegible]

AO3: Contextual Insight

At GCSE, context often supports an argument.

At A Level, context can deepen, challenge or reshape interpretation.

Consider the examples below.

GCSE

Jacobean audiences believed in the Divine Right of Kings, so Duncan's murder would have been seen as a crime against God's appointed ruler. Macbeth's guilt therefore highlights the seriousness of his actions and shows the consequences of disrupting the natural order.

A Level

While Jacobean beliefs in the Divine Right of Kings might encourage audiences to interpret Macbeth's guilt as divine punishment for regicide, Shakespeare's intense focus on Macbeth's psychological suffering also allows the play to be read through a more human lens. Rather than simply illustrating religious doctrine, *Macbeth* explores competing explanations for guilt: is it imposed by God, rooted in conscience, or generated by the individual's inability to reconcile ambition with morality?

The difference is subtle but significant.

Context becomes a way of thinking rather than a fact to insert.

Task

Look back at the paragraph you have just written.

How might an understanding of Jacobean beliefs about conscience, murder and divine order deepen your interpretation of Macbeth's guilt?

Develop your response below.

AO4: Connections Across Texts

One of the biggest surprises for many students is that AO4 changes completely.

At GCSE, AO4 rewarded accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar.

At A Level, AO4 asks you to:

- **explore connections across literary texts.**

Literature does not exist in isolation.

Tragic heroes often confront similar questions:

- How should power be used?
- Can guilt be escaped?
- Are individuals responsible for their own downfall?
- What happens when moral boundaries are crossed?

Later in this booklet, you will compare *Macbeth* with another tragedy.

For now, simply consider:

- why might reading texts alongside one another deepen our understanding of both?

Task: write down your thoughts

A05: Critical Interpretations

A Level introduces a completely new Assessment Objective.

A05: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

This means recognising that readers do not always agree.

You will encounter:

- academic critics;
- alternative readings;
- directors' interpretations;
- actors' performances;
- audience responses from different periods.

One production might present Macbeth as psychologically tormented and deserving of sympathy.

Another might portray him as an ambitious tyrant whose guilt fails to excuse his actions.

Neither interpretation is automatically "correct".

Your role is to evaluate them.

Task:

Read the critical interpretation below.

"Macbeth becomes his own tormentor after Duncan's murder."

How might someone respond to this interpretation?

Write two or three sentences that either:

- support the statement;
- challenge it;
- or qualify it by recognising both perspectives.

You might begin:

- One interpretation of Macbeth's guilt is that...
- However, another reading might suggest...
- Shakespeare may encourage audiences to see...

Your Response:

Looking Ahead...

You may have noticed that the Assessment Objectives do not operate independently.

As you developed your argument, analysed Shakespeare's methods, considered the influence of context, anticipated wider connections and explored alternative interpretations, you were engaging with all of them.

The rest of this booklet will continue to revisit and refine the same question.

By returning to your original argument again and again, you will see how a strong GCSE response can evolve into something recognisably A Level: more exploratory, more nuanced and more attentive to the many conversations that literature invites.

Chapter 3

Developing Your Argument

By this point, you have already begun answering an A Level question.

In Chapter 1, you encountered an A Level-style task for the first time. You gathered evidence, explored tensions within the statement and developed a provisional line of argument.

In Chapter 2, you considered how the Assessment Objectives evolve from GCSE to A Level, recognising that the skills you have already developed are not replaced, but elevated.

The next step is to begin constructing an essay.

Importantly, A Level essays are not written by addressing one Assessment Objective at a time. Nor are they simply a series of analytical paragraphs linked together.

Instead, they are driven by a line of argument: an overall interpretation that develops, deepens and evolves across the essay. Each paragraph contributes to that wider argument.

In this chapter, you will return to the line of argument you developed earlier and begin transforming it into the foundations of an A Level essay.

Returning to Your Line of Argument

At the end of Chapter 1, you developed a provisional response to the question below.

**"Macbeth's overwhelming guilt makes him a more tragic and sympathetic figure than a villain."
In the light of this view, explore Shakespeare's presentation of guilt in *Macbeth*.**

Task:

Read your original line of argument again.

Having explored the Assessment Objectives in Chapter 2:

- Does it still reflect your thinking?
- Does it establish a clear judgement?
- Does it acknowledge complexity?
- Can you now see more clearly how the essay might develop?

Literary study is often a process of revisiting and refining ideas.

You will have the opportunity to revise your original response later.

A Line of Argument: The Roadmap

A line of argument does more than establish your opinion.

It provides the roadmap for your essay.

A strong line of argument should:

- respond directly to the question;
- establish an overall judgement;
- acknowledge complexity;
- anticipate the development of the essay by alluding to the ideas explored in later paragraphs.

Think of it as answering two questions at once: What do I think? and: How am I going to prove it?

Less Effective

Macbeth feels guilty throughout the play and this makes him sympathetic.

This establishes a viewpoint, but gives little indication of how the essay will unfold.

More Effective

Although Shakespeare initially presents Macbeth's guilt as evidence of a conscience that encourages audience sympathy, this response becomes increasingly complicated as guilt coexists with Macbeth's continued acts of violence. Set against a culture deeply concerned with moral and social order, Macbeth's suffering suggests that guilt reveals both his humanity and the destructive consequences of his choices, ultimately presenting him as both a tragic and villainous figure.

Notice that this line of argument:

- establishes an overall judgement;
- acknowledges complexity;
- hints at the main ideas the essay will explore;
- alludes to wider concerns about morality and order without relying on detailed contextual discussion.

A reader can already anticipate the likely direction of the essay.

Planning from the Line of Argument

The line of argument above might develop in the following way:

Line of Argument	Paragraph Focus
Macbeth's guilt initially encourages sympathy because it reflects a moral conscience.	Paragraph 1: Macbeth's early guilt and psychological suffering.
Sympathy becomes increasingly complicated as guilt exists alongside further violence.	Paragraph 2: Macbeth's choices and moral responsibility.
Shakespeare ultimately presents Macbeth as both tragic and culpable.	Paragraph 3: Tragic ambiguity and final judgement.

At this stage, you are focusing primarily on AO1 and AO2.

You will return to these ideas later in the booklet:

- contextual insight (AO3) will deepen them;
- critical interpretations and productions (AO5) may challenge them;
- comparison with other texts (AO4) will broaden them.

For now, your task is to establish the foundations of your essay.

Line of Argument to Analytical Paragraph

At GCSE, many students use structures such as PEE, PEA or PEAL. These can provide a useful starting point.

At A Level, essays are often less formulaic. Rather than moving mechanically from point to evidence to explanation, paragraphs sustain an argument whilst moving flexibly between textual detail and interpretation, interleaving the Assessment Objectives along the way.

The structure below is not a formula to memorise.

Instead, it reflects how literary arguments often develop.

1. Establish an aspect of your argument.

How does this paragraph contribute to your wider line of argument?

2. Support it with evidence.

Which moments from the text best illuminate this interpretation?

3. Explore Shakespeare's dramatic craft.

- a. How does Shakespeare shape meaning through:
- b. language;
- c. dramatic form;
- d. structure;
- e. placement within the play;
- f. audience response;
- g. the conventions of tragedy?

4. Return to the wider judgement.

How does this analysis support, refine or complicate your overall argument?

Task:

Before reading, return to the first strand of the line of argument: **Macbeth's guilt initially encourages sympathy because it suggests he retains a moral conscience.**

Now consider how this idea develops in the model below.

Although Shakespeare initially presents Macbeth's guilt as evidence of a conscience that encourages audience sympathy, this response becomes increasingly complicated as guilt coexists with Macbeth's continued acts of violence. Set against a culture deeply concerned with moral and social order, Macbeth's suffering suggests that guilt reveals both his humanity and the destructive consequences of his choices, ultimately presenting him as both a tragic and villainous figure.

Macbeth's guilt initially encourages the audience to sympathise with him because Shakespeare presents him as deeply disturbed by the consequences of Duncan's murder. Immediately after the crime, Macbeth repeatedly declares that he shall "sleep no more", suggesting that guilt has deprived him of

peace and restoration. Positioned directly after Duncan's murder, Macbeth's fragmented speech allows the audience to witness the beginning of his psychological collapse. The motif of sleep, associated with innocence, healing and renewal, becomes an inescapable punishment that Macbeth imposes upon himself. Shakespeare therefore presents guilt not merely as an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, but as evidence that Macbeth understands the moral significance of his actions, encouraging the audience to view him as more than a straightforward villain.

Notice how the paragraph contributes to the wider essay.

1. It develops one strand of the line of argument.

Macbeth's guilt initially encourages the audience to sympathise with him...

2. It selects evidence purposefully.

"...Macbeth repeatedly declares that he shall 'sleep no more'..."

3. It explores Shakespeare's dramatic craft.

"...Positioned directly after Duncan's murder, Macbeth's fragmented speech allows the audience to witness the beginning of his psychological collapse..."

Rather than simply identifying repetition, the analysis considers:

- dramatic placement;
- audience experience;
- Shakespeare's construction of tragedy.

4. It returns to the wider judgement.

"...encouraging the audience to view him as more than a straightforward villain."

The paragraph contributes to the essay's overall argument.

Your Turn: Part A

[illegible][illegible][illegible][illegible]

- [illegible]

[illegible][illegible]

Your Turn: Part B

Task:

Choose one aspect of your line of argument and develop it into a paragraph.

As you write, ask yourself:

- How does this paragraph contribute to my overall argument?
- Which quotation best supports this idea?
- How has Shakespeare shaped meaning through dramatic form?
- How does this paragraph return to the wording of the question?

Your paragraph:

Task:

Choose one aspect of your line of argument and develop it into a paragraph.

As you write, ask yourself:

- How does this paragraph contribute to my overall argument?
- Which quotation best supports this idea?
- How has Shakespeare shaped meaning through dramatic form?
- How does this paragraph return to the wording of the question?

Your paragraph:

Task:

Choose one aspect of your line of argument and develop it into a paragraph.

As you write, ask yourself:

- How does this paragraph contribute to my overall argument?
- Which quotation best supports this idea?
- How has Shakespeare shaped meaning through dramatic form?
- How does this paragraph return to the wording of the question?

Your paragraph:

- Task:**
- Choose one aspect of your line of argument and develop it into a paragraph.
- As you write, ask yourself:
- How does this paragraph contribute to my overall argument?
 - Which quotation best supports this idea?
 - How has Shakespeare shaped meaning through dramatic form?
 - How does this paragraph return to the wording of the question?
- Your paragraph:**

Task:

Choose one aspect of your line of argument and develop it into a paragraph.

As you write, ask yourself:

- How does this paragraph contribute to my overall argument?
- Which quotation best supports this idea?
- How has Shakespeare shaped meaning through dramatic form?
- How does this paragraph return to the wording of the question?

Your paragraph:

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, leaving small margins at the top and bottom. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Task:

Read your line of argument and paragraph together and reflect on what you're written.

Ask yourself:

- Does my paragraph genuinely develop the argument I established?
- Could a reader anticipate the direction of my essay from my line of argument?
- Have I moved beyond identifying methods to exploring Shakespeare's dramatic craft?
- Have I maintained a focus on the question throughout?

Make any revisions you feel are necessary.

Looking Ahead...

You now have the beginnings of an A Level essay:

- a refined line of argument;
- a developed analytical paragraph;
- a clear relationship between the two.

In the next chapter, you will revisit this same paragraph through contextual readings. Rather than adding historical information for its own sake, you will explore how contextual insight can deepen, challenge and reshape the argument you have already begun to construct.

Your essay has started.

Now it is time to elevate it.

Chapter 4

Integrating Contextual Insight

At GCSE, context often helps to explain a text.

You may have learned about the Gunpowder Plot, James I's interest in witchcraft, or Jacobean attitudes towards kingship. These details can help us understand why writers make particular choices.

At A Level, however, context becomes something more dynamic.

Context is not simply information to be added into an essay. Instead, contextual reading should deepen, challenge and complicate interpretation.

The question is no longer: What do I know about the period? Instead, ask: How does this reading change the way I understand the text?

In this chapter, you will revisit the paragraph you wrote in Chapter 3 and explore how literary, historical and theatrical contexts reshape interpretation.

Returning to the Model

Task:

Remind yourself of the model (below) from Chapter 3 which developed the line of argument and first main analytical paragraph.

Although Shakespeare initially presents Macbeth's guilt as evidence of a conscience that encourages audience sympathy, this response becomes increasingly complicated as guilt coexists with Macbeth's continued acts of violence. Set against a culture deeply concerned with moral and social order, Macbeth's suffering suggests that guilt reveals both his humanity and the destructive consequences of his choices, ultimately presenting him as both a tragic and villainous figure.

Macbeth's guilt initially encourages the audience to sympathise with him because Shakespeare presents him as deeply disturbed by the consequences of Duncan's murder. Immediately after the crime, Macbeth repeatedly declares that he shall "sleep no more", suggesting that guilt has deprived him of peace and restoration. Positioned directly after Duncan's murder, Macbeth's fragmented speech allows the audience to witness the beginning of his psychological collapse. The motif of sleep, associated with innocence, healing and renewal, becomes an inescapable punishment that Macbeth imposes upon himself. Shakespeare therefore presents guilt not merely as an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, but as evidence that Macbeth understands the moral significance of his actions, encouraging the audience to view him as more than a straightforward villain.

Task:

Now reread the paragraph you wrote in Chapter 3.

Before reading any further, ask yourself:

- What assumptions am I making?
- What do I currently believe Shakespeare is doing?
- Which aspects of my interpretation feel secure?
- Which ideas might become more nuanced?

Keep this paragraph in front of you throughout the chapter.

Reading 1: Kingship, Regicide and Disorder

Historical context enhances interpretation; at A Level, historical knowledge matters because it changes the questions we ask of the text.

Task:

Read and annotate the extract below.

Highlight:

- ideas that deepen your interpretation;
- ideas that challenge it;
- ideas that could reshape your paragraph.

Extracts: from 'The Play in Context' (see appendices for full article – page 77)

Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* in 1606. It is important to understand the political context in which it was written, as that is the key to the main theme of the play, which is that excessive ambition will have terrible consequences. Shakespeare was writing for the theatre during the reigns of two monarchs, Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. The plays he wrote during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, are often seen to embody the generally happy, confident and optimistic mood of the Elizabethans. However, those he wrote during James's reign, such as *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, are darker and more cynical, reflecting the insecurities of the Jacobean period. *Macbeth* was written the year after the Gunpowder Plot of 1605...

...Religious thinkers in the Middle Ages had upheld the idea of "The Great Chain of Being". This was the belief that God had designed an ordered system for both nature and humankind within which every creature and person had an allotted place. It was considered an offence against God for anyone to try to alter their station in life...

...One of James's beliefs was the so-called "divine right of kings". This was the belief that the power of monarchs was given directly by God, and thus monarchs were answerable only to God. Any opposition to the King was an attack on God himself, and therefore sacrilege, the most heinous of sins.

Task:

Think about the reading:

- How might a Jacobean audience have understood Macbeth's suffering?
- Could guilt represent more than private remorse?
- How does this context alter your understanding of sympathy?
- Does Macbeth's guilt suggest recognition of personal wrongdoing, wider disorder, or both?

Model Revisited

Task:

Read the model.

Notice how it has evolved (see sections in bold) – the contextual insight has been integrated at several points.

Although Shakespeare initially presents Macbeth's guilt as evidence of a conscience that encourages audience sympathy, this response becomes increasingly complicated as guilt coexists with Macbeth's continued acts of violence. Set against a culture deeply concerned with moral and social order, Macbeth's suffering suggests that guilt reveals both his humanity and the destructive consequences of his choices, ultimately presenting him as both a tragic and villainous figure.

Macbeth's guilt initially encourages the audience to sympathise with him because Shakespeare presents him as deeply disturbed by the consequences of Duncan's murder. Immediately after the crime, Macbeth repeatedly declares that he shall "sleep no more", suggesting that guilt has deprived him of peace and restoration. **For Jacobean audiences, however, Duncan's murder would have represented more than a private act of violence. Ideas such as the Great Chain of Being and the Divine Right of Kings encouraged the belief that the monarch occupied a sacred position within God's ordered universe.** Positioned directly after Duncan's murder, Macbeth's fragmented speech therefore allows the audience to witness not only the beginning of his psychological collapse but also **the wider disorder unleashed by violating divine and political order.** The motif of sleep, associated with innocence, healing and renewal, becomes an inescapable punishment that Macbeth imposes upon himself. Guilt emerges not merely as an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, but as evidence that Macbeth understands the significance of his actions, **encouraging audiences to recognise that the consequences of regicide extend far beyond the individual.**

Your Turn

Task:

Revisit your own paragraph from Chapter 3.

Integrate some contextual insight informed by this historical lens.

Aim to weave the context into your paragraph, and not simply put it at the end.

Your Response:

Reading 2: Renaissance Theatre

Context also involves understanding how theatre functioned within society and how audiences responded to performance.

Task:

Read the extract below carefully - annotate it as you read.

Highlight:

- ideas that deepen your interpretation;
- ideas that challenge it;
- ideas that could reshape your paragraph.

Extracts: from 'The Renaissance Theatre' (see appendices for full article – page 79)

Governmental authorities understood the potential disruptions public theatre could cause in a well-ordered cultural hierarchy, so took steps to control the performances of plays from the very beginning. As early as 1574, even before the first theatre was built, the Lord Mayor of London and the Common Council laid heavy restrictions on the times, places, contents and purposes of theatrical entertainments. Although the municipal government was decidedly anti-theatre, its animosity had little effect. Beginning with the construction of the first purpose-built playhouse in 1576 until the closing of the theatres in 1642, theatre's popularity and commercial success steadily increased...

... Many of Shakespeare's plays actually deal with unstable political situations, especially those commonly referred to as the 'great tragedies'. Hamlet's famous indecision originates in the death of Denmark's monarch; Macbeth's plot involves two separate regicides, though both occur offstage. King Lear provides some of Shakespeare's most complex reflections on the nature of kingship. The image of the 'poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old' Lear (3.2.20) wandering mad on the heath may not have unsettled James I, devoted fan of theatre as he was. But it certainly does raise questions about the actual differences between monarch and subject, questions that resonate with performers, critics and students to this day.

Task:

Think about the reading:

- How does this change your understanding of Shakespeare's theatre?
- Why might plays about kingship and rebellion have been politically sensitive?
- How might audiences have responded differently from modern audiences?
- Does Macbeth become more than a private tragedy?

Model Reconsidered

Task:

Read the model again.

Notice how it has evolved (see section in bold) – in this case, it is integrated at the beginning.

Although Shakespeare initially presents Macbeth's guilt as evidence of a conscience that encourages audience sympathy, this response becomes increasingly complicated as guilt coexists with Macbeth's continued acts of violence. Set against a culture deeply concerned with moral and social order, Macbeth's suffering suggests that guilt reveals both his humanity and the destructive consequences of his choices, ultimately presenting him as both a tragic and villainous figure.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences were accustomed to seeing plays engage with politically sensitive questions of power and authority, Shakespeare invites spectators to witness Macbeth's inner turmoil. Macbeth's guilt initially encourages the audience to sympathise with him because Shakespeare presents him as deeply disturbed by the consequences of Duncan's murder. Immediately after the crime, Macbeth repeatedly declares that he shall "sleep no more", suggesting that guilt has deprived him of peace and restoration. For Jacobean audiences, however, Duncan's murder would have represented more than a private act of violence. Ideas such as the Great Chain of Being and the Divine Right of Kings encouraged the belief that the monarch occupied a sacred position within God's ordered universe. Positioned directly after Duncan's murder, Macbeth's fragmented speech allows the audience to witness not only the beginning of his psychological collapse but also the wider disorder unleashed by violating divine and political order. The motif of sleep, associated with innocence, healing and renewal, becomes an inescapable punishment that Macbeth imposes upon himself. Guilt emerges not merely as an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, but as evidence that Macbeth understands the significance of his actions, encouraging audiences to recognise that the consequences of regicide extend far beyond the individual.

Your Turn

Task:

Reconsider your revised paragraph.

How might theatrical context broaden your interpretation beyond Macbeth as an individual character?

Aim to deepen your interpretation rather than simply adding information.

Revised paragraph:

Reflection: Watching it Evolve

Task:

Compare the three versions of the model.

Version	Development
Original Model	Line of argument & close analysis which developed an interpretation
Model Revisited	Historical context deepened the interpretation through Jacobean beliefs about kingship and disorder.
Model Reconsidered	Theatrical context broadened the discussion to a more political focus which theatregoers engaged with.

What has changed?

At A Level, AO3 is not about accumulating facts. It is about recognising that texts exist within wider historical, literary and theatrical conversations.

The strongest essays do not simply mention context. They allow contextual understanding to reshape interpretation.

Looking Ahead...

You have now revisited and refined your paragraph through contextual reading.

In the next chapter, you will encounter another important aspect of A Level Literature:

What happens when critics, directors and audiences disagree about what a text means?

You will discover that literary interpretation is not fixed.

It is debated.

Chapter 5

Exploring Texts and Traditions

At GCSE, you studied *Macbeth* as a text in its own right.

At A Level, you begin to recognise that literary texts do not exist in isolation. Writers revisit similar concerns, ask recurring questions and experiment with familiar forms. Reading texts alongside one another allows us to deepen our understanding of both.

AO4 asks you to:

- **Explore connections across literary texts.**

However, comparison is not simply about identifying similarities and differences.

Instead, comparison allows texts to illuminate one another. It encourages us to ask broader questions:

- What concerns repeatedly interest Shakespeare as a tragic dramatist?
- How do different tragic protagonists invite sympathy and judgement?
- Does tragedy follow a predictable pattern, or does Shakespeare continually reshape it?

In this chapter, you will encounter another of Shakespeare's great tragedies: *Hamlet*.

As you do so, keep the following question in mind:

- What happens when characters understand the moral implications of their actions?

Macbeth recognises the horror of Duncan's murder and proceeds anyway.

Hamlet recognises his duty to avenge his father and repeatedly hesitates.

Both are troubled by conscience.

Both invite sympathy and frustration.

Both force audiences to consider the uneasy relationship between thought, action and responsibility.

Before You Begin

Task:

Based on your study of *Macbeth*, what do you think Shakespeare is interested in exploring through tragedy?

You might consider: power; ambition; responsibility; suffering; justice; guilt; family; leadership, self-awareness, humanity, evil.

Record your ideas:

Introducing *Hamlet*

Written around 1600, *Hamlet* is one of Shakespeare's most celebrated tragedies.

The play follows Prince Hamlet of Denmark after the sudden death of his father. Before Hamlet has had time to grieve, his uncle Claudius has married Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, and assumed the Danish throne.

When Hamlet discovers that Claudius murdered his father, he is confronted with a terrible responsibility: Should he take revenge?

Unlike Macbeth, whose tragedy unfolds through decisive action, Hamlet's tragedy is characterised by reflection, uncertainty and delay.

Both protagonists understand the consequences of violence.
Yet they respond very differently.

As you read, ask yourself: Is it better to act despite uncertainty, or to hesitate until certainty arrives?

Shakespeare offers no easy answers.

Act One

Hamlet opens in an atmosphere of uncertainty and unease. On the battlements of Elsinore Castle, guards and Hamlet's friend Horatio encounter the ghost of the recently deceased King Hamlet. Disturbed by its appearance, they resolve to inform Prince Hamlet, believing the spirit may have some message for him.

Meanwhile, the audience is introduced to a Denmark that appears stable on the surface but is already marked by disruption. Claudius, Hamlet's uncle, has assumed the throne and married Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, with remarkable speed following his brother's death. Although Claudius presents himself as a capable and pragmatic ruler, Hamlet is deeply troubled by what he sees as his mother's betrayal and the court's eagerness to move on. Isolated in his grief, he reflects bitterly on the corruption around him, lamenting, "Frailty, thy name is woman!"

When Hamlet finally encounters the Ghost, the tragedy's central conflict is established. The spirit claims to be the ghost of Hamlet's father and reveals that he was not killed by natural causes, but murdered by Claudius, who poured poison into his ear as he slept. The Ghost commands Hamlet to avenge this "foul and most unnatural murder", transforming private grief into a moral obligation. Hamlet vows to remember his father's command and devote himself to revenge.

Yet Shakespeare immediately complicates what might otherwise resemble a straightforward revenge narrative. Rather than embracing his task with certainty, Hamlet seems overwhelmed by it. He recognises the enormity of what has been asked of him, lamenting, "The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!" From the very beginning of the play, conscience becomes a burden. Hamlet knows what he believes he ought to do; whether he can bring himself to do it remains uncertain.

Act One therefore establishes the central conflict of the tragedy.

Hamlet knows what he believes he ought to do.

The question is whether he can bring himself to do it.

AO4 Reflection

Macbeth rapidly moves towards Duncan's murder despite recognising its horror.

Hamlet recoils from the violence he believes duty requires.

Task

How does Shakespeare establish different relationships between conscience and action from the very beginning of each tragedy?

Record your ideas:

Act Two

Act Two explores Hamlet's increasingly complex response to the burden placed upon him. Although he now believes Claudius murdered his father, he remains uncertain about how to proceed. Rather than acting immediately, Hamlet adopts what he describes as an "antic disposition", behaving in ways that appear irrational and unpredictable. Whether this madness is entirely feigned, partially genuine, or a combination of both remains one of the play's enduring questions.

Those around Hamlet attempt to explain his behaviour in simpler terms. Polonius becomes convinced that the prince's apparent instability is the result of his love for Ophelia, believing that rejection has driven him into emotional distress. Confident in his own interpretation, Polonius reports his conclusions to Claudius and Gertrude. Meanwhile, the King and Queen summon Hamlet's childhood friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, hoping that familiar faces might uncover the cause of his suffering. Hamlet welcomes them warmly at first, but quickly realises they have been sent to observe him. Surrounded by people he can no longer trust, his isolation deepens.

The arrival of a travelling company of actors prompts one of Hamlet's most revealing moments of self-reflection. Watching an actor summon genuine emotion in the service of fiction unsettles him profoundly. The player weeps for Hecuba, a queen he has never known, while Hamlet—whose father has genuinely been murdered—remains incapable of carrying out the revenge he believes duty demands. Disgusted by what he perceives as his own inaction, he condemns himself: "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!"

Yet Hamlet's response to this self-reproach is not decisive action. Instead, he devises another plan. The actors will perform a play that mirrors the circumstances of King Hamlet's murder. By observing Claudius's reaction, Hamlet hopes to determine whether the Ghost has spoken the truth. Only then, he believes, can he act with certainty.

He concludes: "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King."

Act Two therefore reveals both Hamlet's greatest strength and his greatest weakness. He refuses to act without evidence, questioning appearances and resisting impulsive judgement. At the same time, his relentless need for certainty repeatedly postpones the action he believes is necessary.

Shakespeare begins to ask whether thought leads to wisdom—or whether excessive reflection can become its own form of paralysis.

AO4 Reflection

Hamlet repeatedly delays action in pursuit of certainty.

Macbeth understands Duncan's goodness, acknowledges the consequences of murder and proceeds regardless.

Task:

Does thinking deeply lead to wiser choices—or paralysis?

How might Macbeth answer this question? How might Hamlet?

Record your ideas:

Act Three

Act Three marks the dramatic and psychological heart of Hamlet. The questions that have troubled Hamlet since the beginning of the play—whether to act, whether he can trust appearances, and whether certainty is ever possible—become increasingly urgent. It is also the act in which Shakespeare reveals the devastating consequences of both hesitation and impulsiveness.

The act opens with Hamlet's most famous soliloquy: "To be, or not to be: that is the question." Reflecting on suffering, mortality and the burdens of existence, Hamlet wonders whether it is nobler to endure life's hardships or to end them altogether. Yet even the prospect of death offers no escape. The uncertainty of what follows—"the undiscover'd country"—fills him with fear. Hamlet concludes that it is often conscience that prevents decisive action: "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all."

For Hamlet, thought and moral awareness are both gifts and burdens. His ability to imagine consequences, to question motives and to consider alternative possibilities repeatedly inhibits action.

Soon afterwards, Claudius and Polonius arrange for Hamlet to encounter Ophelia while they secretly observe. Hamlet's treatment of her is harsh and unsettling. Urging her to "Get thee to a nunnery", he appears disillusioned by love, distrustful of women and increasingly alienated from those around him. Whether this cruelty reflects genuine bitterness, strategic performance or emotional instability remains open to interpretation. Shakespeare offers no easy explanation, forcing audiences to grapple with the complexity of Hamlet's state of mind.

The turning point of the act arrives with the performance of The Mousetrap. The actors stage a scene closely resembling the Ghost's account of King Hamlet's murder. As Hamlet watches Claudius's reaction, the tension becomes almost unbearable. When Claudius abruptly rises and stops the performance, Hamlet interprets this as confirmation of his guilt. At last, the certainty Hamlet has long sought appears to be within his grasp.

Yet certainty does not lead to immediate action. Finding Claudius apparently alone at prayer, Hamlet has the perfect opportunity to avenge his father. However, he hesitates once again. Believing that killing Claudius during prayer might send his soul to heaven, Hamlet postpones revenge: "Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;/And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven."

Ironically, the audience knows that Claudius has been unable to repent sincerely. Hamlet's reasoning, though morally complex, is tragically flawed. The delay that he believes to be principled becomes another missed opportunity.

The act concludes with one of its greatest ironies. Summoned to confront his mother, Hamlet speaks passionately about betrayal, corruption and moral responsibility. Hearing movement behind a curtain, he assumes Claudius is hiding there and, for the first time in the play, acts without hesitation. He thrusts his sword through the arras. Instead of Claudius, he kills Polonius.

The man who has spent three acts struggling to act decisively suddenly abandons caution and acts impulsively—with devastating consequences.

Act Three therefore exposes the central paradox of Hamlet's tragedy. He delays when he believes action is justified, yet acts rashly when certainty is absent.

Shakespeare suggests that neither impulsiveness nor excessive reflection offers protection from tragedy. Conscience may illuminate the moral significance of our choices, but it does not guarantee that we will make the right ones.

AO4 Reflection

Macbeth murders Duncan despite recognising that the act is morally wrong.

Hamlet spares Claudius despite believing revenge is morally necessary.

Yet Hamlet impulsively kills Polonius.

Task:

Which response do you find more understandable? Why?

Record your ideas:

Act Four

The consequences of Hamlet's actions begin to unfold rapidly in Act Four. Having finally acted, Hamlet discovers that violence has not brought clarity or resolution. Instead, the accidental killing of Polonius sends shockwaves throughout the Danish court, drawing more characters into the tragedy and accelerating its movement towards catastrophe.

Claudius is quick to recognise the threat Hamlet now poses. Publicly, he presents himself as a concerned ruler attempting to manage a dangerous situation. Privately, however, he sees an opportunity to remove Hamlet permanently. Hamlet is sent to England under the supervision of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, carrying sealed letters that secretly instruct the English king to execute him upon arrival. Claudius's willingness to sacrifice Hamlet demonstrates the extent to which corruption has spread through the Danish court. The distinction between justice and self-preservation becomes increasingly blurred.

Hamlet himself appears strangely calm in the aftermath of Polonius's death. At times, he speaks with dark humour and philosophical detachment, refusing to show the remorse audiences might expect. Yet Shakespeare complicates this apparent indifference. During his journey, Hamlet encounters Fortinbras's army marching to fight over a seemingly insignificant piece of land. Fortinbras's decisiveness forces Hamlet to confront his own hesitation once again. Reflecting upon his repeated delays, he condemns himself: "How stand I then,/That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,/Excitements of my reason and my blood,/And let all sleep?" Observing Fortinbras's willingness to act for honour and reputation, Hamlet resolves: "O, from this time forth,/My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!"

Elsewhere, the human cost of the tragedy becomes increasingly apparent. Ophelia, devastated by her father's death and Hamlet's rejection, descends into madness. Her fragmented songs and disjointed speech reveal profound grief and vulnerability, transforming her into one of Shakespeare's most poignant victims. Through Ophelia, audiences witness the collateral damage caused by the actions and indecisions of others. Unlike Hamlet, she has little agency within the structures that govern her life, and her suffering exposes the devastating impact of political and familial conflict upon those caught in its path.

At the same time, Laertes returns to Denmark, enraged by the death of his father and the apparent injustice surrounding it. Unlike Hamlet, Laertes responds immediately and passionately. He storms the palace demanding answers and vengeance. Claudius skilfully manipulates Laertes' anger, directing it towards Hamlet and proposing a plan to eliminate him. Together, they devise a duel involving a poisoned sword and a poisoned cup, ensuring Hamlet's death regardless of the outcome.

Act Four therefore broadens Shakespeare's exploration of conscience and action. Fortinbras acts swiftly.

Laertes seeks immediate revenge. Claudius schemes decisively to protect himself. Hamlet, meanwhile, continues to struggle between reflection and action.

The tragedy increasingly asks whether hesitation is a mark of humanity and moral awareness, or whether the refusal to act allows suffering to multiply and injustice to flourish.

AO4 Reflection

Throughout *Hamlet*, Shakespeare presents a range of responses to conflict and revenge:

- Claudius acts quickly to preserve his position;
- Laertes pursues immediate vengeance;
- Fortinbras embraces decisive military action;
- Hamlet reflects, hesitates and questions.

Macbeth, by contrast, repeatedly recognises the consequences of his choices yet continues to act.

Task:

What are the consequences of delay?

Does Shakespeare suggest that excessive reflection can be as destructive as impulsive action?

Record your ideas:

Act Five

By the final act of the play, death has become unavoidable. Yet Shakespeare slows the pace of the tragedy, creating moments of reflection that encourage both Hamlet and the audience to consider mortality, identity and the limits of human control.

The act opens in a graveyard, where two gravediggers discuss death with dark humour and surprising irreverence. Their conversation reminds audiences that death ultimately erases social distinctions. Kings, jesters and ordinary labourers alike share the same fate.

When Hamlet arrives, he encounters the skull of Yorick, the court jester who entertained him as a child. Holding the skull, Hamlet reflects upon the inevitability of death: "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio." The prince who once feared uncertainty now confronts mortality with a greater degree of acceptance. Even Alexander the Great, he observes, returns to dust.

This meditation is interrupted by Ophelia's funeral procession. Discovering that Ophelia has died, Hamlet is overwhelmed by grief and guilt. In the raw emotion of the moment, he publicly declares the depth of his love for her, confronting Laertes in the process. Yet Shakespeare leaves audiences to question whether Hamlet's recognition comes too late to offer comfort or redemption.

The final sequence centres upon the duel between Hamlet and Laertes. Claudius and Laertes secretly intend to murder Hamlet using a poisoned sword and a poisoned cup prepared as a backup plan. However, the scheme rapidly descends into chaos. Gertrude unknowingly drinks from the poisoned cup and dies. During the duel, Hamlet and Laertes exchange swords, resulting in both men being wounded by the poisoned blade.

As death approaches, truth finally emerges. Laertes confesses Claudius's treachery and asks Hamlet's forgiveness. At last, Hamlet acts decisively and without hesitation. He stabs Claudius with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink from the poisoned cup.

Yet this long-awaited revenge offers little satisfaction. The stage is littered with bodies. Hamlet himself has been mortally wounded. As he dies, he entrusts the future of Denmark to Fortinbras and urges Horatio to tell his story truthfully: "The rest is silence."

Fortinbras arrives to assume control of a kingdom devastated by betrayal, revenge and loss.

Act Five offers no simple resolution. Hamlet finally achieves the revenge demanded at the beginning of the play, but only after countless opportunities have been missed and irreparable damage has been done.

Shakespeare suggests that insight often arrives too late to prevent tragedy. Understanding ourselves and our responsibilities does not necessarily equip us to act wisely. Instead, audiences are left to wrestle with uncomfortable questions about justice, agency and the human capacity for error

AO4 Reflection

Both Macbeth and Hamlet gain moments of profound insight.

Macbeth recognises the horror of his actions and the emptiness of the power he has gained. Hamlet comes to understand the inevitability of death and the limitations of certainty.

Yet both protagonists die.

Task:

Does self-awareness lessen responsibility?

Does understanding the consequences of our actions excuse them or does it make us more accountable?

Record your ideas:

Tragic Protagonists Compared

By this point, you have encountered two very different Shakespearean tragedies.

At first glance, Macbeth and Hamlet appear to have little in common.

One protagonist acts quickly and decisively, while the other hesitates and reflects. One is driven by ambition, the other by obligation. One commits murder early in the play; the other spends much of the drama wrestling with whether he can bring himself to act at all.

However, comparison allows us to move beyond obvious differences.

AO4 asks us to consider how texts illuminate one another. Rather than asking simply, "What is the same?" or "What is different?" we might instead ask: "What new understanding of Macbeth emerges when we place him alongside Hamlet?"

The table below is designed to help you think comparatively. Notice how each comparison returns us to the central concerns of tragedy: conscience, responsibility, suffering and judgement.

Question	<i>Macbeth</i>	<i>Hamlet</i>
What initiates tragedy?	Macbeth chooses to pursue power despite recognising the moral consequences of his actions.	Hamlet is burdened with the responsibility of revenge, yet struggles to act upon it.
What role does conscience play?	Guilt emerges immediately after Duncan's murder and continues to haunt Macbeth throughout the play.	Conscience repeatedly interrupts action, causing Hamlet to question, delay and reflect.
How do the protagonists suffer?	Macbeth experiences psychological torment, fear and increasing isolation.	Hamlet endures grief, uncertainty, distrust and profound emotional conflict.
When does insight occur?	Macbeth frequently recognises the consequences of his actions but continues along his chosen path.	Hamlet gains moments of clarity throughout the play, though certainty rarely brings peace.
What effect does self-awareness have?	Self-awareness intensifies guilt but does not prevent further wrongdoing.	Self-awareness encourages caution, but often contributes to paralysis and missed opportunities.
How should audiences judge them?	Macbeth invites both sympathy and condemnation.	Hamlet invites both sympathy and frustration.
What remains unresolved?	Questions of responsibility, culpability and moral choice.	Questions of justice, certainty and the limits of human understanding.

Reflection

Comparison does not require us to decide which character is "better" or "worse".

Instead, it encourages us to think more carefully about the questions Shakespeare repeatedly explores through tragedy.

Task

Having encountered both plays, consider the following:

- Does conscience protect people from wrongdoing?
- Can self-awareness become a burden?
- Is hesitation more admirable than impulsiveness?
- Are tragic protagonists defined by their choices, their circumstances, or both?
- How should audiences respond to characters who understand the consequences of their actions but fail to avoid them?

Record your ideas:

Returning to the Model

Throughout this booklet, you have revisited the same model paragraph, allowing it to evolve as your understanding has deepened.

At the end of Chapter 4, you reconsidered your interpretation through contextual reading (AO3).

Now, comparison invites you to broaden that interpretation once more.

Task:

Read the model below from where it was modified with AO3 insight.

Although Shakespeare initially presents Macbeth's guilt as evidence of a conscience that encourages audience sympathy, this response becomes increasingly complicated as guilt coexists with Macbeth's continued acts of violence. Set against a culture deeply concerned with moral and social order, Macbeth's suffering suggests that guilt reveals both his humanity and the destructive consequences of his choices, ultimately presenting him as both a tragic and villainous figure.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences were accustomed to seeing plays engage with politically sensitive questions of power and authority, Shakespeare invites spectators to witness Macbeth's inner turmoil, granting them unusual access to the psychological consequences of his actions. Macbeth's guilt initially encourages the audience to sympathise with him because Shakespeare presents him as deeply disturbed by the consequences of Duncan's murder. Immediately after the crime, Macbeth repeatedly declares that he shall "sleep no more", suggesting that guilt has deprived him of peace and restoration. For Jacobean audiences, however, Duncan's murder would have represented more than a private act of violence. Ideas such as the Great Chain of Being and the Divine Right of Kings encouraged the belief that the monarch occupied a sacred position within God's ordered universe. Positioned directly after Duncan's murder, Macbeth's fragmented speech allows the audience to witness not only the beginning of his psychological collapse but also the wider disorder unleashed by violating divine and political order. The motif of sleep, associated with innocence, healing and renewal, becomes an inescapable punishment that Macbeth imposes upon himself. Guilt emerges not merely as an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, but as evidence that Macbeth understands the significance of his actions, encouraging audiences to recognise that the consequences of regicide extend far beyond the individual.

Task:

Now read the reconsidered model, with AO4 insight incorporated.

Although Shakespeare initially presents Macbeth's guilt as evidence of a conscience that encourages audience sympathy, this response becomes increasingly complicated as guilt coexists with Macbeth's

continued acts of violence. Set against a culture deeply concerned with moral and social order, Macbeth's suffering suggests that guilt reveals both his humanity and the destructive consequences of his choices, ultimately presenting him as both a tragic and villainous figure.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences were accustomed to seeing plays engage with politically sensitive questions of power and authority, Shakespeare invites spectators to witness Macbeth's inner turmoil, granting them unusual access to the psychological consequences of his actions. Macbeth's guilt initially encourages the audience to sympathise with him because Shakespeare presents him as deeply disturbed by the consequences of Duncan's murder. Immediately after the crime, Macbeth repeatedly declares that he shall "sleep no more", suggesting that guilt has deprived him of peace and restoration. For Jacobean audiences, however, Duncan's murder would have represented more than a private act of violence. Ideas such as the Great Chain of Being and the Divine Right of Kings encouraged the belief that the monarch occupied a sacred position within God's ordered universe. Positioned directly after Duncan's murder, Macbeth's fragmented speech allows the audience to witness not only the beginning of his psychological collapse but also the wider disorder unleashed by violating divine and political order. The motif of sleep, associated with innocence, healing and renewal, becomes an inescapable punishment that Macbeth imposes upon himself. Guilt emerges not merely as an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, but as evidence that Macbeth understands the significance of his actions, encouraging audiences to recognise that the consequences of regicide extend far beyond the individual. **By contrast, Hamlet's awareness of the moral consequences of revenge repeatedly causes him to delay action, suggesting that conscience can act as a restraint upon violence. Macbeth's guilt, however, emerges only after Duncan's murder has been committed. As a result, audiences may sympathise with Macbeth's guilt-ridden suffering whilst also recognising that moral awareness neither excuses his actions nor prevents him from choosing further violence.**

Notice what has changed.

The comparison has not distracted from your interpretation of *Macbeth*.

Instead, it has sharpened it.

AO4 does not ask: What is similar? It asks: How does another text help me understand this one more deeply?

Your Turn

Task:

Return to the paragraph you have been developing throughout this booklet.

Using one carefully integrated comparative sentence, broaden your interpretation through *Hamlet*.

Remember:

- Keep *Macbeth* as the focus.
- Use *Hamlet* to illuminate your argument.
- Avoid bolt-on comparison.
- Ask yourself what *Hamlet* reveals about Macbeth.

Revise your paragraph:

Looking ahead...

Before moving on, take a moment to recognise how your thinking has evolved:

- Chapter 3 helped you construct an argument and analyse Shakespeare's methods;
- Chapter 4 deepened that argument through literary and historical context;
- Chapter 5 broadened that argument through comparison.

You have not replaced earlier interpretations.

You have refined them.

In the final chapter of this booklet, you will discover that interpretation itself is contested. Critics disagree.

Directors make choices. Audiences respond differently across time.

Literary study is not about arriving at a single, definitive answer.

It is an ongoing conversation.

Chapter 6

Joining the Critical Conversation

Throughout this booklet, you have gradually developed your interpretation of Shakespeare's presentation of guilt in *Macbeth*.

1. You began by constructing an argument.
2. You analysed Shakespeare's dramatic methods.
3. You deepened your ideas through context.
4. You broadened them through comparison.
5. At each stage, the same paragraph evolved.

However, A Level English Literature asks something more.

It asks you to recognise that intelligent readers do not always agree.

Two critics may examine the same scene, the same quotation and the same character and arrive at different conclusions.

This is AO5.

AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

Importantly, AO5 is not about finding the "correct" critic.

Nor is it about collecting quotations from critics and attaching them mechanically to the end of an essay.

Instead, criticism should help you:

1. refine your ideas;
2. challenge your assumptions;
3. qualify your interpretations;
4. recognise the complexity of literary debate.

Literature becomes a conversation.

And now, you are invited to join it.

Before You Begin

Task:

Without looking back at your paragraph, complete the statements below.

Macbeth's guilt makes him sympathetic because...

Macbeth's guilt makes him more blameworthy because...

If you found yourself agreeing with both statements, you have already begun thinking critically.

Reading 1: Wayne Booth

Critical interpretations can encourage us to revisit familiar characters from an entirely new perspective.

Task:

Read the extract carefully and annotate it as you read.

Highlight:

- ideas that support your interpretation;
- ideas that challenge your interpretation;
- ideas that could deepen your understanding of Macbeth.

Extracts: from 'Macbeth as Tragic Hero' (see appendices for full article – page 82)

After this soliloquy (about him not killing King Duncan) Macbeth announces again to Lady Macbeth that he will not go on ("We will proceed no further in this business"), but her eloquence is too much for him. Under her jibes at his "unmanliness," he progresses from a kind of petulant, but still honorable, boasting ("I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none"), through a state of amoral consideration of mere expediency ("If I should fail?"), to complete resolution, but still with a full understanding of the wickedness of his act ("I am settled... this terrible feat").

There is never any doubt, first, that he is bludgeoned into the deed by Lady Macbeth's superior rhetoric and force of character and by the pressure of unfamiliar circumstances (including the witches) and, second, that even in the final decision to go through with it he is extremely troubled by a guilty conscience ("False face must hide what the false heart doth know"). In the entire dagger soliloquy he is clearly suffering from the realization of the horror of the "bloody business" ahead. He sees fully and painfully the wickedness of the course he has chosen, but not until after the deed, when the knocking has commenced, do we realize how terrifyingly alive his conscience is: "To know my deed, 't were best not know myself. / Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!" This is the wish of a "good" man who, though he has become a "bad" man, still thinks and feels as a good man would.

Unpacking Wayne Booth

Booth argues that Shakespeare deliberately preserves our sympathy for Macbeth by emphasising his guilty conscience. Although Macbeth chooses to commit terrible acts, Booth suggests that his horror at those actions reveals that traces of goodness remain. Rather than presenting Macbeth as a straightforward villain, Shakespeare allows audiences to witness the suffering and remorse that accompany his moral decline. However, students might also question whether guilt and suffering diminish Macbeth's responsibility, particularly as he continues to choose violence throughout the play.

Reflection

Task:

Booth argues that Macbeth remains, in some sense, a "'good' man" despite becoming a "bad" one.

To what extent do you agree?

You may wish to consider:

- Does Macbeth's guilt encourage sympathy?
- Can audiences pity Macbeth whilst still condemning him?
- Does understanding that an action is wrong make a character less responsible for it?

Record your ideas:

Returning to the Model

Task:

Read the model paragraph below.

This is the version developed at the end of Chapter 5 having integrated a comparison with *Hamlet*..

Although Shakespeare initially presents Macbeth's guilt as evidence of a conscience that encourages audience sympathy, this response becomes increasingly complicated as guilt coexists with Macbeth's continued acts of violence. Set against a culture deeply concerned with moral and social order, Macbeth's suffering suggests that guilt reveals both his humanity and the destructive consequences of his choices, ultimately presenting him as both a tragic and villainous figure.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences were accustomed to seeing plays engage with politically sensitive questions of power and authority, Shakespeare invites spectators to witness Macbeth's inner turmoil, granting them unusual access to the psychological consequences of his actions. Macbeth's guilt initially encourages the audience to sympathise with him because Shakespeare presents him as deeply disturbed by the consequences of Duncan's murder. Immediately after the crime, Macbeth repeatedly declares that he shall "sleep no more", suggesting that guilt has deprived him of peace and restoration. For Jacobean audiences, however, Duncan's murder would have represented more than a private act of violence. Ideas such as the Great Chain of Being and the Divine Right of Kings encouraged the belief that the monarch occupied a sacred position within God's ordered universe. Positioned directly after Duncan's murder, Macbeth's fragmented speech allows the audience to witness not only the beginning of his psychological collapse but also the wider disorder unleashed by violating divine and political order. The motif of sleep, associated with innocence, healing and renewal, becomes an inescapable punishment that Macbeth imposes upon himself. Guilt emerges not merely as an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, but as evidence that Macbeth understands the significance of his actions, encouraging audiences to recognise that the consequences of regicide extend far beyond the individual. By contrast, Hamlet's awareness of the moral consequences of revenge repeatedly causes him to delay action, suggesting that conscience can act as a restraint upon violence. Macbeth's guilt, however, emerges only after Duncan's murder has been committed. As a result, audiences may sympathise with Macbeth's guilt-ridden suffering whilst also recognising that moral awareness neither excuses his actions nor prevents him from choosing further violence.

Task:

Now read the model paragraph below which has been adapted.

Notice how criticism can be woven into an argument rather than attached awkwardly to the end.

What has been incorporated links to the prior point (about spectators of the play engaging in political ideas) and is linked to the point that follows (about Macbeth's guilt, which was the original starting point/idea of this paragraph before it developed).

The sentences have been adapted to ensure it is seamlessly integrated.

It becomes part of the wider discussion.

The additions below have been bolded.

Although Shakespeare initially presents Macbeth's guilt as evidence of a conscience that encourages audience sympathy, this response becomes increasingly complicated as guilt coexists with Macbeth's continued acts of violence. Set against a culture deeply concerned with moral and social order, Macbeth's suffering suggests that guilt reveals both his humanity and the destructive consequences of his choices, ultimately presenting him as both a tragic and villainous figure.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences were accustomed to seeing plays engage with politically sensitive questions of power and authority, Shakespeare invites spectators to witness Macbeth's inner turmoil, granting them unusual access to the psychological consequences of his actions. **Booth argues that this is Shakespeare's remarkable achievement: transforming a man who ultimately becomes a "dead butcher" into someone audiences can still pity because he remains a "'good' man who, though he has become a 'bad' man, still thinks and feels as a good man would."** Such sympathy is generated, in part, through Macbeth's overwhelming guilt, which exposes the suffering that accompanies his moral decline. Immediately after the crime, Macbeth repeatedly declares that he shall "sleep no more", suggesting that guilt has deprived him of peace and restoration. For Jacobean audiences, however, Duncan's murder would have represented more than a private act of violence. Ideas such as the Great Chain of Being and the Divine Right of Kings encouraged the belief that the monarch occupied a sacred position within God's ordered universe. Positioned directly after Duncan's murder, Macbeth's fragmented speech allows the audience to witness not only the beginning of his psychological collapse but also the wider disorder unleashed by violating divine and political order. The motif of sleep, associated with innocence, healing and renewal, becomes an inescapable punishment that Macbeth imposes upon himself. Guilt emerges not merely as an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, but as evidence that Macbeth understands the significance of his actions, encouraging audiences to recognise that the consequences of regicide extend far beyond the individual. By contrast, Hamlet's awareness of the moral consequences of revenge repeatedly causes him to delay action, suggesting that conscience can act as a restraint upon violence. Macbeth's guilt, however, emerges only after Duncan's murder has been committed. As a result, audiences may sympathise with Macbeth's guilt-ridden suffering whilst also recognising that moral awareness neither excuses his actions nor prevents him from choosing further violence.

Your Turn

Task:

Return to your own paragraph.

Integrate the critical insight into your analysis.

Remember:

- keep your own argument central;
- use the critic to sharpen your interpretation;
- avoid adding criticism mechanically at the end;
- think carefully about where the critical voice naturally belongs.

Your Revised Paragraph:

Task:

Return to your own paragraph.

Integrate the critical insight into your analysis.

Remember:

- keep your own argument central;
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Your Revised Paragraph:

Task:

Return to your own paragraph.

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Your Revised Paragraph:

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Remember:

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- think carefully about where the critical voice naturally belongs.

Your Revised Paragraph:

- Task:
- Return to your own paragraph.
- Integrate the critical insight into your analysis.
- Remember:
- keep your own argument central;
 - use the critic to sharpen your interpretation;
 - avoid adding criticism mechanically at the end;
 - think carefully about where the critical voice naturally belongs.
- Your Revised Paragraph:**

Task:

Return to your own paragraph.

Integrate the critical insight into your analysis.

Remember:

- keep your own argument central;
- use the critic to sharpen your interpretation;
- avoid adding criticism mechanically at the end;
- think carefully about where the critical voice naturally belongs.

Your Revised Paragraph:

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, leaving small margins at the top and bottom. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Looking Back

At the beginning of this booklet, you were invited to think differently about literary study.

Since then, you have learned how to:

- construct arguments (AO1);
- analyse Shakespeare's methods (AO2);
- deepen interpretations through context (AO3);
- broaden ideas through comparison (AO4);
- engage with literary criticism (AO5).

You have also discovered something important.

Great literature rarely produces certainty.

Instead, it invites debate.

It encourages disagreement.

It rewards curiosity.

As you move into A Level English Literature, remember:

- You do not need the "right" answer.
- You need an argument that is thoughtful, supported and open to complexity.

That is what literary study demands.

And that is the conversation you are now ready to join.

What's Next?

You are now to complete your essay – as aforementioned in the introduction, you can hand write or type this.

Important: Whilst this booklet required you to integrate contextual insight (AO3), comparative insight (AO4), and critical insight (AO5) in one main paragraph, you are not expected to include these in all your main paragraphs. You have to be selective and purposeful, avoiding repetition and embedding any of the above just for the sake of it.

Your deadline will be given to you in September, however expect it to be within the first two weeks of the term.

This essay will be marked and feedback will be provided.

Your baseline assessment will be linked to this work where you'll be given a similar essay-style question to respond to – the contextual and critical reading from this bridging unit will be directly relevant for this assessment.

Appendices

Macbeth: The Play in Context

The tragedy Macbeth is set in medieval Scotland. Three witches in a storm plan to meet Macbeth, a warrior and Thane, after the current battle, an uprising against King Duncan. As the victorious Macbeth and Banquo cross a heath, the witches appear to them. They address Macbeth first as Thane of Glamis (his current title), then as Thane of Cawdor (the title of one of the rebels) and finally as King. They also tell Banquo that his descendants shall be kings. The witches vanish and noblemen approach Macbeth to tell him that Duncan has named him the new Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth now understands the witches' pronouncement as a prophecy. He writes to tell his wife what has happened. Lady Macbeth muses on ambition and invokes dark spirits to fill her with cruelty in preparation for helping Macbeth take the throne.

Duncan and his retinue come to Macbeth's castle. The Macbeths plot to kill him. Macbeth has second thoughts, but is spurred on by his wife and commits the murder. He also kills Duncan's guards and Lady Macbeth plants the bloody daggers on them. A knocking at the gate rouses the household and Duncan's corpse is discovered. Macbeth claims to have killed the guards in righteous fury. Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, flee in fear of their lives. Macbeth takes the crown.

Macbeth remembers that Banquo witnessed the witches' prophecy and hires murderers to kill him and his son, Fleance; Fleance escapes. Macbeth is haunted by Banquo's ghost at a feast. Lennox recognises Macbeth's guilt, and Macduff goes to England to summon military aid. Macbeth seeks further counsel from the witches, who produce visions that tell Macbeth to be wary of Macduff, but that he cannot be harmed by any man born of woman, nor will he be vanquished until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill. A fourth vision shows that Banquo's descendants will be kings.

The play descends further into darkness as Macbeth has Macduff's family slaughtered and learns that Lady Macbeth has gone mad with guilt. She dies, probably by suicide. Malcolm, Macduff and the other nobles take arms against Macbeth. The advancing army camouflage themselves by cutting boughs from Birnam Wood, creating the impression that the wood is coming to the hill. Macduff and Macbeth fight; Macduff reveals that he was not 'born' but rather cut from his mother's womb. He kills Macbeth and Malcolm is crowned King.

Political Context

Shakespeare wrote Macbeth in 1606. It is important to understand the political context in which it was written, as that is the key to the main theme of the play, which is that excessive ambition will have terrible consequences. Shakespeare was writing for the theatre during the reigns of two monarchs, Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. The plays he wrote during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, are often seen to embody the generally happy, confident and optimistic mood of the Elizabethans. However, those he wrote during James's reign, such as *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, are darker and more cynical, reflecting the insecurities of the Jacobean period. *Macbeth* was written the year after the Gunpowder Plot of 1605.

When Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, she had no children, or even nephews or nieces. The throne was offered to James Stuart, James VI of Scotland, who then became James I of Britain. He was a distant cousin of Elizabeth, being descended from Margaret Tudor, the sister of Elizabeth's grandfather, Henry the Eighth. James was the son of the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots, who had been deposed and imprisoned when he was a baby, and later executed on Elizabeth's orders. Brought up by Protestant regents, James maintained a Protestant regime in Scotland when he came of age, and so was an acceptable choice for England which had become firmly Protestant under Elizabeth. However, his accession was by no means a popular choice with everyone. Since he was not a direct descendant of Elizabeth, there were other relatives who believed they also had a strong claim and James feared that discontented factions might gather around them. At first the Catholics had hoped James might support them, since his mother had been such a staunch Catholic, but when they realised this would not happen conspiracies developed, one of which was the Gunpowder Plot. Guy Fawkes and his men tried to blow up James and his parliament in 1605. The conspirators were betrayed, and horribly tortured on the rack until they confessed. They were then executed in the most brutal fashion as a warning to other would-be traitors. Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* is to some extent a cautionary tale, warning any other potential regicides (king-killers) of the awful fate that will inevitably overtake them.

Philosophical Context

Religious thinkers in the Middle Ages had upheld the idea of 'The Great Chain of Being'. This was the belief that God had designed an ordered system for both nature and humankind within which every creature and person had an allotted place. It was considered an offence against God for anyone to try to alter their station in life. After death, however, all would be raised in the kingdom of heaven, if they respected God's will. Since royal rank was bestowed by God, it was a sin to aspire to it. This doctrine – a convenient one for King James – was still widely held in Shakespeare's day.

Although his mother, Mary Queen of Scots, was a beautiful and charming woman, James I was aware he was ugly and lacking in the charisma which inspired loyalty. But he was an intelligent and well-educated man, and espoused various beliefs which he felt would keep his position secure. One of these was the so-called 'divine right of kings'. This was the belief that the power of monarchs was given directly by God, and thus monarchs were answerable only to God. Any opposition to the King was an attack on God himself, and therefore sacrilege, the most heinous of sins. The anointing ceremony at the coronation made the King virtually divine. All the Stuart kings strongly supported the belief in their 'divine right' to rule as it was an effective safeguard of their position. They even claimed Christ-like powers of healing. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare alludes to King Edward of England successfully healing the sick: 'such sanctity hath heaven given his hand'. Queen Anne was the last British monarch who used 'the Queen's touch' in this way.

Historical Context

Shakespeare's plot is only partly based on fact. Macbeth was a real eleventh century Scottish king, but the historical Macbeth, who had a valid right to the throne, reigned capably in Scotland from 1040 till 1057. He succeeded Duncan, whom he had defeated in battle, but the real Duncan was a weak man, around Macbeth's own age, not the respected elderly figure we meet in the play. In reality, Macbeth was succeeded by his own stepson, not by Duncan's son, Malcolm, who came to the throne later. The Stuart kings claimed descent from Banquo, but Banquo is a mythical figure who never really existed. Shakespeare found his version of the story of Macbeth in the *Chronicles of Holinshed*, a historian of his own time. Holinshed does include a Banquo in his version, but he is also a traitor who assists Macbeth in the murder. As a tribute to the Stuarts, and James in particular, Shakespeare presents Banquo as a wise, noble and regal figure who arouses jealousy in Macbeth as much for his own good qualities as for the promise the witches make to him of founding a dynasty.

Shakespeare and the Court

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, Shakespeare's acting company was called the 'Chamberlain's Men', and it is known that they performed for the court. After the accession of James they changed their name to the 'King's Men' as a tribute to him. The patronage of the King and court was obviously valuable to Shakespeare. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare seeks to flatter and please the King in various ways. *Macbeth*, the character who usurps the place of a lawful King, is shown as losing everything as a result – he becomes hated and demonised by all his subjects, as does his wife, who supports him in his crime. Banquo, whom the Stuarts claimed as their ancestor, is presented in a completely positive light. When the witches show *Macbeth* the future, he sees a line of kings descended from Banquo that seems to 'stretch out to the crack of doom'. This flatters King James with the promise of a long-standing dynasty, although in fact James's father, Charles I, would be executed, and the Stuart line was to die out with Queen Anne in 1714.

Shakespeare also included other enthusiasms of the King in the play. James had written a book called *Basilikon Doron*, which looks at the theme of kingship. In the book, James identifies the ideal king as one who does his duty to God and to his country and who is also a man of spotless personal integrity. In the play, Shakespeare, too, explores this topic, with the character of Malcolm representing the template of the ideal king. In addition, the idealised portrait of Edward the Confessor, the 'holy king' who has the power literally to heal his people, would come across to a contemporary audience as an indirect tribute to James himself. James was also very interested in the supernatural, and had written a paper called *Daemonologie* on the subject. During his reign as King of Scotland, James is known to have been directly involved in some witch trials at North Berwick. Women were regularly burnt as witches, and Shakespeare presents his witches unequivocally as powerful and evil emissaries of the devil. In his day, the majority of the general public, too, believed in witches and the power of the supernatural, and the witch scenes would have been taken very seriously.

The Renaissance Theatre – Eric Rasmussen

In the late summer of 1597, a monster emerged from the humid stench of London's Bankside. News of the monster quickly reached Robert Cecil, Secretary of State to Queen Elizabeth. Cecil determined that the monster was a threat to national security and arranged for its swift destruction. The nest where it had bred was raided and neutralised; the people who had nurtured it were called to account and imprisoned. The monster in question was a satirical play called *The Isle of Dogs*. Its co-author, Thomas Nash acknowledged that in writing the play he'd created a monster: 'it was no sooner borne but I was glad to run from it'. No copy of the play exists today, so we can only guess at its contents. But the Privy Council clearly viewed it as 'seditious' and ordered not only that the dramatists and actors be imprisoned but that all theatres in the city be closed for months as a punishment. This governmental response may seem like overkill, but the Queen and her enforcers were keenly aware of the potential danger posed by theatre's ability to subvert cultural norms. In Renaissance England, the development of theatre paralleled, and may have helped to spark, dramatic, culture-wide shifts in religious, economic, social, sexual and even political perspectives.

Theatre historian Andrew Gurr has estimated that as many as 50 million people paid to see live theatre in London during the golden age of English Renaissance drama. London loved theatre. And with theatre's popularity came a reorganising of social strata in which class divisions were no longer safe. After all, William Shakespeare, the son of a Stratford glover, earned enough in a decade of playmaking and acting to buy a share in a theatrical company as well as an opulent house in Stratford-upon-Avon. He even applied to the College of Heralds for a coat of arms. When the request was granted, Shakespeare effectively entered the nobility. This social step epitomises the potentially subversive nature of theatre: it allowed the playmaker son of an artisan father to style himself a gentleman.

Restrictions

Governmental authorities understood the potential disruptions public theatre could cause in a well-ordered cultural hierarchy, so took steps to control the performances of plays from the very beginning. As early as 1574, even before the first theatre was built, the Lord Mayor of London and the Common Council laid heavy restrictions on the times, places, contents and purposes of theatrical entertainments. Although the municipal government was decidedly anti-theatre, its animosity had little effect. Beginning with the construction of the first purpose-built playhouse in 1576 until the closing of the theatres in 1642, theatre's popularity and commercial success steadily increased.

Subversive playwrights

The successful playmakers who emerged during this period were a decidedly subversive group. There was Christopher Marlowe, accused of being an atheist, suspected of homosexual tendencies, an ex-spy who was murdered at age 29 in the suspicious company of other spies. There was Ben Jonson, who had been apprenticed to his bricklayer stepfather as a youth, soldiered in the Low Countries, killed a fellow actor in a duel and became a Catholic while in prison for the killing. And there was George Wilkins, a thug who had a long arrest record for brutal assaults (including kicking a pregnant woman in the belly). Wilkins was Shakespeare's landlord in London, and collaborated with him on *Pericles*.

When Sir Francis Walsingham formed an acting company under the patronage of Queen Elizabeth, he dictated that plays written for and performed by the Company of Players, the Queen's Men, should feature patriotic representations of English history with wholesome Protestant morals, and ought to be written in stately verse. Although some early playwrights adhered to this party line, Marlowe broke frame to take serious risks: writing about a Mongol warlord, Tamburlaine – in blank verse, no less. More seriously, whereas the government had called for morality plays with English heroes, Marlowe's foreign infidel repeatedly commits heinously amoral acts and is never struck down by the hand of divine justice. And Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* was a runaway success.

Even when Marlowe wrote apparently orthodox plays, he still found ways to push against the government's expectations, as well as societal conventions. *Doctor Faustus*, his best-known work, presents itself as a familiar moral tale of the perils of pride and excessive learning, and yet somehow manages to question the very legitimacy of that moral dramatic framework. *The Massacre at Paris*, perhaps Marlowe's most obscure play, disrupts expectations in similar ways. The play promises to be a fairly straightforward, nationalistic condemnation of Frenchness and Catholicism. Unsurprisingly, in the course of the play this expected straightforwardness collapses into recognisably Marlovian political angling and moral shades of grey.

Shakespeare was influenced by Marlowe's subversion of form and subject matter. The two may have collaborated on *King Henry VI* Parts 1–3, choosing as their subject a weak and ineffectual monarch in a decidedly unpatriotic series of plays. Much like Marlowe's earlier *Edward II*, Shakespeare's own *Richard II* deals with the deposition of another inept king. The scene in which Richard is forced to yield his crown was omitted from printed versions of the play throughout Elizabeth's reign, and was perhaps left out in performance as well – no doubt the official government censor, known as the Master of the Revels, did not wish to encourage audiences to contemplate removing a sitting monarch, given the Queen's advanced age and debatable fitness for rule. Indeed, when the Earl of Essex planned a coup to overthrow Elizabeth, his henchmen commissioned Shakespeare's acting company to perform *Richard II*, presumably to get Londoners in the mood for a forced deposition. Although the rebellion failed, theatre's potential for political subversion was clearly understood.

Many of Shakespeare's plays actually deal with unstable political situations, especially those commonly referred to as the 'great tragedies'. Hamlet's famous indecision originates in the death of Denmark's monarch; Macbeth's plot involves two separate regicides, though both occur offstage. King Lear provides some of Shakespeare's most complex reflections on the nature of kingship. The image of the 'poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old' Lear (3.2.20) wandering mad on the heath may not have unsettled James I, devoted fan of theatre as he was. But it certainly does raise questions about the actual differences between monarch and subject, questions that resonate with performers, critics and students to this day. The extant manuscript of *Sir Thomas More* – a play to which Shakespeare contributed a few speeches – gives us a peek of insight into the type of subversive material that the censor was on the lookout for. The Master of the Revels, Edmund Tilney, has written on the first page of the manuscript 'leave out the insurrection wholly'. The government was obviously concerned that a stage representation of a riot by unemployed Londoners against foreign workers who had taken their jobs might breed real riots in the theatres and the streets of the city.

All plays performed in the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre had to be approved by the Master of the Revels, with the curious exception of those staged by the Children of the Queen's Revels, a company of boy actors under the patronage of Queen Anne, for whom the poet Samuel Daniel was appointed as the official licenser of plays. Dramatists flocked to this company where they (rightly) assumed that a sympathetic fellow writer would be more likely to allow subversive plays to be staged than a rigorous government censor. In 1605, Ben Jonson, George Chapman and John Marston went so far as to make fun of King James's Scottish accent in *Eastward Ho!* (Jonson and Chapman were subsequently imprisoned and 'in danger of having their ears and noses slit' as punishment, all the while blaming the offensive passages on Marston.) In the following year, John Day's *Isles of Gulls*, a thinly veiled attack on the government, occasioned such a scandalous uproar that the playwright and entire cast of boys were imprisoned. Whereas casting conventions called for boys to perform women's roles, the trope of the cross-dressing character called for a female character to don a male disguise. Thus, a boy actor taking the role of Portia in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* would, in the course of the action, cross-dress as a woman for the part of Portia, then cross-dress again (or back?) when Portia adopts the persona of Balthazar. This fluidity leads, in several of Shakespeare's plays, to highly fascinating reflections on the relationship between gender, performance and identity; more importantly to Renaissance London, it would have further ruffled Puritan feathers. But the Puritans would ultimately get their revenge, and certainly the last laugh, when they came to power and succeeded in closing the theatres in 1642.

Religion

Religion was another favoured target of theatrical satire, and one that was seemingly tolerated by the Master of the Revels. Characters such as Zeal-of-the-Land Busy in Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* and Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* exaggerated extremist Puritanism for comedic effect. Roman Catholicism was usually represented with more seriousness, but hardly more concern for psychological realism. In Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris*, the outwardly Catholic Duke of Guise reveals in his first soliloquy that he is in fact one of Marlowe's trademark atheist villains. In Shakespeare's *King John*, Cardinal Pandolf acts as the Pope's proxy, repeatedly acting against England's interests. Sometimes, of course, Puritans were represented seriously, and Catholics were represented comedically; for instance, one scene in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* has Faustus use his new magical powers to beat and abuse the Pope, a scene clearly written for laughs. The theatre used humour to skewer Puritans and slander to skewer Catholics: the common denominator was irreverence.

Cross-Dressing

The Puritans deeply disapproved of the theatrical practice of cross-dressing female roles. Women were not part of the theatrical guilds, so acting companies cast boys in most women's parts. This practice

represented the ultimate in theatrical deception to religious eyes: boys were not women, and presenting boys in the guise of women misled audiences, both about boys' natures and women's natures. When playwrights and companies realised that this casting habit bothered the Puritans, they predictably leaned into it. With increasing frequency from the 1590s onward, English Renaissance plays deployed not only cross-dressing actors but cross-dressing characters as well.

Macbeth As Tragic Hero: Wayne Booth

Put even in its simplest terms, the problem Shakespeare gave himself in *Macbeth* was a tremendous one. Take a good man, a noble man, a man admired by all who know him—and destroy him, not only physically and emotionally, as the Greeks destroyed their heroes, but also morally and intellectually. As if this were not difficult enough as a dramatic hurdle, while transforming him into one of the most despicable mortals conceivable, maintain him as a tragic hero—that is, keep him so sympathetic that, when he comes to his death, the audience will pity rather than detest him and will be relieved to see him out of his misery rather than pleased to see him destroyed. Put in Shakespeare's own terms: take a "noble" man, full of "conscience" and "the milk of human kindness," and make of him a "dead butcher," yet keep him an object of pity rather than hatred.

If we thus artificially reconstruct the problem as it might have existed before the play was written, we see that, in choosing these "terminal points" and these terminal intentions, Shakespeare makes almost impossible demands on his dramatic skill, although at the same time he insures that, if he succeeds at all, he will succeed magnificently. If the trick can be turned, it will inevitably be a great one. One need only consider the many relative failures in attempts at similar "plots" and effects to realize the difficulties involved.

When dramatists or novelists attempt the sympathetic-degenerative plot, almost always one or another of the following failures or transformations occurs:

1. The feeling of abhorrence for the protagonist becomes so strong that all sympathy is lost, and the play or novel becomes "punitive"—that is, the reader's or spectator's chief pleasure depends on his satisfaction in revenge or punishment.
2. The protagonist is never really made very wicked, after all; he only seems wicked by conventional (and, by implication, unsound) standards and is really a highly admirable reform-candidate.
3. The protagonist reforms in the end and avoids his proper punishment.
4. The book or play itself becomes a "wicked" work; that is, either deliberately or unconsciously the artist makes us side with his degenerated hero against "morality." If it is deliberate, we have propaganda works of one kind or another, often resembling the second type above; if it is unconscious, we get works whose immorality (as in pornographic or sadistic treatments of the good-girl-turned-whore, thief, or murderess) makes them unenjoyable as literature unless the reader or spectator temporarily or permanently relaxes his own standards of moral judgment.

Any of these failures or transformations can be found in conjunction with the most frequent failure of all: the degeneration remains finally unexplained, unmotivated; the forces employed to destroy the noble man are found pitifully inadequate to make his fall seem credible. Even in works which are somewhat successful, there is almost always some shrinking from a fully responsible engagement with the inherent difficulties. For example, in *Tender Is the Night*, which is in many ways strikingly similar to *Macbeth*, Fitzgerald waters down the effect in several ways. Dick Diver, Fitzgerald's "noble" man, is destroyed, but he is destroyed only to helplessness—to unpopularity and drunkenness and poverty; he becomes a "failure." The signs of his destruction are never grotesque acts of cruelty or wickedness of the kind committed by

Macbeth or of a kind which for the modern reader would be analogous in their unsympathetic quality. Rather, he speaks more sharply to people than he used to; he is no longer charming.

This is indeed pitiful enough, in its own way, but it is easy enough, too, especially when the artist chooses, as Fitzgerald does, to report the final demoralization of the hero only vaguely and from a great distance: one never sees Dick Diver's final horrible moments as one sees Macbeth's. So that, at the end of his downward path, Diver has been more sinned against than sinning, and we have no obstacles to our pity. But, on the other hand, since the fall has not been nearly so great, our pity that the fall should have occurred at all is attenuated, compared with the awfulness of the last hours of Macbeth. Other attenuations follow from this one. If the fall is not a very great one, the forces needed to produce it need not be great (although one might argue that even in *Tender Is the Night* they should have been greater, for credibility). Nicole and a general atmosphere of gloom and decay are made to do a job which in Macbeth requires some of the richest degenerative forces ever employed. If, then, comparison on these structural points is just, in spite of the strong differences between the works, it indicates that in point of difficulties faced—or, one should say, created—Shakespeare in Macbeth has it all over Fitzgerald, as he has it all over anyone else I know of who has attempted this form.

A complete study of how Macbeth is made to succeed in spite of—or rather because of—the difficulties is perhaps beyond the capacities of any one reader. It is certainly impossible here. But the major devices employed—one never knows how "consciously"—by Shakespeare can be enumerated and discussed quite simply.

The first step in convincing us that Macbeth's fall is a genuinely tragic occurrence is to convince us that there was, in reality, a fall: we must believe that Macbeth was once a man whom we could admire, a man with great potentialities. One way to convince us would have been to show him, as Fitzgerald shows Dick Diver, in action as an admirable man. But, although this is possible in a leisurely novel, it would, in a play, have wasted time needed for the important events, which begin only with Macbeth's great temptation at the conclusion of the opening battle. Thus the superior choice in this case (although it would not necessarily always be so) is to begin your representation of the action with the first real temptation to the fall and to use testimony by other characters to establish your protagonist's prior goodness. We are thus given, from the beginning, sign after sign that Macbeth's greatest nobility was reached at a point just prior to the opening of the play. When the play begins, he has already coveted the crown, as is shown by his excessively nervous reaction to the witches' prophecy; it is indeed likely that he has already considered foul means of obtaining it. But, in spite of this wickedness already present to his mind as a possibility, we have ample reason to think Macbeth a man worthy of our admiration. He is "brave" and "valiant," a "worthy gentleman"; Duncan calls him "noble Macbeth." These epithets have an ironic quality only in retrospect; when they are first applied, one has no reason to doubt them. Indeed, they are true epithets, or they would have been true if applied, say, only a few days or months earlier.

Of course, this testimony to his prior virtue given by his friends in the midst of other business would not carry the spectators for long with any sympathy for Macbeth if it were not continued in several other forms. We have the testimony of Lady Macbeth (the unimpeachable testimony of a "bad" person castigating the goodness of a "good" person):

*Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win.*

No verbal evidence would be enough, however, if we did not see in Macbeth himself signs of its validity, since we have already seen many signs that he is not the good man that the witnesses seem to believe. Thus the best evidence we have of his essential goodness is his vacillation before the murder. Just as Raskolnikov is tormented and just as we ourselves—virtuous theater viewers—would be tormented, so Macbeth is tormented before the prospect of his own crime. Indeed, much as he wants the kingship, he decides in Scene 3 against the murder:

*If chance will have me King, why, chance may crown me,
Without my stir....*

And when he first meets Lady Macbeth he is resolved not to murder Duncan. In fact, as powerful a rhetorician as she is, she has all she can do to get him back on the course of murder. In addition, Macbeth's ensuing soliloquy not only weighs the possible bad practical consequences of his act but shows him perfectly aware, in a way an evil man would not be, of the moral values involved:

*He's here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off....*

In this speech we see again, as we saw in the opening of the play, Shakespeare's wonderful economy: the very speech which shows Macbeth to best advantage is the one which shows the audience how very bad his contemplated act is, since Duncan is blameless. One need only think of the same speech if it were dealing with a king who deserves to be assassinated or if it were given by another character commenting on Macbeth's action, to see how right it is as it stands.

After this soliloquy Macbeth announces again to Lady Macbeth that he will not go on ("We will proceed no further in this business"), but her eloquence is too much for him. Under her jibes at his "unmanliness," he progresses from a kind of petulant, but still honorable, boasting ("I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none"), through a state of amoral consideration of mere expediency ("If I should fail?"), to complete resolution, but still with a full understanding of the wickedness of his act ("I am settled... this terrible feat"). There is never any doubt, first, that he is bludgeoned into the deed by Lady Macbeth's superior rhetoric and force of character and by the pressure of unfamiliar circumstances (including the witches) and, second, that even in the final decision to go through with it he is extremely troubled by a guilty conscience ("False face must hide what the false heart doth know"). In the entire dagger soliloquy he is clearly suffering from the realization of the horror of the "bloody business" ahead. He sees fully and painfully the wickedness of the course he has chosen, but not until after the deed, when the knocking has commenced, do we realize how terrifyingly alive his conscience is: "To know my deed, 't were best not know myself. / Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!" This is the wish of a "good" man who, though he has become a "bad" man, still thinks and feels as a good man would.

To cite one last example of Shakespeare's pains in this matter, we have the testimony to Macbeth's character offered by Hecate (III, 5):

*And which is worse, all you have done
Hath been but for a wayward son,
Spiteful and wrathful, who, as others do,
Loves for his own ends, not for you.*

This reaffirmation that Macbeth is not a true son of evil comes, interestingly enough, immediately after the murder of Banquo, at a time when the audience needs a reminder of Macbeth's fundamental nobility. The evil of his acts is thus built upon the knowledge that he is not a naturally evil man but a man who has every potentiality for goodness. This potentiality and its frustration are the chief ingredients of the tragedy of Macbeth. Macbeth is a man whose progressive external misfortunes seem to produce, and at the same time seem to be produced by, his parallel progression from great goodness to great wickedness. Our emotional involvement (which perhaps should not be simplified under the term "pity" or "pity and fear") is thus a combination of two kinds of regret: (1) We regret that any potentially good man should come to such a bad end: "What a pity that things should have gone this way, that things should be this way!" (2) We regret even more the destruction of this particular man, a man who is not only morally sympathetic but also intellectually and emotionally interesting.

In eliciting both these kinds of regret to such a high degree, Shakespeare goes beyond his predecessors and establishes trends which are still working themselves out in literature. The first kind—never used at all by classical dramatists, who never employed a genuinely degenerative plot—has been attempted again and again by modern novelists. Their difficulty has usually been that they have relied too completely on a general humane response in the reader and too little on a realized prior height or potentiality from which to fall. The protagonists are shown succumbing to their environment—or, as in so many "sociological" novels, already succumbed—and the reader is left to himself to infer that something worth bothering about has gone to waste, that things might have been otherwise, that there is any real reason to react emotionally to the final destruction. The second kind—almost unknown to classical dramatists, whose characters are never "original" or "fresh" in the modern sense—has been attempted in ever greater extremes since Shakespeare, until one finds many works in which mere interest in particular characteristics completely supplants emotional response to events involving men with interesting characteristics. The pathos of Bloom, for example, is an attenuated pathos, just as the comedy of Bloom is an attenuated comedy; one is not primarily moved to laughter or tears by events involving great characters, as in Macbeth, but rather one is primarily interested in details about characters.

It can be argued whether this is a gain or a loss to literature, when considered in general. Certainly, one would rather read a modern novel like *Ulysses*, with all its faults on its head, than many of the older dramas or epics involving "great" characters in "great" events. But it can hardly be denied that one of Shakespeare's triumphs is his success in doing many things at once which lesser writers have since done only one at a time. He has all the generalized effect of classical tragedy. We lament the "bad fortune" of a great man who has known good fortune. To this he adds the much more poignant (at least to us) pity one feels in observing the moral destruction of a great man who has once known goodness. And yet with all this he combines the pity one feels when one observes a highly characterized individual—whom one knows intimately, as it were, in whom one is interested—going to destruction. One difference between watching Macbeth go to destruction and watching the typical modern hero, whether in the drama (say, Willy Loman) or in the novel (say, Jake or any other of Hemingway's heroes), is that in Macbeth there is some "going." Willy Loman doesn't have very far to fall; he begins the play on the verge of suicide, and at the end of the play he has committed suicide. Even if we assume that the "beginning" is the time covered in the earliest of the flashbacks, we have not "far to go" from there to Willy's destruction. It is true that our contemporary willingness to exalt the potentialities of the average man makes Willy's fall seem to us a greater one than it really is, dramatically. But the reliance on convention will, of course, sooner or later dictate a decline in the play's effectiveness. Macbeth continues to be effective at least in part because

everything necessary for a complete response to a complete action is given to us. A highly individualized, noble man is sent to complete moral, intellectual, and physical destruction.

II

But no matter how carefully the terminal points of the drama are selected and impressed on the spectator's mind, the major problem of how to represent such a "plot" still remains. Shakespeare has the tremendous task of trying to keep two contradictory dynamic streams moving simultaneously: the stream of events showing Macbeth's growing wickedness and the stream of circumstances producing and maintaining our sympathy for him. In effect, each succeeding atrocity, marking another step toward complete depravity, must be so surrounded by contradictory circumstances as to make us feel that, in spite of the evidence before our eyes, Macbeth is still somehow admirable.

The first instance of this is the method of treating Duncan's murder. The chief point here is Shakespeare's care in avoiding any "rendering" or representation of the murder itself. It is, in fact, not even narrated. We hear only the details of how the guards reacted and how Macbeth reacted to their cries. We see nothing. There is nothing about the actual dagger strokes; there is no report of the dying cries of the good old king. We have only Macbeth's conscience-stricken lament for having committed the deed. Thus what would be an intolerable act if depicted with any vividness becomes relatively bearable when seen only afterward in the light of Macbeth's suffering and remorse. This may seem ordinary enough; it is always convenient to have murders take place offstage. But if one compares the handling of this scene, where the perpetrator must remain sympathetic, with the handling of the blinding of Gloucester, where the perpetrators must be hated, one can see how important such a detail can be. The blinding of Gloucester is not so wicked an act, in itself, as murder. If we had seen, say, a properly motivated Goneril come in from offstage wringing her hands and crying, "Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more.' Goneril does put out the eyes of sleep... I am afraid to think what I have done," and on thus for nearly a full scene, our reaction to the whole episode would, needless to say, be exactly contrary to what it now is.

A second precaution is the highly general portrayal of Duncan before his murder. It is necessary only that he be known as a "good king," the murder of whom will be a wicked act. He must be the type of benevolent monarch. But more particular characteristics are carefully kept from him. There is nothing for us to love, nothing for us to "want further existence for," within the play. We hear of his goodness; we do not see it. We know practically no details about him, and we have little, if any, personal interest in him at the time of his death. All the personal interest is reserved for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. So, again, the wickedness is played up in the narration but played down in the representation. We must identify Macbeth with the murder of a blameless king, but only intellectually; emotionally we should be concerned as far as is possible only with the effects on Macbeth. We know that he has done the deed, but we feel primarily only his own suffering.

Banquo is considerably more particularized than was Duncan. Not only is he also a good man, but we have seen him acting as a good man, and we know quite a lot about him. We saw his reaction to the witches, and we know that he has resisted temptations similar to those of Macbeth. We have seen him in conversation with Macbeth. We have heard him in soliloquy. We know him to be very much like Macbeth, both in valor and in being the subject of prophecy. He thus has our lively sympathy; his death is a personal, rather than a general, loss. Perhaps more important, his murder is actually shown on the stage. His dying words are spoken in our presence, and they are unselfishly directed to saving his son. We are forced to the proper, though illogical, inference: it is more wicked to kill Banquo than to have killed Duncan.

But we must still not lose our sympathy for Macbeth. This is partially provided for by the fact that the deed is much more necessary than the previous murder; Banquo is a real political danger. But the important thing is again the choice of what is represented. The murder is done by accomplices, so that Macbeth is

never shown in any real act of wickedness. When we see him, he is suffering the torments of the banquet table. Our incorrect emotional inference: the self-torture has already expiated the guilt of the crime.

The same devices work in the murder of Lady Macduff and her children, the third and last atrocity explicitly shown in the play (except for the killing of young Siward, which, being military, is hardly an atrocity in this sense). Lady Macduff is more vividly portrayed even than Banquo, although she appears on the stage for a much briefer time. Her complaints against the absence of her husband, her loving banter with her son, and her stand against the murderers make her as admirable as the little boy himself, who dies in defense of his father's name. The murder of women and children of such quality is wicked indeed, the audience is made to feel. And when we move to England and see the effect of the atrocity on Macduff, our active pity for Macbeth's victims is at the high point of the play. For the first time, perhaps, pity for Macbeth's victims really wars with pity for him, and our desire for his downfall, to protect others and to protect himself from his own further misdeeds, begins to mount in consequence.

Yet even here Macbeth is kept as little "to blame" as possible. He does not do the deed himself, and we can believe that he would have been unable to, had he seen the wife and child as we have seen them. (The Orson Welles movie version contains many grotesque errors of reading, but none worse than showing Macbeth actively engaged on the scene of this crime.) He is much further removed from them than from his other victims; as far as we know, he has never seen them. They are as remote and impersonal to him as they are immediate and personal to the audience, and personal blame against him is thus attenuated. More important, however, immediately after Macduff's tears we shift to Lady Macbeth's scene—the effect being again to impress on us the fact that the punishment for these crimes is always as great as, or greater than, the crimes themselves. Thus all three crimes are followed immediately by scenes of suffering and self-torture. Shakespeare works almost as if he were following a master-rulebook: By your choice of what to represent from the materials provided in your story, insure that each step in your protagonist's degeneration will be counteracted by mounting pity for him.

All this would certainly suffice to keep Macbeth at the center of our interest and sympathy, even with all our mounting concern for his victims. But it is reinforced by qualities in his character separate and distinct from his moral qualities. Perhaps the most important of these is his gift (indirectly Shakespeare's gift, it is true, but we should remember that in his maturer work Shakespeare does not bestow it indiscriminately on all his characters) of expressing himself in great poetry. We naturally tend to feel with the character who speaks the best poetry of the play, no matter what his deeds (Iago would never be misplayed as protagonist if his poetry did not rival, and sometimes surpass, Othello's). When we add to this poetic gift an extremely rich and concrete set of characteristics, over and above his moral qualities, we have a character which is in its own way more sympathetic than any character portrayed in only moral colors could be. Even the powers of virtue gathering about his castle to destroy him seem petty compared with his mammoth sensitivity, his rich despair. When he says:

*my way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have,*

we feel that he wants these things quite as honestly and a good deal more passionately than even the most virtuous man could want them. And we regret deeply the truth of his conclusion that he "must not look to have" them.

If Macbeth's initial nobility, the manner of representation of his atrocities, and his rich poetic gift are all calculated to create and sustain our sympathy for him throughout his movement toward destruction, the kind of mistake he makes in initiating his own destruction is equally well calculated to heighten our willingness to forgive while deploring. On one level it could, of course, be said that he errs simply in being overambitious and underscrupulous. But this is only partly true. What allows him to sacrifice his moral beliefs to his ambition is a mistake of another kind—of a kind which is, at least to modern spectators, more probable or credible than any conventional tragic flaw or any traditional tragic error such as mistaking the identity of a brother or not knowing that one's wife is one's mother. Macbeth knows what he is doing, yet he does not know. He knows the immorality of the act, but he has no conception of the effects of the act on himself or on his surroundings. Accustomed to murder of a "moral" sort, in battle, and having valorously and successfully "carv'd out his passage" with "bloody execution" many times previously, he misunderstands completely what will be the devastating effect on his own character if he tries to carve out his passage in civil life. The murder of Duncan on one level resembles closely the kind of thing Macbeth has done professionally, and he lacks the insight to see the great difference between the two kinds of murder. He cannot foresee that success in the first murder will only lead to the speech "to be thus is nothing; But to be safely thus," and to ever increasing degradation and suffering for himself and for those around him. Even though he has a kind of double premonition of the effects of the deed both on his own conscience and on Duncan's subjects ("If it were done when 't is done, then 't were well..."), he does not really understand. If he did understand, he could not do the deed.

This ignorance is made more convincing by being extended to a misunderstanding of the forces leading him to the murder. Macbeth does not really understand that he has two spurs "to prick the sides" of his intent, besides his own vaulting ambition. The first of these is, of course, the witches and their prophecy. A good deal of nonsense has been written about these witches, some in the direction of making them totally responsible for the action of Macbeth and some making them merely a fantastical representation of Macbeth's mental state. Yet they are quite clearly real and objective, since they say and do things which Macbeth could know nothing about—such as their presentation of the ambiguous facts of Macduff's birth and the Birnam wood trick. And equally they are not "fate," alone responsible for what happens to Macbeth. He deliberately chooses from what they have to say only those things which he wishes to hear; and he has already felt the ambition to be king and even possibly to become king through regicide. Dramatically they seem to be here both as a needed additional goad to his ambition and as a concrete instance of Macbeth's tragic misunderstanding. His deliberate and consistent mistaking of what they have to say objectifies for us his misunderstanding of everything about his situation. He should realize that, if they are true oracles, both parts of their prophecy must be fulfilled. He makes the mistake of acting criminally to bring about the first part of the prophecy, and then acting criminally to prevent the fulfilment of the second part, concerning Banquo. But only if they were not true oracles would the slaying of Duncan be necessary or the slaying of Banquo be of any use. Macbeth tries to pick and choose from their promises, and they thus aid him in his self-destruction.

The second force which Macbeth does not understand, and without which he would find himself incapable of the murder, is Lady Macbeth. She, of course, fills several functions in the play, besides her inherent interest as a character, which is great indeed. But her chief function, as the textbook commonplace quite rightly has it, is to incite Macbeth to the murder of Duncan. Shakespeare has realized the best possible form for this incitation. She does not urge Macbeth with pictures of the pleasures of rewarded ambition; she does not allow his thoughts to remain on the moral aspects of the problem, as they would if he were left to himself. Rather, she shifts the whole ground of the consideration to questions of Macbeth's valor. She twits him for cowardice, plays upon the word "man," making it seem that he becomes more a man by doing the manly deed. She exaggerates her own courage (although significantly she does not offer to do the murder herself), to make him fear to seem cowardly by comparison. Macbeth's whole reputation for bravery seems at last to be at stake, and even questions of success and failure are made to hang on his

courage: "But screw your courage to the sticking-place / And we'll not fail." So that the whole of his past achievement seems to depend for its meaning on his capacity to go ahead with the contemplated act. He performs the act, and from that point his final destruction is certain.

His tragic error, then, is at least three-fold: he does not understand the forces working upon him to make him commit the deed, neither his wife nor the weird sisters; he does not understand the differences between "bloody execution" in civilian life and in his past military life; and he does not understand his own character—he does not know what will be the effects of the evil act on his own future happiness. Only one of these—the misunderstanding of the witches' prophecy—can be considered similar to, say, Iphigenia's ignorance of her brother's identity. Shakespeare has realized that simple ignorance of that sort will not do for the richly complex degenerative plot. The hero here must be really aware of the wickedness of his act, in advance. The more aware he can be—and still commit the act convincingly—the greater the regret felt by the reader or spectator. Being thus aware, he must act under a special kind of misunderstanding: it must be a misunderstanding caused by such powerful forces that even a good man might credibly be deceived by them into "knowingly" performing an atrocious deed.

All these points are illustrated powerfully in the contrast between the final words of Malcolm concerning Macbeth—"This dead butcher and his fiendlike queen"—and the spectator's own feelings toward Macbeth at the same point. One judges Macbeth, as Shakespeare intends, not merely for his wicked acts but in the light of the total impression of all the incidents of the play. Malcolm and Macduff do not know Macbeth and the forces that have worked on him; the spectator does know him and, knowing him, can feel great pity that a man with so much potentiality for greatness should have fallen so low. The pity is that everything was not otherwise, since it so easily could have been otherwise. Macbeth's whole life, from the time of the first visitation of the witches, is felt to be itself a tragic error, one big pitiful mistake. And the conclusion brings a flood of relief that the awful blunder has played itself out, that Macbeth has at last been able to die, still valiant, and is forced no longer to go on enduring the knowledge of the consequences of his own misdeeds.