



IGCSE Edexcel (9-1) English Literature

Macbeth: Character Profile

Macbeth

Macbeth

SYMBOLISES THE PERILS OF AMBITION

INTRODUCTION

Macbeth is the **eponymous** character of this Shakespearean tragedy. He is a **tragic hero**, meaning he starts out in a position of glory and success, but falls from grace due to an error in judgement of his own making. Every tragic hero has a fatal flaw, or **hamartia**: Macbeth's is his **unchecked ambition**. He can't restrain himself from going after what he wants, regardless of moral consequence.



When we are introduced to Macbeth, he is presented as the stereotypical hero, the ideal warrior. He fulfils the expectations of masculinity and proves his manhood. Shakespeare uses his **noble status** to give him a place to fall from. All tragic heroes have to start at the top, so that they can fall. Macbeth's journey from hero to villain, from brave warrior to coward, allows for an exploration of **gender**, **power**, and **morality**.

Macbeth's **tense, passionate** relationship with his wife also allows Shakespeare to examine **gender roles**, **marital relations**, and **power** in his own society. Because Macbeth allows himself to be overpowered by his wife, you could say that he takes a more feminine role in their marriage. He descends from a brave, masculine warrior to a **passive feminine coward**. Could this change in gender expression be linked to his villainy? If so, Shakespeare is suggesting that breaking the norms and order of society makes you vulnerable to corruption and temptation.

Macbeth's character is significant in terms of philosophy, religion, and morality. His personality is defined by both his **ambition** and his **guilt**. On the one hand he is fixated on the future he desires. On the other, he is constantly looking over his shoulder, haunted by his crimes. A question Shakespeare explores through Macbeth is one of **predestination**; Macbeth's life seems to be controlled by **fate**, but how much of Macbeth's story was foretold, and how much was of his own making? Was he destined to become a hellish villain, or was there anything he could have done to keep his place in Heaven?

CHARACTER IN CONTEXT

Gender

It would be easy if Macbeth was only used by Shakespeare to explore **masculinity**, but in practice, the gender performance associated with his character is much more **ambiguous**.

- Overwhelmingly, Shakespeare writes Macbeth to be a **symbol for toxic and repressive masculinity**, ultimately associating manhood with violence.
- At the same time, though, Macbeth's fear of being **emasculated**, and the 'feminine' traits he inherits at certain points in the play, means Shakespeare uses his character to **explore femininity**.

Initially, it seems like Macbeth has no reason to worry about his manhood. He is successful in battle, has a loyal wife, and is destined to work his way up the social ladder. But it quickly becomes apparent that this isn't enough for him. For Macbeth, the ideals of valour, power, and violence become **synonymous** with masculinity. He is convinced that if he doesn't pursue kingship as much as possible, he will be exposed as **effeminate**.

Also note how his relationship with Lady Macbeth influences his decisions, and how the **power dynamics** change as the play progresses.

- Macbeth, for most of the play, treats Lady Macbeth as his equal, or even his superior. He allows himself to be **manipulated** by her, because she has the power to strip him of his masculinity.

Ambition is his fatal flaw, but his disputed masculinity is his weakness. Any challenge to his manhood is enough to convince Macbeth of any crime. You could argue that what Macbeth's ambition strives for, more than to be king, is to be indisputably 'manly'.



Religion

As **Jacobean England** was so deeply religious, it's no surprise that **faith** is mentioned in the play which is full of sinners and treachery. Macbeth rarely mentions God by name, but the idea of Heaven and Hell plays heavily on his mind. This suggests he is worried about the destination of his **immortal soul**.

- He mentions jumping **"the life to come"**, implying he is sacrificing an eternal life in Heaven so that he can enjoy power and status during his finite life on Earth.

A significant part of Macbeth's character arc is how he **cope**s (or tries to cope) with turning his back on God. While contemplating Duncan's murder, he acknowledges that Heaven will object

to his plans. He frets that Duncan's virtues as a good king will somehow cry out against the murder. This could refer to how his subjects will literally mourn his death, or it could be **metaphorical**: Macbeth may be worried that Heaven and Earth will react negatively to the murder.

Killing Duncan is a landmark decision in his **moral path**, as it is a **conscious choice** to put an end to his good ways and **embrace corrupt temptation**. Straight after the murder, Macbeth has a moral crisis and an identity crisis.

- One of the signs of his inability to cope is how he will **"sleep no more"**.
- The other is that he could not **"say Amen"**.

These affect Macbeth so deeply because they both demonstrate that life as he knows it is over. He will no longer live like the rest of humanity. He has strayed from God's path, and so has lost God's protection.

Setting - Scotland

Shakespeare constructs Scotland after the murder as a godless, Hellish land to match its king. Crops fail, strange cries fill the air, and the country lives in eternal darkness. Macbeth's mental state mirrors the state of his kingdom. Shakespeare suggests that living without God is the worst fate a man can have.



Homosociality & Male Friendship

Male friendships were a huge part of Jacobean culture. It was a **patriarchal society** where women were expected to stay at home, so the public domain was exclusively male. Men were business partners, colleagues, and school peers. Most of the time, a man's only company was other men. This meant men were **emotionally** and **psychologically** attuned to each other, and became very close.

The influence of **military standards** on society also meant that **male solidarity** and **loyalty** were important values. In battle, soldiers relied on each other, and desertion was unthinkable. The same rules applied to life outside of war.

Part of Macbeth's moral crisis comes from the ideal of male friendship. Killing Duncan means **betraying** a friend, relative, and his king. This goes against everything Macbeth has been taught to value and uphold. Similarly, killing Banquo is such a shocking act - particularly for a Jacobean audience - because Macbeth is supposed to be his closest friend. No one can suspect Macbeth at first because the idea of a man betraying another was preposterous.

Tragic Hero

The concept of the **tragic hero** was popular in Shakespeare's plays and in Renaissance theatre as a whole. There are several stages to a tragic hero's journey:

- The **hamartia**, or tragic flaw that causes their downfall.
- The **hubris**, or excessive pride and disrespect for the natural order
- **Peripeteia**, or reversal of fate
- **Anagnorisis**, or discovery
- **Nemesis**, or unavoidable punishment
- and finally **catharsis**, where the audience feels pity and fear for the protagonist in their undoing.

For Macbeth, his **hamartia** is his **unchecked ambition**. Shakespeare uses the idea of the tragic hero to teach his audience the **importance of morality**, and of respecting God's will. Having a tragic hero means the audience feels **sympathy** for them despite their failings.

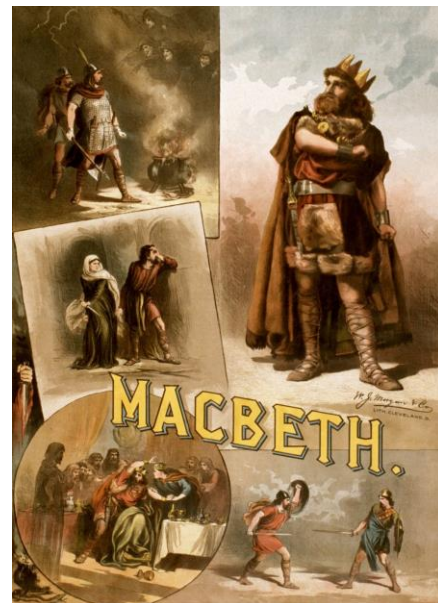
Shakespeare ensures we root for Macbeth, wanting him to succeed and avoid detection, even though we know what he's doing is wrong. This creates a big **moral crisis** for the audience, guaranteeing they will be more engaged with the topic and debate it. Our investment in Macbeth also makes his turn towards pure villainy more painful to bear. Even though we relate with his desires and are, to a certain extent, on his side, we are forced to admit that he is wrong, and that his tragic death is deserved and just.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

Ambitious

Unchecked ambition is Macbeth's undoing in the play. If he had been patient, and waited for the title of king to come to him, he would have improved his position in society and kept his soul fit for Heaven. Under the forceful hand of Lady Macbeth, though, Macbeth gives into **temptation**. As a result, he ends the play in a much lower position than when he started. He loses grace, favour, and respect - from his peers and from the audience.

The issue, Shakespeare argues, isn't ambition itself, but the way Macbeth allows himself to be controlled by it. We know this because other characters, like Banquo and Malcolm, show ambition, but know how to restrain themselves. They can judge the situation, and recognise when it's best not to listen to their desires for the good of themselves, their loved ones, and the country they serve. Macbeth, on the other hand, is **oblivious to morality and natural order**.





Shakespeare shows his audience that ambition is a sin when it goes against God's will for the way things are meant to be. By killing Duncan to become king, Macbeth fights his way up the Chain of Being. Think of it like swimming in a river: Macbeth goes against the current, led by his ambition, and this is what is so dangerous and shocking. Shakespeare seems to want to teach his audience the **importance of self-awareness, conscience, and self-restraint**. You should be content with God's plans for you. You should control your ambition, and not let your ambition control you. At a time when people were plotting to kill the king and fear of espionage (spying) was rife, these were very relevant and important messages.

Guilty

Immediately after the murder, Macbeth becomes a man who is **guilt-ridden** and **tragically remorseful**. He has to live with what he's done, and with the knowledge that there is no undoing it. His guilt makes him a **nihilistic figure**, a character tormented by his own conscience. He is surrounded by blood, darkness, and death. Although unchecked ambition is what causes Macbeth's downfall, his guilt makes his undoing unbearable for him and the audience.

What might have been a historical or political play that follows the righteous uprising against a tyrannical king becomes a **psychological tragedy** because of how Shakespeare follows Macbeth's **mental state**. Macbeth's ambition propels him into **unescapable regret**, suggesting that the real punishment for regicide isn't execution, but guilt. Even when no one suspects him of foul play, Macbeth is troubled and cannot enjoy the life he sacrificed his immortal soul (what Christians believed lived on after death and went to Heaven or Hell) for. Shakespeare suggests that the conscience, or inner voice of God, that we all have ensures that no crime or sin can go unpunished. He proposes that no one can cope with the guilt our conscience creates, nor can we live with the knowledge of our own evil.



Violent

The play of 'Macbeth' is filled with **violence** and **conflict**, both **internal** and **external**. No one suffers more from this than Macbeth himself. The smallest scale of conflict he endures is his **internal conflict**, and the largest is the conflict between **free will and fate** that takes over the whole universe. Similarly, the conflicts between **good and evil**, between the **supernatural and the natural**, and between **appearances and reality**, go beyond Macbeth and rage across Scotland.

Violence is largely associated with **manhood** and **masculinity**, particularly by Macbeth. Whenever his manliness is challenged, Macbeth responds by committing a violent, ruthless act. He represses any feelings of fear or doubt, viewing them as signs of **weakness** and **femininity**. Furthermore, cruelty and violence are linked with **masculine ideals of honour and bravery**. Men are supposed to be noble and strong leaders, and Macbeth interprets this as bloodlust. Shakespeare could be implying that ideals such as bravery and honour are used to disguise injustice. Warfare and violence are presented as necessary and respectable measures, allowing men to follow selfish emotion rather than selfless logic.

Importantly, Shakespeare demonstrates how violence and bloodshed are used to **maintain tyranny and corruption**. They are **tools** for bad kings. Unlike Duncan's reign, which is portrayed as a nurturing, fruitful harvest, Macbeth's is plagued by disease and murder. If he was an effective ruler who obtained his power through fair means, he wouldn't need to use violence to protect himself. As it is, his power is wrongly gained, and his **reign is corrupt**.

→ He declares that **"blood will have blood"**. Shakespeare argues that violence breeds more violence. Macbeth is trapped in a **cycle** of bloodshed and conflict.

Macbeth, furthermore, is at the centrepiece of the power plays. In many ways, what matters more in the play is the **fight for power**, rather than the power itself. There is a constant **push and pull** between the main players, as each tries to keep hold of power. Shakespeare portrays power as being elusive and tricky - its possession can't be guaranteed. This is what drives men insane: they crave power, but what they have is never enough, and they live with the constant threat of losing it all. Macbeth is an example of this. He kills for more and more power, finding that what he already has isn't enough to satisfy himself. Again, he is trapped in a **cycle of his own making**.

KEY MOMENTS

Beginning (1.1 - 2.2)

We never really get to see what Macbeth is like at the very beginning of the play. The first time he's on stage, he meets the Witches, and their prophecies are the **catalyst** (cause) for his change in character.

From what we hear of him, Macbeth sounds like an impressive man. The determined way he fights for Scotland in battle suggests bravery, skill, and loyalty to his country. However, for the opening scenes Macbeth's character is plagued with **inconsistencies** and **contradictions**. We get the impression we are watching two different personalities fighting it out in front of us, each corresponding to a different destiny.

→ The idea of murdering Duncan surprises and shocks him, as if the suggestion came from a different person altogether.

→ With each scene that passes, he seems to have made the opposite choice to the scene before. His main **soliloquies** are **full of debate, deliberation, and anxiety**.

Already, we see a glimpse of the guilt that will haunt him after the murder takes place. We see his **moral compass** and **conscience** have a voice, but there are also moments where he seems heartless and dead set on being king regardless of consequence. Right up until he kills Duncan, it's not impossible that he could back out.

Another key trait that defines Macbeth's character in the opening scenes is his **weak will**. He takes the opinions and suggestions of others to heart and can't avoid being manipulated by them. Lady Macbeth, in particular, holds a lot of power over him. Linked to this is his **fragile sense of masculinity**. It's clear that Macbeth will do whatever it takes to prove himself and his manliness. You could argue that his weak will is entwined with his ambition, which is typically named as his **fatal flaw**. His ambition for power ties in with his **deflated ego**. The power he craves isn't supernatural or physical. What he wants is the title of king and the recognition it brings. Being king means his peers - and his wife - will have to respect him. It will be a testament to his masculinity, the ultimate proof of manly strength.

Middle (2.3 - 3.4)

Macbeth's **crisis of character** is at its most extreme during the middle of the play. The attributes and skills he possessed at the start don't make an appearance: he is **cowardly, indecisive, paranoid**. Most significantly, he is **consumed by guilt**.

- The conflict between ambition and conscience has evolved into a conflict between ambition and guilt.
- He deeply regrets what he's done and cannot bear to face it, yet another part of him isn't satisfied.
- His ambition drives him further and further into bloodshed and betrayal.

Macbeth's seemingly **inexorable** (unstoppable) descent into violence could also be attributed to his **paranoia**. As we discovered before, Macbeth's **public image** is very important to him, because it helps him believe he's still a good man. Though he kills people in cold blood, he doesn't do it without a reason. At least, in his eyes, he has a good reason. And that reason is always **protection**. Anyone who could defeat him or expose him is killed.

Part of what makes his guilt so difficult to bear is his revelation that power doesn't come with a guarantee. Murdering Duncan has taken a great toll on him, and he knows it, so he is frustrated that he put himself through so much for nothing. He believes he has to keep fighting to keep hold of his power.

As Act 3 comes to a close, Macbeth comes to a **resolution**. He decides to embrace his new life of violence, believing he has to see it through to the end. It's clear Macbeth thinks he has paid the price of murder by sacrificing his innocence and peace of mind, and he needs to make it worth the cost. This perspective marks the third and final part of his character development as we enter the final scenes of the play.

Ending (3.5 - 5.9)

As with the rest of the play, in the final acts it seems like two different Macbeths walk the stage. One is **violent and ruthless**, hellbent on furthering his own power and status, no matter the cost. The other is **dejected, dispirited**, and **nihilistic**, someone who knows his power is meaningless and is haunted by his own mortality, but can't do anything about either. He is friendless, loveless, and hopeless, as Shakespeare shows that killing your king and going against God will bring nothing but **misery** and **suffering**.

Undoubtedly, Macbeth has become a tyrant. To repress all feelings of guilt and regret, he **embraces violence and greed**. He wants to feel invincible and unstoppable - like God.

- We hear from his subjects and from Malcolm and Macduff that Scotland is in ruins because of Macbeth's brutal ruling style.
- We also know that, eventually, all of his followers and men betray him.
- Because he's not an authentic king, Shakespeare demonstrates that he can't inspire any authentic feelings of loyalty or love.

Macbeth's behaviour and actions give the impression that he doesn't care what anyone thinks of him. He believes he's above criticism or condemnation because he's king, and fortune is on his side.

Similarly, Macbeth's **hubris** peaks in Act 4, as he believes he is **immune to fate and higher powers**.

Hecate tells us as such when she addresses the Witches. Macbeth has lost sight of his humanity and weaknesses, so that he's possessed by arrogance, confidence, and pride.

- His slaughtering of Macduff's innocent family implies he believes he shouldn't be limited by moral or social rules, and exploits his power as king to kill whenever he pleases.
- The way he immediately resorts to murder suggests he has an exaggerated view of his own importance, because he acts as if his slight discomfort warrants bloodshed.

The battle that closes the play gives us an opportunity to directly compare how Macbeth behaves at the beginning and end. Some of the same qualities of bravery, righteous violence, and determination have resurfaced by Act 5, but he's a different, broken man. He has lost everything and everyone: an army of one, fighting for himself rather than for his king and country.



RELATIONSHIPS

Lady Macbeth | Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are incredibly **ambitious** and **power-hungry**. Most of what we see of their marriage is their **plotting and conspiring**. Both are **weakened by guilt and paranoia** as the plot develops, and by the end have isolated themselves from each other. The main difference between them is their confidence: Lady Macbeth is **determined**, **ruthless**, **strong-willed**, and **self-assured**, whereas Macbeth is **uncertain**, **weak-willed**, and **hesitant**.



The **power dynamic** between them switches. Initially, Lady Macbeth holds the power in their relationship, despite being in an inferior position according to society. She relies on Macbeth for power and status, but controls Macbeth like he's her own puppet. Eventually, Macbeth breaks away from her, plotting without her and keeping secrets.

Duncan | Both Duncan and Macbeth are kings of Scotland, but one is the rightful king, while the other is a detested tyrant. Duncan is renowned for his fatherly love and attention for his subjects, whereas Macbeth's reign is associated with Hell and the Devil.

At first, they appear to be on the same side. Macbeth is Duncan's loyal Thane, someone Duncan relies on for guidance and protection, and Macbeth is proud to serve his king and country. Duncan's trust in Macbeth is misplaced, as Macbeth's loyalty is weak.

Malcom | Just like Macbeth, Malcom wants to be king. Unlike Macbeth, Malcom is the **rightful heir to the throne**, and has been chased away from what's his by Macbeth's actions. Macbeth is associated with disorder, chaos, and sin, while Malcom is a **symbol for peace, purity, and order**.

Macduff | Macduff is Macbeth's **foil** in the play, meaning **he highlights the flaws Macbeth has**. Both start out as Duncan's Thanes and are highly respected in the courts and in battle, but when Macbeth takes the throne, Macduff suspects him. Macduff chooses allegiance to his country, unlike Macbeth, and runs to England to join Malcom. He is a **symbol for honour, nobility, and selflessness**.

Banquo | Banquo is Macbeth's best friend, another highly respected soldier. He, too, hears the Witches' prophecies, but chooses honour and loyalty over power. He resists his greed and temptations. He is physical proof of Macbeth's corruption and paranoia. He shows it's possible to hear such promising prophecies and not turn to murder, and his inside knowledge of Macbeth means he can expose him.

Macbeth's decision to murder Banquo, someone who meant a great deal to him, shows how **overwhelmed** he is by ambition and paranoia. The **memory** of the murder is something he can't live with, as shown by the appearance of Banquo's accusatory, blood-stained ghost.

Another difference between Banquo and Macbeth is highlighted in the Witches' prophecies. Though he won't be king himself, his sons will be kings. The Witches say he will be happier and greater than Macbeth. Therefore, Banquo is a **symbol for honour, loyalty**, and **prosperity**: his legacy is much better than Macbeth's.

KEY QUOTES

"I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself / And falls on th'other." - Macbeth, (A1S7)

- Macbeth knows that the only argument for killing Duncan is to **satisfy his ambition**. He also knows that blindly obeying ambition will end in disaster. The phrase "**o'erleaps itself / And falls on th'other**" suggests ambition makes people think illogically, so that they overestimate their own abilities and get ahead of themselves. Additionally, it portrays ambition as **self-destructive**. It "**o'erleaps itself**" rather than having someone or something else make it "**o'erleap**".
- The **metaphor** of horse-racing continues throughout this whole line of thought, mimicking the way people treat life as a race or competition. The **motif** evokes the sense of a rush to the finish, with everyone panicked as they chase down power and success.
- In the **metaphor**, Macbeth sees himself as both jockey and horse. Shakespeare could be implying that Macbeth is trying to control his ambition, but feels like his ambition will end up controlling him. As he is reduced from the jockey to the horse, he becomes more **animalistic**.
- This reflects the way the Jacobean believed the only thing that separated humans from animals was **reason or logic**. If a man lost his reason and acted irrationally, he was a beast. Macbeth is aware that ambition can make him act mindlessly, in the same way an animal would.

“For brave Macbeth - well he deserves that name - / Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel, / Which smoked with bloody execution, / Like Valour’s minion carved out his passage / Till he faced the slave, / Which ne’er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him, / Till he unseamed him from the nave to th’chaps / And fixed his head upon our battlements.” - Captain, (A1S2)

- This recount of the battle against Norway and the rebels portrays Macbeth as the hero Scotland needs. He is “**brave**” and highly skilled with his sword - both **traits** typically associated with **heroism**. Shakespeare shows how violence and bloodshed are romanticised in the context of war, with impressive **imagery** such as “**disdaining Fortune**” and “**smoked with bloody execution**”. Because Macbeth is fighting for his country, his actions are righteous and honourable. It’s interesting to note how, when he behaves in the same ruthless way later in the play, he’s viewed as tyrannical and horrific. Shakespeare could be **criticising** the **culture of aggressive masculinity** and **honourable warfare**.
- The **metaphor** “**smoked with bloody execution**” implies violence is a **destructive force**, like fire. Shakespeare combines smoke and blood, two **motifs** that recur throughout the play and are linked to Macbeth’s guilt. The **imagery** could be an **allusion** to the flaming swords featured in the Bible.
- Angels and other representatives of God were granted flaming swords - for example to guard the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve were thrown out. This link portrays Macbeth as a soldier of God, suggesting he fights on the side of good and has God’s blessing. Shakespeare shows how highly respected and admired Macbeth was by his peers.
- Macbeth is referred to with the **simile** “**like Valour’s minion**”, portraying him as the **epitome of courage and chivalry**. “**Valour**” refers to a demonstration of courage in the face of danger, especially in battle, while “**minion**” suggests a loyal follower. This implies Macbeth can be trusted because he will always show courage in battle, and is dedicated to victory in the face of defeat. He is a saving grace for Scotland. Alternatively, “**minion**” **connotes** a slave or an unimportant servant. This would mean Macbeth is the inferior servant of a greater power, in this case Valour. This implies he will blindly turn to violence and conflict, and foreshadows his vicious and brutal ambition.
- Another interesting aspect of this quote is how it perfectly summarises the events of the play. Describing how Macbeth is “**disdaining Fortune**” alludes to his later hubris and defiance as he tries to dodge destiny. The description of how he



ruthlessly and mercilessly slaughters his opposition, “**unseam[ing] him from the nave to th’chaps**”, predicts his **tyrannical behaviour** as he chooses to murder any possible threat to his power. Lastly, the traitorous Macdonald has “**his head fixed upon [the] battlements**”. The same fate meets Macbeth in the final scene of the play. This implies that Macbeth had the ability to be evil within him all along. Alternatively, Shakespeare may be demonstrating how evil will always be punished. The balance between good and evil is maintained, so the same paths are followed again and again as God keeps order.

“Stars, hide your fires; / Let not light see my black and deep desires: / The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be, / Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.” - Macbeth (A1S4)

- This quote exemplifies the contradictory, fragmented nature of Macbeth’s character. The **duality** between light and dark, such as “**stars**” and “**black and deep desires**”, is a **symbol** for the conflict between Macbeth’s conscience, or moral compass, and his ambition. Here, he finally admits to himself that he wants to become king no matter what, but isn’t prepared to face the reality of what that means. The **metaphor** “**the eye wink at the hand**” is a synecdoche, which is a literary technique where **a part is used to represent the whole**. In this case, the “**eye**” represents Macbeth’s consciousness or awareness - his mind - while the “**hand**” represents his actions and reality. He wants to turn a blind eye to his own murderous deeds. Despite it being what “**the eye fears**”, he wants it to be “**done**”. This **paradox** causes a lot of **tension** and tragedy for Macbeth. It’s impossible to be unaware of your own actions, but he is torn apart in his attempts to do just that.
- The phrase “**stars, hide your fires**” could refer to several things. Firstly, the “**stars**” might represent the gods or the heavens. In this case, Macbeth doesn’t want them to see his sins, in the hopes that he will still be blessed by them and have salvation. Equally, he fears their judgement and disappointment. Similarly, “**stars**” could be previous heros. It was common in mythology for heros to be immortalised in the stars, like with constellations. Macbeth still wants his chance at being a hero to his country. Alternatively, asking the “**stars**” to “**hide [their] fires**” could show how Macbeth wants to operate in darkness. This means he can avoid detection from others, but more importantly, doesn’t have to witness his own corruption and villainy.

“Out, out, brief candle! / Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more. It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.” - Macbeth (A5S5)

- Macbeth knows his end is near at this point in the play. The change in tone and the pathos (feeling of pity and sadness) this whole soliloquy evokes gives the impression that Macbeth has suddenly awakened from his stupor. His wife is dead, his kingdom is falling apart, and he is truly alone. All his ambition and sacrifice has been for nothing.
- The **imagery** and **metaphors** used in this excerpt emphasise how **life is a facade**, with no purpose or meaning to it. The **nouns** “**candle**”, “**shadow**”, “**player**”, and “**tale**” all **connote** imitation and emptiness. Also, they are all temporary or delicate. Shakespeare suggests that everyone is **insignificant**, a mere candle flame compared to the light of the whole universe. The **semantic field of facade** could show how people, particularly Macbeth, focus on the wrong things in life, so that they are looking at “**shadow[s]**” or “**tale[s]**” rather than the reality.
- Macbeth has been so fixated on his ambition and power that he has missed what really matters - or, in a more **nihilistic interpretation**, he never realised that nothing really matters. His ambition can’t live on past his death, and nor can his power. His crisis is caused by the undeniable truth of his own mortality, which nothing can contend with. For all his “**sound and fury**” - his violence and painful guilt - he has accomplished nothing everlasting: it signifies “**nothing**”.
- The extended **metaphor** of theatre is a meta (self-aware) technique by Shakespeare, almost breaking the fourth wall. He suggests that everything is playing a part rather than being their authentic selves, so that appearances don't match reality. For Macbeth, he was playing the part of a moral and righteous servant, when really he was a murderer. You could also argue he was playing the part of being the chosen king. Another implication of this **motif** links to the **influence of fate and fortune**. No one is in charge of their own lives: like Macbeth, their lives are dictated by external forces.