

1

Act 1: Fair and foul

How does Shakespeare establish the play?



Your progress in this unit:

- understand and explain Shakespeare’s choice for opening the play
- explore the way he establishes characters and ideas
- analyse Shakespeare’s use of language and imagery
- develop a response to a writing task.

GETTING STARTED - THE PLAY AND YOU

Ambition - good or bad?

Ambition is a major **theme** in *Macbeth*. When is ambition a good thing? How can it be bad?

- 1 Work with a partner. Look at the following list. Which of these do you think are good ambitions? Which do you think might be unhealthy? Why? Discuss with a partner.

- be rich
- be the first person in my family to go to university
- be successful
- gain 6/8/10 GCSEs with top grades
- get Grade 8 cello before I leave school
- be powerful
- be a supermodel
- be a Premier League footballer
- get a black belt in judo
- be famous
- be able to drive
- run a marathon
- own a Ferrari
- have my own home

GETTING CLOSER - FOCUS ON DETAILS

Establishing the play

Act 1 in a play is mostly about ‘establishing’ important information for the audience. In Act 1 of *Macbeth*, Shakespeare establishes the plot, the atmosphere, the **characters** and the main ideas of the play. He grabs his audience’s attention by his use of language and dramatic devices.

Read the summary of what happens in Act 1.

- 1 Using information from this summary, work in groups to discuss the key things that are ‘established’ in Act 1.
- 2 Write a five-line voiceover for a ‘trailer’ video for a new film of *Macbeth*. How will you make people want to go and see it? Use key words and short quotations that sum up the story.

Now read Act 1.



Key terms

- theme:** an idea or concept that recurs throughout a play.
- characters:** the people in a story; even when based on real people, characters in a play are invented or fictionalised.

Scene 1

The play opens dramatically with thunder and lightning. Three Witches plan to meet Macbeth.

Scene 2

A messenger tells King Duncan that the rebels have been defeated in battle. The Thane of Cawdor, who has betrayed the king, is executed. His title is given to Macbeth, and Macbeth and Banquo are both honoured for their bravery.

Scene 3

The Witches foretell that Macbeth will be Thane of Cawdor, then king. They also tell Banquo that his sons will be kings. Ross arrives and announces that Macbeth is now Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth starts to have '**horrible imaginings**' about being king.

Scene 4

Duncan honours Macbeth and Banquo, then names his son Malcolm as the next king. Macbeth expresses his '**black and deep desires**' to be king. Duncan plans to visit Macbeth in his castle.

Scene 5

Lady Macbeth reads a letter from Macbeth about the Witches' prophecy. When she learns that Duncan is to stay in their castle, she asks spirits to fill her with '**cruelty**'. When Macbeth arrives she tells him of her plans to murder the king.

Scene 6

King Duncan arrives at Macbeth's castle, which he says has a '**pleasant seat**'. Lady Macbeth greets him warmly. The king shows his trust in his hosts.

Scene 7

Macbeth struggles with the plan to kill Duncan, who is a guest in his house. Lady Macbeth persuades him not to be a '**coward**'. Macbeth agrees to do this '**terrible**' act.



GCSE English Literature for AQA: Macbeth

Context: the wider picture

‘Context’ is a word you will often hear and read during your study of *Macbeth*. It refers to the things that are going on around a piece of literature. For a play like *Macbeth* these include:

- **the setting:** when and where it takes place and what was happening at the time. *Macbeth* is set in Scotland sometime around the 11th century.
- **how it was first performed:** *Macbeth* was written and first performed in London in about 1606, when public theatres (such as the Globe) were a new idea. The audience came from all walks of life.

Find out what it was like to see *Macbeth* at the Globe theatre on Cambridge Elevate.

Contexts

Macbeth was performed in front of the new king, James I, who was the patron of Shakespeare’s acting company, The King’s Men. James knew the story well, as it included his ancestors Banquo and Fleance. In addition to this, the king was very interested in witchcraft and had written a book about it. In retelling the story of the historical Macbeth, Shakespeare was flattering James as well as using an interesting tale for the purposes of his drama.

The supernatural atmosphere

Shakespeare’s drama begins with the Witches. The ‘foul’ setting creates a context where **supernatural** things can and do happen. The Witches’ performance establishes a mood of threat and fear:

Fair is foul, and foul is fair,
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

Witches: Act 1 Scene 1, lines 12-13

- 1

Read Act 1 Scene 1.

a

What are the Witches planning to do?

b

How does Shakespeare suggest that the Witches know what is going to happen in the future? Identify lines or words that suggest this.

c

Notice how Shakespeare uses language to set the mood of this scene. List all the references to darkness and atmosphere you can find. Create a montage or mind map of any references you find using an image or colour scheme of your choice.
- 2

Look back at the summary of all the scenes in Act 1 at the beginning of this unit.

a

Why do you think Shakespeare chose to begin the play with the Witches rather than the entrance of King Duncan that begins Scene 2?



Fair is foul and foul is fair,
Hover through the fog
and filthy air.

Witches: Act 1 Scene 1, lines 12-13

- b** What do the Witches add to the opening of the play?
 - c** What would be the effect of removing this first scene?
- 3** Look at Act 1 Scene 3. Macbeth’s opening line in the play is ‘**So foul and fair a day I have not seen**’ (line 36). What might Macbeth mean by the words ‘**foul**’ and ‘**fair**’? Decide which of the following statements is true. Give reasons for your answer.
- a** Macbeth is referring to the weather.
 - b** Macbeth is referring to their recent success in the battle.
 - c** Macbeth’s comment is in reference to the light.
 - d** Macbeth’s meaning is unclear. Like the Witches, he is speaking in riddles.



Watch actors discussing the meaning of this line on Cambridge Elevate.

- 4** The same words are used by the Witches in Scene 1. Why do you think Shakespeare transfers them to Macbeth in this scene?
- 5** Describe what the Witches promise Macbeth in Act 1 Scene 3. How does he react? Use quotations to support your answer.
- 6** Find either three video clips or three still images of Act 1 Scene 1 taken from different films or theatre productions. How does each one:
- a** establish the setting
 - b** emphasise the supernatural
 - c** create fear
 - d** deliver the important lines about ‘**foul**’/‘**fair**’?

Look carefully at:

- lighting
- staging (scenery and props)
- actors’ movements and gestures
- sound effects.

Setting context in performance

The opening line gives any lighting designer or director a clue about what kind of atmosphere they should aim to create in a theatre. The line also carries a number of possible **connotations**. An actor playing Macbeth must decide which connotations are most important and consider how to show them. Remember that in the opening scene – unknown to Macbeth – the Witches are on stage and about to reveal themselves to him and Banquo for the first time.

Shakespeare’s language in the first scenes may subtly hint at what is to come later in the play, particularly how Macbeth will believe the Witches’ prophecies and be drawn into committing evil deeds.

- 1** What have you already heard or seen about Macbeth that could be described as either ‘**foul**’ or ‘**fair**’?
- 2** Work in pairs or small groups to explore different ways of delivering aloud the ‘**foul and fair**’ speech in Act 1 Scene 1, lines 12–13, or write a few lines of instruction or advice to an actor on how they might speak these lines in performance.



Read more about the context and setting of *Macbeth* in Unit 7.



Key terms

context: the historical circumstances of a piece of writing, which affect what an author wrote and the way they wrote it. Context also includes the way the writing was performed (in the case of plays such as *Macbeth*) and received by audiences.

supernatural: something that cannot be explained by the known laws of science and nature.

connotation: an idea or a feeling linked to the main meaning of a word – what it implies or suggests in addition to its literal meaning.

GCSE English Literature for AQA: Macbeth

Establishing character relationships

Writers establish and develop characters in several ways, including through:

- **what they say** (their language, vocabulary and images)
- **what they do** (their actions, their reactions to events and their expressions of feeling)
- **how others respond to them or speak about them** (the language used to describe them and how people act or behave in their presence).

1 Shakespeare uses Act 1 to establish characters and their relationships. Copy and complete the following table to summarise what Shakespeare reveals about the central characters and how he engages the audience. Ask yourself the following questions:

- a What do we know about the characters?
- b What do we **want** to know?



Watch a video about King Duncan's character on Cambridge Elevate.

	The Witches	King Duncan	Macbeth	Lady Macbeth	Banquo
What do we know?					He is Macbeth's friend. He has a son. He stands in the way of Macbeth becoming king. According to the prophecy, his family will gain the throne.
What do we want to know?					How will his friendship with Macbeth change? Will Lady Macbeth kill him and his son? Is the Witches' prophecy true?

Macbeth's reputation

Following the noise of battle off stage, Act 1 Scenes 2 and 3 introduce Macbeth and establish him as a hero. Three characters praise Macbeth in his absence: the Captain, Duncan and Ross. He is admiringly reported to have been '**brave**' and '**noble**' in battle, compared to '**eagles**' and a '**lion**'.

1 Identify words or phrases used to describe Macbeth in Scene 2 that help to establish his reputation. How is he presented by others?

- 2
- a

Why do you think Shakespeare introduces us to Macbeth in this way?
- b

Which words or images from the Captain’s description of Macbeth are most striking?
- c

What links can you find between the way Macbeth is described here at the start of the play and events later on? What do you later discover that Macbeth is capable of?



Watch a video about how Macbeth’s character is established on Cambridge Elevate.

Character and language

Look at how the Captain describes Macbeth:

For brave Macbeth – well he deserves that name –
Disdaining Fortune, with brandished steel,
Which smoked with bloody execution,
Like Valour’s minion carved out his passage
Till he faced the slave,

Captain: Act 1 Scene 2, lines 16–20

- 1
- What do these words make you think of? What connotations do they carry? Copy and complete the following table to record your answers.

Words used in relation to Macbeth	Associated words or connotations
‘carve’	meat is carved; butchery; slaughter of people like animals
‘Disdaining Fortune’	
‘brandished steel’	
‘smoked’	
‘bloody execution’	
‘valour’	

PUTTING DETAILS TO USE

Establishing Macbeth’s character in Act 1

We find out a lot about Macbeth in Act 1, both from his own words and actions and from what other people say about him. This information helps us to build up a picture of the sort of man he is.

- 1
- In the middle of a blank sheet of paper, write the question ‘What do we find out about Macbeth in Act 1?’

Around this question, write down what you have found out about Macbeth’s character during the first act of the play. Think about:

- a
- what he says
- b
- what he does
- c
- how he reacts to what happens
- d
- what other people say about him.

- 2
- Work in small groups. Choose one person to take the role of an actor who is going to play Macbeth in a new production. They want to find out about their character at the start of the play. The other members of the group have just two minutes to coach ‘Macbeth’ and give him ideas. They must be based only on Act 1.

At the end of the two minutes, the actor should give a summary of what they have found out.

GCSE English Literature for AQA: Macbeth

Macbeth and the witches

The Witches’ prophecies in Act 1 Scene 3 fill Macbeth and Banquo with conflicting emotions.

- 1

How does Shakespeare make Macbeth and Banquo seem interested in what the Witches have to say?
- 2

What do you think is going through the minds of the two characters as they hear the prophecies? Write some ‘thought bubbles’ in modern English for:

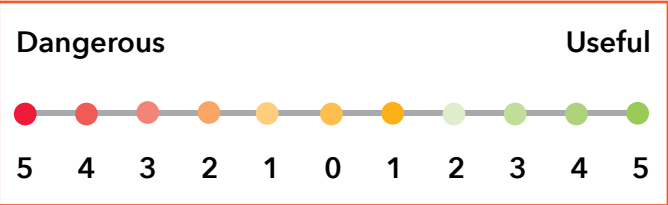
a

Macbeth

b

Banquo.
- 3

Do you think the Witches are more dangerous or useful to Macbeth? Look at the ratings line and decide where you would place the Witches. Discuss your rating with a partner, giving reasons for your choice.



Macbeth and Lady Macbeth

In Act 1 Scene 2, the audience learns about aspects of Macbeth’s character through the opinions of soldiers, lords and royalty. In Scenes 5–7, Shakespeare reveals aspects of Macbeth through the insight of the woman he lives with.

Lady Macbeth says that Macbeth is ‘**too full o’th’milk of human kindness**’. She shows her physical closeness to him by saying:

Your face, my thane, is as a book where men
May read strange matters.

Lady Macbeth: Act 1 Scene 5, lines 60–61

She also is seen to take control of events, instructing her husband how to behave and taking charge of the plans for Duncan’s murder:

look like th’innocent flower,
But be the serpent under’t.

Lady Macbeth: Act 1 Scene 5, lines 63–64

- 1

How well do you think Lady Macbeth knows her husband? Read Scene 5 and select three things she says about him that reveal important aspects of his character.
- 2

How does Lady Macbeth seem to control her husband? Identify any commands or instructions that she gives him.

Your face, my thane,
is as a book where men
May read strange matters.

Lady Macbeth: Act 1 Scene 5, lines 60–61





Learning checkpoint

How do you think Shakespeare wants you to view Macbeth’s character in the play so far?

1 Create a table like the one shown to investigate statements A-E.

- A** At the start of the play, Macbeth is a warm, friendly character with many good qualities.
- B** At the start of the play, Macbeth is already a murderous and dark figure whom we dislike.
- C** At the start of the play, Macbeth is shown to be capable of violence and cruelty but also to be much admired and respected.
- D** The Witches poison Macbeth’s character and mind with evil suggestions.
- E** The Witches merely exploit Macbeth’s own ambition and cruelty.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
A At the start of the play, Macbeth is a warm, friendly character with many good qualities. <i>Supporting quotations:</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
B At the start of the play, Macbeth is already a murderous and dark figure whom we dislike. <i>Supporting quotations:</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- a** After thinking about these statements or discussing them with others, decide the extent to which you agree with them.
- b** Find evidence in the form of quotations to support the statements. Which line or quotation would you use to prove or defend what you think about Macbeth’s character?
- c** Add your own original statements describing how you think Shakespeare wants you to feel about Macbeth in the opening three scenes. Provide evidence to support them.



Fill in the table on Cambridge Elevate.

GCSE English Literature for AQA: Macbeth

- 3 Shakespeare uses **soliloquy** to allow the audience to hear the thoughts of characters directly. Alone on stage in Act 1 Scene 7 (lines 1–28), Macbeth struggles with his conscience as he plots to kill King Duncan:

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 the murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself.

Macbeth: Act 1 Scene 7, lines 12–16

- a What reasons does Macbeth give as to why Duncan should trust him?
- b List five reasons why Macbeth should be afraid of killing Duncan.
- c List the reasons why you think he has to go ahead with the murder.

- 4 When his wife enters, Macbeth tells her that he ‘**will proceed no further in this business**’ (line 31).

Read through lines 35–59 in Act 1 Scene 7.

- a How does Lady Macbeth persuade her husband to go ahead with the murder?
- b What does she accuse him of? Why does she think this will make him change his mind?



Explore two different interpretations of Act 1 Scene 7 on Cambridge Elevate.



Read more on characters and characterisation in *Macbeth* in Unit 8.

Who should against the
murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself.

Macbeth: Act 1 Scene 7, lines 15–16



GETTING IT INTO WRITING

Writing about Shakespeare’s presentation of Macbeth

Complete this assignment on Cambridge Elevate.

- 1
- Drawing together the progress you have made in this unit, write a response to the following question:

How does Shakespeare present the character of Macbeth in Act 1?

You should write about:

- a
- how Shakespeare develops Macbeth’s character in Act 1
- b
- how the Witches’ prophecies and Lady Macbeth influence Macbeth.
- c
- Whether Shakespeare encourages any sympathy or admiration for Macbeth.

Use some of the following prompts to help structure your response.

- This is clear when he says ...

The line ... suggests ...
- For example the word ... implies ...

For example the audience can tell that ...
- We can tell that he feels ... by ...

It is obvious that he wants ...
- He explores the idea of ...

His language is full of ...
- When the audience hears him say ...

An audience would feel ...
- Macbeth shares feelings of ...

Lady Macbeth’s response suggests ...

Learning checkpoint

When writing about ‘how Shakespeare presents’ you will need to consider how a character is shown to think and behave at various times in the play. Macbeth, for example, behaves and speaks very differently at the opening of the play and at the end of Act 1. You will also need to show that you understand how the character is presented through the language that they use.

How will I know I’ve done this well?

✓

The best answers will explore why Shakespeare wanted to show different sides to a character, and analyse the way he uses language to make his audience think and feel. They offer a personal response and include supportive detail from the text.

✓

Good answers will explain how Shakespeare has made the characters interesting and believable, and ensured that what happens is interesting to watch. They will include references to well-chosen examples.

✓

Weaker answers will describe a character as a real person and what happens in the play as if it was true. It will not include many examples or mention what Shakespeare does as a writer.

GCSE English Literature for AQA: Macbeth

GETTING FURTHER

Investigating soliloquy

- 1
- Compare Shakespeare’s use of soliloquy in Act 1 Scene 7 with the following. What does each soliloquy tell us about Macbeth?
- a

Macbeth’s soliloquy in Act 1 Scene 3, where he reflects on the Witches’ prophecies
- b

Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy in Act 1 Scene 5, lines 13–28, where she shows how well she understands Macbeth.
- 2
- List all the soliloquies in Act 1, then identify the purpose of each one. Is it meant to:
- a

reveal how a character responds to what has happened (**characterisation**)
- b

reveal what a character is going to do
- c

reveal private thoughts and feelings that are overheard by another character on stage (**dramatic irony**).



Key terms

characterisation: the way a writer paints a picture of a particular character, through their words, actions and reactions.

dramatic irony: when the audience knows something that the characters on stage are unaware of.

Shakespeare in performance: stagecraft and theatricality

- ‘Stagecraft’ refers to the ways in which actors, directors and designers use the stage for maximum effect. Exploring stagecraft means analysing the use of space, props, costumes and technical elements to enhance the drama.
- 1
- Look at the quotations opposite. Write a short comment on the way that each one offers an opportunity for great drama on stage. Think about these questions:
- a

What stagecraft does Shakespeare encourage in order to create a dark and thrilling atmosphere?
- b

What does each of the quotations suggest could happen on stage?
- c

What challenges or opportunities do they present to a director?



Connect to the text

When you are writing about the dramatic or theatrical effect of a scene or moment, look for the clues in the text and include them in your answer.

In Act 1 Scene 3, for example, the audience knows that Macbeth’s arrival is signalled by a drum because the Witch says ‘**A drum, a drum; Macbeth doth come**’. The rhyme in this line suggests the beating of a drum and gives a clue as to how Shakespeare wanted the drum beat to sound.



Stars, hide your fires,
Let not light see my black and
deep desires

Macbeth: Act 1 Scene 4, lines 50–51

What bloody man is that?

(of the Captain) Duncan: Act 1 Scene 2, line 1

Here I have a pilot’s thumb,
Wrecked as homeward he did come.

First Witch: Act 1 Scene 3, lines 26-27

they meant to bathe in reeking wounds

(of Macbeth and Banquo) Captain: Act 1
Scene 2, line 39

A drum, a drum;
Macbeth doth come.

Third Witch: Act 1 Scene 3, lines 28-29

But I am faint, my gashes cry for help.

Captain: Act 1 Scene 2, line 42

What are these,
So withered and so wild in their attire,
that look not like th’inhabitants o’th’earth

Banquo: Act 1 Scene 3, lines 37-39

Thunder. Enter the three Witches

Stage direction: Act 1 Scene 3

Witches vanish.

Banquo: ... whither are they vanished?
Macbeth: Into the air, and what seemed
corporal,
Melted as breath into the wind.

Act 1 Scene 3 lines 78-80

First Witch: Where hast thou been sister?
Second Witch: Killing swine

Witches: Act 1 Scene 3, lines 1-2

Stars, hide your fires,
Let not light see my black and deep desires

Macbeth: Act 1 Scene 4, lines 50-51

