Act I
William Shakespeare
Objectives

• Analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.
• Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a drama.
• Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a test contribute to its overall structure.
• Write arguments to support claims in an analysis, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
• Draw evidence from literary or informational tests to support analysis, reflection, and research.
Can you ever be too ambitious?
Themes
Ambition

- *Macbeth* is a play about ambition run amok. The *weird sisters’* prophecies spur both *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth* to try to fulfill their ambitions, but the witches never *make* Macbeth or his wife do anything. Macbeth and his wife act on their own to fulfill their deepest desires. Macbeth, a good general and, by all accounts before the action of the play, a good man, allows his ambition to overwhelm him and becomes a murdering, paranoid maniac. Lady Macbeth, once she begins to put into actions the once-hidden thoughts of her mind, is crushed by guilt.

- Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth want to be great and powerful, and sacrifice their morals to achieve that goal. By contrasting these two characters with others in the play, such as *Banquo, Duncan,* and *Macduff,* who also want to be great leaders but refuse to allow ambition to come before honor, Macbeth shows how naked ambition, freed from any sort of moral or social conscience, ultimately takes over every other characteristic of a person. Unchecked ambition, *Macbeth* suggests, can never be fulfilled, and therefore quickly grows into a monster that will destroy anyone who gives into it.
Fate

• From the moment the weird sisters tell Macbeth and Banquo their prophecies, both the characters and the audience are forced to wonder about fate. Is it real? Is action necessary to make it come to pass, or will the prophecy come true no matter what one does? Different characters answer these questions in different ways at different times, and the final answers are ambiguous—as fate always is.

• Unlike Banquo, Macbeth acts: he kills Duncan. Macbeth tries to master fate, to make fate conform to exactly what he wants. But, of course, fate doesn’t work that way. By trying to master fate once, Macbeth puts himself in the position of having to master fate always. At every instant, he has to struggle against those parts of the witches’ prophecies that don’t favor him. Ultimately, Macbeth becomes so obsessed with his fate that he becomes delusional: he becomes unable to see the half-truths behind the witches’ prophecies. By trying to master fate, he brings himself to ruin.
Violence

• To call *Macbeth* a violent play is an understatement. It begins in battle, contains the murder of men, women, and children, and ends not just with a climactic siege but the suicide of Lady Macbeth and the beheading of its main character, Macbeth. In the process of all this bloodshed, *Macbeth* makes an important point about the nature of violence: every violent act, even those done for selfless reasons, seems to lead inevitably to the next. The violence through which Macbeth takes the throne, as Macbeth himself realizes, opens the way for others to try to take the throne for themselves through violence. So Macbeth must commit more violence, and more violence, until violence is all he has left. As Macbeth himself says after seeing Banquo’s ghost, “blood will to blood.” Violence leads to violence, a vicious cycle.
Nature and the Unnatural

• In medieval times, it was believed that the health of a country was directly related to the goodness and moral legitimacy of its king. If the King was good and just, then the nation would have good harvests and good weather. If there was political order, then there would be natural order. *Macbeth* shows this connection between the political and natural world: when Macbeth disrupts the social and political order by murdering Duncan and usurping the throne, nature goes haywire. Incredible storms rage, the earth tremors, animals go insane and eat each other. The unnatural events of the physical world emphasize the horror of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s acts, and mirrors the warping of their souls by ambition.

• Also note the way that different characters talk about nature in the play. Duncan and Malcolm use nature metaphors when they speak of kingship—they see themselves as gardeners and want to make their realm grow and flower. In contrast, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth either try to hide from nature (wishing the stars would disappear) or to use nature to hide their cruel designs (being the serpent hiding beneath the innocent flower). The implication is that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, once they’ve given themselves to the extreme selfishness of ambition, have themselves become unnatural.
Manhood

• Over and over again in *Macbeth*, characters discuss or debate about manhood: Lady Macbeth challenges Macbeth when he decides not to kill Duncan, Banquo refuses to join Macbeth in his plot, Lady Macduff questions Macduff’s decision to go to England, and on and on.

• Through these challenges, *Macbeth* questions and examines manhood itself. Does a true man take what he wants no matter what it is, as Lady Macbeth believes? Or does a real man have the strength to restrain his desires, as Banquo believes? All of *Macbeth* can be seen as a struggle to answer this question about the nature and responsibilities of manhood.
Act I, Scene I

- As a storm rages, **three witches** appear, speaking in rhyming, paradoxical couplets: “when the battle’s lost and won” (1.1.4); “fair is foul, and foul is fair” (1.1.10). They agree to meet again on the heath (plain) when the battle now raging ends. There they’ll meet **Macbeth**.

- *The witches’ rhyming speech makes them seem inhuman, ominous, and paranormal, which, in fact, they are.*
Act I, Scene II

• At a military camp, King Duncan of Scotland, his sons Malcolm and Donalbain, and the Thane of Lennox wait for news of the war. A captain enters, covered in so much blood he is almost unrecognizable. The captain tells them of the state of the battle against the invading Norwegians and the Scottish rebels Macdonald and the Thane of Cawdor. Two Scottish nobleman have been especially brave, Macbeth (the Thane of Glamis) and Banquo. Macbeth killed Macdonald (“unseemed him from the nave to th’ chops” (1.2.22)).

• The Thane of Ross arrives, and describes how Macbeth defeated Sweno, the Norwegian King, who now begs for a truce. Duncan proclaims that the traitorous Thane of Cawdor shall be put to death, and that Macbeth shall be made Thane of Cawdor.

• The blood covering the captain makes him an unrecognizable monster, just as Macbeth, who in this scene is described as

• a noble hero who is brave and loyal to his king, will be transformed into a monster as he becomes “covered” with the metaphorical blood of those he kills to achieve his ambitions.

• Duncan rewards and trusts his subjects. This is the opposite of personal ambition. Ironically, though, he replaces one traitor with a much worse traitor.
Act I, Scene III

• On the heath the witches appear. They call themselves the “weird sisters” (1.3.30) and brag of their dread and magical deeds such as killing swine and cursing a sailor to waste away.

• Macbeth and Banquo enter. The witches hail Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and “king hereafter” (1.3.47). Banquo asks Macbeth why he seems to fear this good news, then questions the witches about his own future. They say that Banquo is “lesser than Macbeth and greater” (1.3.63) because though he’ll never be king, his descendants will.

• Macbeth asks how the witches know this information. But the witches vanish, making the two men wonder if they could have imagined the whole thing. Just then, Ross and Angus enter. They tell Macbeth that the old Thane of Cawdor was a traitor and that Duncan has made Macbeth the new Thane of Cawdor.

• The witches are established as both wicked and magically powerful.

• Does the fear Banquo notes in Macbeth signal that Macbeth’s doomed struggle against his ambition starts the instant he hears the prophecy?

• The prophecy is fulfilled and the witches’ power is proved to be genuine. The traitorous old Thane of Cawdor is replaced by Macbeth.
Act I, Scene III

• **Macbeth** and **Banquo** are shocked. Macbeth asks Banquo if he now thinks that his children will be king. Banquo seems unsure, and comments that “instruments of darkness” sometimes tell half truths to bring men to ruin.

• As **Banquo** talks with **Ross** and **Angus**, **Macbeth** ponders the prophecy. If it’s evil, why would it truly predict his being made Thane of Cawdor? If it’s good, why would he already be contemplating murder, a thought that makes “my seated heart knock at my ribs” (1.3.134-136)? Macbeth feels that he’s losing himself, and hopes that if fate says he’ll become king, he won’t have to act to make it happen.

• **Ross** and **Angus** think **Macbeth**’s reverie is caused by becoming Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth and Banquo agree to speak about the witches’ prophecy later.

• **Banquo** guesses the witches’ plot exactly. This means that when Macbeth chooses to believe the witches and act, he knows the risks.

• Macbeth is already thinking about killing Duncan, but the thought terrifies him: he’s struggling against his ambition. His thoughts about fate are classic: does fate happen no matter what, or must one act?

• This exchange with Banquo is the last time Macbeth is honest in the play.
Act I, Scene IV

- At a camp near the battlefield, Malcolm tells Duncan that the old Thane of Cawdor confessed and repented before being executed. Duncan notes that you can't always trust a man by his outward show. Macbeth, Banquo, Ross, and Angus enter. Duncan says that even the gift of Cawdor is not as much as Macbeth deserves. Macbeth responds: "The service and loyalty I owe, in doing it, pays itself" (1.4.22).

- Duncan is pleased. He says: "I have begun to plant thee, and will labour to make thee full of growing" (1.4.28-29). Next, he announces that Malcolm will be heir to the Scottish throne (the kingship was not hereditary in Scotland at that time). Duncan then adjourns the meeting and decides to spend the night at Inverness, Macbeth's castle.

- Macbeth goes ahead to prepare for the King's visit, but notes that Malcolm now stands between him and the throne. He begs the stars to "hide your fires, let not light see my black and deep desires" (1.4.51).

- Deeply ironic that just as Duncan comments about how you can't trust people's outward shows, Macbeth enters. Duncan's great strength as a king is his trust in his people and his thanes, but it also makes him vulnerable to treachery.

- Duncan thinks of his role as King in terms of what he can give. He's like a gardener in nature: putting his country above his own desires...

- ...Macbeth, in contrast, thinks in terms of what he can take. This makes his relationship with nature adversarial.
Act I, Scene V

• At Inverness, Lady Macbeth reads a letter in which Macbeth tells her of the witches' prophecy. Lady Macbeth worries Macbeth is too kind and honorable to fulfill his ambition and the prophecy. She decides to question his manhood to make him act.

• A servant enters with news that Duncan will spend the night, then exits. Lady Macbeth says Duncan’s visit will be fatal, and calls on spirits to “unsex me here... and take my milk for gall” (1.5.39-46).

• Macbeth enters, and says Duncan will spend the night and leave the next day. Lady Macbeth says Duncan will never see that day. She counsels Macbeth to look like an “innocent flower,” but be the viper hiding beneath it (1.5.63). Macbeth remains unconvinced. Lady Macbeth tells him to leave the plan to her.

• Lady Macbeth is established as power-hungry. She sees honor as a weakness, and knows how to push her husband’s buttons: question his courage.

• In order to murder Duncan, Lady Macbeth not only renounces her womanhood, she literally asks to be turned into an unnatural end!

• Macbeth is still struggling against his ambition. Lady Macbeth’s advice on how to hide one’s true intentions involves exploiting nature. (Note: in the Garden of Eden, the devil hid himself in the form of a snake.)
Act I, Scene VI

• Duncan, Malcolm, Donalbain, Banquo, Lennox, Macduff, Ross, and Angus arrive at Inverness. Duncan comments on the sweetness of the air. Banquo notes that martlets, a species of bird that usually nests in churches, have nested in the castle.

• Lady Macbeth warmly greets the King and the thanes, though Macbeth is nowhere to be seen.

• Ironic that Duncan thinks the castle where he’ll be murdered is beautiful. Also shows what beauty Macbeth loses when he gives in to his ambition.

• At this point, the planned murder weighs more on Macbeth than on Lady Macbeth.
Act I, Scene VII

• **Macbeth**, alone, agonizes about whether to kill **Duncan**. He'd be willing to murder Duncan if he thought that would be the end of it. But he knows that “bloody instructions, being taught, return to plague the inventor” (1.7 .10). Also, Macbeth notes, Duncan is a guest, kinsmen, and good king. He decides ambition is not enough to justify the murder.

• **Macbeth** wrestles with his ambition and wins! He knows that murdering Duncan will only end up leading to more bloodshed, and ruin his honor, which he prizes.
Vocabulary

• Hurly-burly: turmoil; uproar
• Broil: brattle
• Thane: a Scottish noble
• Posters: quick riders
• Home: fully; completely
• Set forth: showed
• My dispatch: my management
• Seat: location
• Purveyor: one who makes advance arrangements for a royal visit
Discuss

• Lines 15-40:
  • What great feat has Macbeth accomplished for Duncan?
  • What does it convey about Macbeth’s character?
  • What do the analogies in lines 35-38 mean?
  • Does Macbeth seem capable of murdering King Duncan?

• Lines 39-87:
  • In what ways have the witches shown that they represent supernatural forces?
  • Does Banquo’s responses to the witches differ from Macbeth’s reaction?
  • Are Macbeth’s and Banquo’s reactions believable?
  • How does Lady Macbeth feel about seeing Macbeth become king? Explain.
  • What do Lady Macbeth’s prayers imply about her view of gender roles?
  • How would Shakespeare’s audience be likely to judge Lady Macbeth at this point? Why?
Text Analysis

• Blank Verse: Reread lines 38. Compare its meter with that of line 10 in Scene 1, spoken by the three witches.

• Foreshadowing: What do the witches’ words predict for Macbeth?

• Aside: Reread Macbeth’s aside in lines 130-142. What private thoughts does he reveal to the audience?

• Foreshadowing: Notice that in lines 11-14, Duncan admits he misjudged the thane of Cawdor, who proved a traitor. What might this admission foreshadow about the king?

• Tragedy: What is Macbeth’s tragic flaw?

• Soliloquy: What conclusion can you draw about Lady Macbeth?