



Exploring Senior Cycle Texts

Macbeth by William Shakespeare

Please note: *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare is a drama included as part of the List of Texts prescribed for comparative study, for examination in the year 2026 and 2027. At Higher Level a play by Shakespeare must be one of the texts chosen.



Image courtesy of *The Guardian*

Please note:

- The following tasks might be completed over a series of lessons or as part of a unit of learning
- Students may wish to complete some tasks individually or in pairs/groups
- Tasks might be completed orally and/or in written format
- Students may also wish to engage in a think, pair, share activity for some tasks.

Making connections with the continuum of learning



Students should be able to:

Develop an awareness of their own response to texts and analyse and justify that response.

Develop an awareness of their own responses, affective, imaginative, and intellectual, to aesthetic texts. Explore these responses relative to the texts read, generate and justify meanings and build coherent interpretations.

(Leaving Certificate Syllabus, p.13)

Pre-reading discussion:

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” - John Dalberg-Acton, 1st Baron Acton

Discuss this statement considering how power is seen and valued from different perspectives. You may wish to discuss whether a person’s moral compass is compromised and if these changes are positive or negative, or both





ACT II Scene II

Enter MACBETH.

Macbeth I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?

Lady Macbeth I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry.
Did not you speak?

Macbeth When?

Lady Macbeth Now.

Macbeth As I descended?

Lady Macbeth Ay.

Macbeth Hark – Who lies i'th' second chamber?

Lady Macbeth Donalbain.

Macbeth This is a sorry sight.

Lady Macbeth A foolish thought,
To say a sorry sight.

Macbeth There's one did laugh in's sleep,
And one cried 'Murder', that they did wake each other.
I stood and heard them. But they did say their prayers,
And addressed them again to sleep.

Lady Macbeth There are two lodged together.

Macbeth One cried 'God bless us', and 'Amen' the other,
As they had seen me with these hangman's hands;
List'ning their fear, I could not say 'Amen',
When they did say 'God bless us'.

Lady Macbeth Consider it not so deeply.

Macbeth But wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'?
I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen'
Stuck in my throat.



- Lady Macbeth These deeds must not be thought
After these ways: so, it will make us mad.
- Macbeth Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more;
Macbeth does murder sleep, the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravelled 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 brain-sickly of things – Go get some water,
And wash this filthy witness from your hand.
Why did you bring these daggers from the place?
They must lie there – go carry them, and smear
The sleepy grooms with blood.
- Macbeth I'll go no more:
I am afraid to think what I have done;
Look on't again, I dare not.
- Lady Macbeth Infirm of purpose;
Give me the daggers; the sleeping, and the dead,
Are but as pictures, 'tis the eye of childhood
That fears a painted devil. If he do bleed,
I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal,
For it must seem their guilt.

Exit LADY MACBETH.



A note on foreshadowing

The content of this scene foreshadows a lot of the events that will occur later in the play, perhaps most notably the bloodied hands on Lady Macbeth.



Foreshadowing is a technique used in literature, involving authors or playwrights dropping hints about future plot twists or developments that unfold later in the story. This can be done through direct statements or subtle clues embedded in the narrative.

Anton Chekhov, the Russian playwright, famously illustrated foreshadowing with his statement: "If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off." Essentially, this means that the initial description of the rifle should anticipate its eventual significance or use in the story.

The role of a director in giving a play new life

Each director will have a different creative vision for a play, which is why these scenes can be reworked so effectively, so appeal to different audiences, or to highlight various aspects of the script and story.



Directors will often conduct their own research on the context of the play, the playwright or at times a more unusual theatrical concept that the director may wish to portray on stage.

The director has quite often worked through an entire script, considering and liaising with departments in costume, sound, lighting, set-design and working with individual actors on blocking, presence and body language. All of these ideas stem from the original text, in this case a script.

Hangman's Hands

Macbeth sees his hands as akin to the hangman's after he has killed King Duncan, drawing a connection between his own act of murder and the methodical, remorseless actions of an executioner. This comparison suggests Macbeth's recognition and admission of his responsibility for the king's death.



While hanging was a ghastly death for some, the reference to the hangman's hands is in particular relation to the act of treason against the King. In these instances, the hangman would also disembowel the traitor, with the remains typically parboiled and displayed as a threatening reminder of the penalty for high treason.



Possible Questions

1. Lady Macbeth says, "a little water clears us of this deed, how easy is it then". How does this seem to be an understatement? Discuss the gravity of her statement and what it might foreshadow.
2. What can we conclude from this scene regarding Macbeth's state of mind?
3. Take a look at the following performance of this scene, as performed by the Royal Shakespeare company and available on their Learning Zone Youtube channel



How does the director employ dramatic techniques to create a rich storytelling experience for the audience?

You might consider some of the following:

- **Blocking** The placing/moves/choreography of the actors on stage
- **Characterisation** The investigation and portrayal of a character
- **Gesticulation** The act of making gestures. In theatre, quite often a dramatic movement that gets attention.
- **Levels** Contrast of height used in positioning, this could be with actors or set
- **Message** The overall point the director wants to communicate to the audience in this scene
- **Mood** The feeling or emotion of a moment or piece
- **Set** Objects, flats and furniture we see on stage to help create the setting



Some aspects of short story include...

Definition of Short Story

...an invented prose narrative shorter than a novel usually dealing with a few characters and aiming at unity of effect and often concentrating on the creation of mood rather than plot

Merriam Webster

Key Considerations for Short Story

A short story is a brief work of fiction that typically focuses on a single incident, character, or theme. It is shorter in length compared to novels and novellas, often ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand words. Short stories aim to convey a complete narrative arc within a limited space, usually featuring a concise plot, well-defined characters, and a clear resolution.



Brevity: Short stories are concise and focused, with no unnecessary digressions or subplots. They aim to tell a complete story within a relatively small word count.

Single Plot or Theme: Short stories usually revolve around a single plot or theme, allowing for a clear and focused narrative structure.

Limited Character Development: Due to their brevity, short stories often feature a smaller cast of characters and may focus more on action or plot-driven elements rather than extensive character development.

Impactful Endings: Short stories often conclude with a twist, revelation, or resolution that leaves a lasting impression on the reader. The ending is designed to provide closure or provoke thought.

Exploration of Themes: Despite their shorter length, short stories can explore complex themes and ideas, offering insights into human nature, society, and the human experience.

