

Annotated Essay

Explore the theme of ambition in Macbeth.

You must consider language, form and structure and refer to the context of play in your answer.

Question keyword	Context	Language analysis	Structural analysis
Form analysis	Technique	Writer's intentions	

William Shakespeare's Macbeth (1606) is a play that, at its very core, warns of the dangers of unchecked ambition and accepting your God-given role in the Great Chain of Being. Functioning as a didactic force of royalist propaganda, Shakespeare aimed to ingratiate himself with the newly crowned King James I by discouraging attempted acts of regicide following the Gunpowder Plot. Throughout the play, Macbeth's hamartia, his "vaulting ambition", can be seen to misguide the protagonist to his tragic downfall and ultimate punishment: a beheading fit for a traitor. Though some may argue that the Witches or Lady Macbeth "spur" Macbeth's ambition, ultimately, Macbeth's actions are driven by his desires and moral weakness, for which he alone must bear responsibility.

Shakespeare establishes Macbeth's ambitious and violent nature in the play's opening scenes. Indeed, Macbeth begins the play as "brave Macbeth", a hero and saviour of Scotland, helping to defeat the Norwegian army. Yet just as the Witches warn that "fair is foul and foul is fair", the audience comes to realise that their first impression of Macbeth as a "brave" hero may mask a "serpent" underneath. Macbeth's first words in the play mirror the Witches' aforementioned paradox, as he exclaims surprise at "so fair and foul a day", echoing the Witches' paradoxical warnings that appearances may be deceiving. A Jacobean audience would have an instinctual fear of the supernatural, so Macbeth being aligned with the Witches so

early on may be the first indicator that he should not be trusted. Upon first hearing the Witches' prophecy that he "shall be King hereafter", Macbeth's ambition immediately becomes apparent as he muses that if "chance may have [him] king" then "chance may crown [him]" without his "stir". Macbeth personifies chance as though to suggest that these matters are now out of his control, yet this may be a way to absolve blame for his later actions. He may be able to argue that it was not his own murderous choices that led him to the "golden round" but the force of fate. However, Shakespeare cleverly uses Banquo as a foil character to contrast Macbeth's immediate infatuation with the prospect of being King with a more logical and sceptical reaction. Banquo neither "fears nor begs" for the Witches' attention, whilst Macbeth asks them to "stay". Banquo warns Macbeth that these are "instruments of darkness" whose words may manipulate. In contrast, Macbeth is immediately enthralled by the Witches' prophecies, even returning to seek out the Witches in Act 4. Finally, Banquo does nothing to make the Witches' prophecies come to fruition, yet Macbeth plots the murder of his King within days of this moment. Through this contrasting characterisation, Shakespeare presents an ideal subject in Banquo, who respects the natural order, fears the supernatural, and keeps his ambition in check. This idealised portrayal would likely please King James I, both as a warning against disrupting the Great Chain of Being and as a nod to his descent from Banquo.

Though it is clear that Macbeth's potential for excessive ambition was present from the first moments of the play, some may still argue that this hamartia was only catalysed by the supernatural. The Witches' use of the trochaic tetrameter immediately sets them apart as untrustworthy outsiders. This contrasts strongly with the other high-status courtly members who speak in iambic pentameter. Therefore, Macbeth's willingness to be swayed by the "supernatural soliciting" of such clearly untrustworthy and otherworldly creatures could be seen as nothing more than a flimsy excuse to allow his ambition to reign. Likewise, Lady Macbeth encourages Macbeth's deadly ambition, acting almost as a fourth Witch, by calling on "spirits" to "unsex" her so that she may strip herself of feminine kindness to encourage her husband to deadly (but socially advantageous) regicide. Arguably, living in a

patriarchal society, Lady Macbeth's **ambition** could only be furthered through her husband. This line of thinking has often led to Lady Macbeth being blamed for "spurring" Macbeth's **ambition** to its deadly conclusion. Yet without the horse, without the **ambition**, there would be nothing to "spur" into action. **The temptation to blame women for all men's sins is culturally ingrained**, yet also remember that King Duncan was so trusting and so "meek" that he became weak enough to allow two traitors in his midst. **Therefore, it could be argued that Duncan's weak kingship laid the foundation** for Macbeth's **ambition** to surface. **It must also be remembered that Macbeth committed the first murder of King Duncan with his own hands. His subsequent murders happened entirely without Lady Macbeth's involvement**, with Macbeth encouraging her to be "innocent of the knowledge" of Banquo's murder and having no prior knowledge of Macbeth's plans to kill Macduff's family. *Perhaps Shakespeare warns that whatever predisposition we have towards seeking power, our actions are choices for which we are solely responsible.*

Macbeth's **ambition** consequently fractures the natural order, as *Shakespeare cautions that we must respect our rightful place in society*. **According to the Divine Right of Kings, the monarch is God's chosen representative on earth; by committing regicide, Macbeth defies God himself**. *Shakespeare thus makes it apparent that Macbeth's kingship is decaying the fabric of Scotland*, shown when Macduff laments, "bleed, bleed, poor country". This **personification** of Scotland highlights the mass suffering and bloodshed as a result of Macbeth's unholy rule. Furthermore, Macbeth finds no satisfaction in fulfilling his **ambition** to become King, as his **ambition** then moves onto another goal to yearn for, specifically the lack of hope for any future royal lineage, as the Macbeths are childless. **The metaphors** Macbeth uses are particularly apt when he complains of a "fruitless crown" and a "barren sceptre", as both phrases not only reference the Macbeths' apparent infertility but may also allude to the unnatural state of Scotland under the unrightful King. Scotland, too, is "fruitless", "barren", and bleeding when the laws of God go unheeded. Indeed, when Angus describes Macbeth's "giant's robe" hanging loose like it is worn by a "dwarfish thief", Shakespeare's use of **metaphor** powerfully conveys Macbeth's unworthiness for his position. Like the crown and the sceptre, the robe **symbolises** royalty, which

Macbeth is unfit to wear. This emphasises that Macbeth's **ambition** has led a small and incapable man to "overleap" his position in the natural order, resulting in both personal and societal suffering.

Ultimately, Macbeth's **ambition** must be punished and the natural order restored. Shakespeare utilises **a cyclical structure** to suggest a return to God's will, as the play starts and ends with a traitor being beheaded - both the then Thanes of Cawdor. By Macbeth's downfall, the **cyclical structure** shows that Scotland has returned to the hands of the rightful heir, Malcolm, as **decreed by the Divine Right of Kings**. Macbeth's punishment for his "vaulting **ambition**" also follows **the typical structure of a tragic fall**, with Macbeth beginning as a high-status character, "brave Macbeth", and ending as a disgraced "butcher" and a "tyrant". The **noun** "butcher" reveals that Macbeth's actions have been for no higher, holier purpose but were acts of violent, thoughtless savagery, focused only on becoming King for his own sake and not for the good of his country. Being "beheaded" then is a fitting punishment: a brutal and humiliating death for someone who inflicted mindless "gory" suffering on the innocent lives around him. By the end of the play, Malcolm takes the throne as its rightful heir and "plants" a new peace. The **nature imagery here juxtaposes the storms, nighttime settings and supernatural deeds seen in the rest of the play**. Shakespeare seems to suggest that the natural order has been restored: *a true King sacrifices for the good of his country and seeks power not to satisfy his **ambition** but because God has entrusted him.*

In conclusion, *Shakespeare warns against unchecked **ambition** and the disruption of God's natural order.* While external forces like the Witches and Lady Macbeth influence Macbeth, his choices ultimately lead to his downfall. Shakespeare presents **ambition** *not as a path to greatness but as a force that corrupts, isolates, and destroys.* By restoring rightful leadership through Malcolm, *the play reinforces that power must be earned through legitimacy and duty, not seized through violence and pride.*