Plot summary (with quotations)

1.1	The play opens with the witches discussing Macbeth: ***"there to meet with Macbeth"***
1.2	The Captain describes Macbeth's bravery to the King: ***"brave Macbeth"***. The king says he will make Macbeth Thane of Cawdor: ***"stars shine on all deservers"***
1.3	The witches meet Macbeth and tell him that he will be Thane of Cawdor and then King. ***"Thou shall be king"*** They tell Banquo that his sons will be King: "***Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none"*** Macbeth begins to imagine being King.
1.4	Macbeth is given the title Thane of Cawdor and Banquo comments that the witches' predictions were true: ***"can the devil speak true?***" Macbeth mentions how Malcolm stands in the way of his desires. ***"stars hide your fires, let not light see my black and deep desires"***
1.5	Lady Macbeth reads Macbeth's letter in which he describes his meeting with the witches; she asks for the spirits to help her persuade Macbeth to do all he needs to become king. ***"Come ye spirits" "unsex me here" "fill me with direst cruelty"*** She says she will ask him to ***"look like the innocent flower but be the serpent under it"***
1.7	Macbeth decides that he will not kill Duncan: ***"I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent" "we will proceed no further in this business"*** but then Lady Macbeth enters the stage to persuade him that he must do it: "***plucked out my nipple from its boneless gums and dashed the brains out"*** She tells him that they will be able to frame Duncan's guards who: ***"will bear the guilt of our great quell"*** Macbeth agrees to the murder: ***"false face must hide what the false heart doth know"***
2.1	Macbeth sees a dagger floating in the air which leads him to Duncan: ***"is this a dagger I see before me?"***
2.2	After murdering King Duncan Macbeth is afraid: he can't say ***"amen"*** and he is worried about the blood on his hands. ***"Macbeth doth murder sleep" "look on't again I dare not"*** Macbeth has brought the daggers with him which Lady Macbeth has to return to Duncan's chamber as she is not afraid; she tells her husband to not be a coward: ***"a little water clears us of this deed" "my hands are of your colour but I shame to wear a heart so white"***
2.3	Macduff is upset at discovering Duncan's body. Macbeth kills the two guards as he claims he was so angry with them. Malcolm and Donalbain, the King's sons, are afraid that they may now be murdered so they run away to England and Ireland: ***"there's daggers in men's smiles"***
3.1	Banquo says that he is suspicious about how Macbeth became king: ***"I fear thou played most foully for it"*** Macbeth then enters to ask Banquo if he is going riding. After Banquo confirms that he is, Macbeth speaks to two murders and orders them to kill both Banquo and his son, Fleance.
3.2	Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth that he is dealing with Banquo but he doesn't reveal what he has planned: ***"be innocent of the knowledge dearest chuck"***
3.4	At Macbeth's banquet, the murders tell him that the killed Banquo but that Fleance escaped. Macbeth is upset that Fleance still lives but is happy that Banquo is dead: ***"the grown serpent lies"*** At his banquet, Macbeth if terrified as he sees the ghost of Banquo: ***"never shake thy gory locks at me"*** Afraid, the guests worry what is the matter with Macbeth. Once again Lady Macbeth tells him to be a man. Macbeth is concerned that he isn't safely the king so he tells Lady Macbeth that he will go back to see the witches. ***"I will to the weird sisters"***
3.6	People begin to grow suspicious of Macbeth. Lennox wishes Macduff well as he has gone to England to help form an army against Macbeth.
4.1	Macbeth goes back to visit the witches. Macbeth demands to know if he will remain king. The witches call upon three apparitions which tell him: ***"beware Macduff"***, fear ***"none of woman born"*** and fear noting until ***"Birnam Wood come to Dunsinane"***. Once the witches have vanished, Macbeth hears from Lennox who tells him that Macduff has gone to England; Macbeth orders the murder of Macduff's wife and children.
4.2	Macduff's wife and children are murdered on the orders of Macbeth.
4.3	Malcolm test Macduff's loyalty to him and to Scotland. After Macduff proves his loyalty, they prepare to attack Macbeth's castle.
5.1	Lady Macbeth appears on stage for the final time. She appears disturbed as she asks for her hands to be clear of Duncan's blood, before revealing her guilty secrets. ***"out, out damn spot" "who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him"***
5.3	Macbeth learns that his thanes are abandoning him and that the English army is approaching.
5.4	As the English army approach Macbeth's castle, Malcolm gives the order for the soldiers to cut down branches from Birnam Wood and hold it in front of them.
5.5	Macbeth learns that his wife is dead and that the English army is approaching: ***"she should have died hereafter"*** Macbeth goes out to meet his fate.
5.7	Macbeth fights Young Siward and kills him
5.8	Macduff and Macbeth do battle. Macbeth says that he can't be harmed by one of ***"woman born"*** but Macduff replies that he was ***"from his mother's womb untimely ripp'd"***. At first Macbeth is afraid: ***"I'll not fight thee"*** but then says that he will fight him to the death. They fight on and Macduff kills Macbeth. Macduff enters with the head of Macbeth: ***"the dead butcher and his fiendlike queen"***. Malcolm is crowned King of Scotland.

Themes

Ambition, power and greed

- After the witches' predictions, Macbeth's ambition is contrasted to Banquo's loyalty
- Macbeth demands that the witches speak to him
- As soon as Macbeth speaks to the witches he thinks about becoming King
- Lady Macbeth wants to be Queen and her husband to be King
- Macbeth says that ambition is his only reason to kill King Duncan
- Macbeth kills King Duncan because he wants to be the King
- Banquo recognises Macbeth's ambition and worries he might have killed King Duncan
- Macbeth orders the murder of Banquo and his son as he is afraid he will lose his power
- Again, worried about his power, Macbeth goes back to the witches
- Consumed with power, he orders the murder of Macduff's wife and children
- Believing that he is invincible, Macbeth waits in his castle for the English army
- Lady Macbeth, no longer powerful, dies off stage
- With the death of Macbeth, rightful power is restored at the end of the play

Loyalty and kingship

- The Thane of Cawdor is executed for betraying King Duncan
- Macbeth is given that title for being loyal to King Duncan. Macbeth says he fights for "loyalty"
- Macbeth decides that he cannot kill King Duncan as he wants to be loyal to him
- Macbeth betrays King Duncan and murders him
- Out of loyalty to King Duncan, Macduff does not attend Macduff's coronation
- Macbeth doesn't think that Banquo is loyal to him and so has him killed
- Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty to him and King Duncan – he passes this test
- Macduff kills Macbeth as he wants the true King on the throne
- Malcolm, the rightful heir, is King at the end of the play

Guilt

- Macbeth thinks about killing King Duncan but recognises that it is wrong
- Lady Macbeth persuades Macbeth to kill King Duncan as the guard will "bear the guilt" of the murder
- After murdering King Duncan, Macbeth is consumed with guilt
- Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth not to think about the death as the guards will be blamed
- Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost – suggesting that he feels guilty about his murder
- Lady Macbeth sleepwalks seeing blood on her hands – suggesting she feels guilty
- Consumed with guilt, Lady Macbeth commits suicide offstage
- At the end of the play, Macbeth does not seem concerned with the death of King Duncan or Banquo

Death, violence and conflict

- Violence is celebrated at the start of the play – because Macbeth and Banquo have won the battle
- King Duncan and the Captain describe Macbeth's violent fighting
- Macbeth and Lady Macbeth argue about killing King Duncan
- Macbeth suffers internal conflict of conscience
- Macbeth murders King Duncan
- Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are covered in King Duncan's blood
- Macbeth orders the death of Banquo and Fleance – he celebrates Banquo's murder
- Conflicted, Lady Macbeth dies
- Macduff kills Macbeth
- Macbeth's death is celebrated

Light and dark

- In the play, light represents good and the dark represents evil
- The play opens with thunder and lightning – it introduces a dark atmosphere
- King Duncan says it's difficult to know what people are thinking – "no art to find the mind's construction in the face"
- He also describes the light "shining on deservers"
- Macbeth asks the "stars to hide their fires" so people don't know his "desires"
- He later says that he will have a "false face" to hide his "false heart"
- Duncan is murdered in his "innocent sleep"
- Following Duncan's death the sun doesn't rise as the world is in chaos "night strangles light"
- Before Banquo's murder, his torch goes out
- Malcolm tells Macduff that even the "brightest angel fell" – meaning that all are capable of evil
- At the end of the play, Lady Macbeth had to have a light by her side
- Macbeth reacts to Lady Macbeth's death by saying "out brief candle" – showing he felt she brought light

Blood and water

- At the start of the play, the Captain escribes the bloody battle
- Macbeth sees visions of a blood covered dagger
- Macbeth is scared by Duncan's blood – he says it would turn all of the seas red
- Lady Macbeth says that they can wash the blood away
- Macbeth celebrates Banquo's blood being on the murderer's face
- The ghost of Banquo is covered in blood
- At the end of the play, Lady Macbeth sees the blood on her hands
- Macbeth is killed and his head is chopped off

Masculinity/Manliness

- Macbeth's bravery is celebrated at the beginning of the play
- Macbeth describes his wife as his "partner of greatness"
- Lady Macbeth worries that her husband is too "kind" to kill King Duncan
- Lady Macbeth tells her husband that he won't be a man if he doesn't kill King Duncan
- Macbeth kills King Duncan in his sleep
- Lady Macbeth has to guide Macbeth after King Duncan's murder
- After seeing Banquo's ghost, she again tells him to be a man
- Macduff is upset at the death of his wife and children but others tell him to take the news like a man
- Macduff wants revenge against Macbeth
- At the end of the play, we are reminded of Macbeth's bravery
- Macbeth and Macduff fight to the death

The supernatural

- The witches open the play at set the atmosphere of the action to come
- Macbeth has complete belief in the witches and their prophecies
- Lady Macbeth asks for the evil spirits help to persuade her husband to murder King Duncan
- Macbeth sees visions of a dagger and then later Banquo's ghost
- After King Duncan's death, the world is thrown into chaos
- Macbeth is so consumed that he returns to see the witches
- Lady Macbeth's sleep is haunted and she kills herself
- The witches trick Macbeth with their predictions

Context

Macbeth was written by Shakespeare in approximately 1606. The early 17th century was a time of unrest, suspicion and superstition. A new king had just come to power and the future of the country seemed quite uncertain. Shakespeare's play reflects these changes.

A king in Shakespeare's time was thought to rule by 'divine right'. This meant that God had chosen that person directly to rule over others. The killing of a king (known as regicide) was therefore considered to be just about the worst crime that anyone could commit. That is why Macbeth's decision to murder Duncan seemed so horrific to an audience of the time and why the murderer has such a guilty conscience.

The new King on the throne of England, James I (also known as James VI of Scotland), was paranoid about assassination attempts. This was unsurprising, since the infamous Gunpowder Plot to blow up the King and Parliament had taken place just months before Macbeth was first performed. Many of Macbeth's themes resonate with the attempted revolt: it's a play about treason, the overthrow of a King, and the downfall of his murderers.

King James also believed in dark magic and the supernatural. He wrote a book called Daemonologie in which he supported and encouraged the trials of witches. He believed the witches were controlled by the devil. Many in his audience would have also believed in these things, and certainly all of them would have been entertained by them. This is one of the reasons that Shakespeare decided to include the characters of the witches. The witches also represent danger and evil and present a world linked to the devil. By being tempted by the witches (devil), Shakespeare shows how the world can be thrown into chaos. This would encourage the audience to be loyal to the King and to God.

In both Shakespeare's time and in the time when the play takes place, women had a much lower status than would be the case today. Wives were little more than the property of their husbands and had no legal rights. Their main purpose was to have children and support men.

Lady Macbeth appears to be a much more feisty character with ambitions and desires of her own; these are characteristics that could imply a lack of femininity. It is worth remembering that in the original performances of the play the part of Lady Macbeth would have been played by a man and this would have helped to emphasise the character's masculine qualities.

Read the following extract from Act 1 Scene 3 and then answer the question that follows.

At this point in the play, Macbeth has just been told by the three witches that he will become king.

MACBETH (Aside) Two truths are told

As happy prologues to the swelling act

Of the Imperial Theme. – I Thank you gentlemen. -

This Supernatural soliciting

Cannot Be ill, cannot be good. If ill,

Why hath it given me earnest of success,

Commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor.

If good, why do I yield to that suggestion

Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair

And make my seated heart knock at my ribs

Against the use of nature? Present fears

Are less than horrible imaginings

My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,

Shakes so my single state of man

That function is smothered in surmise

And nothing is but what is not.

Starting with this speech explain how far you think Shakespeare presents Macbeth as ambitious.

Write about:

- How Shakespeare presents Macbeth's feelings and thoughts in this extract
- How Shakespeare presents Macbeth's ambition in the play as a whole

30 Marks