Key themes

Ambition – Shakespeare shows that Macbeth is ambitious because he wants to be king even though he is not in line to be. His ambition drives him to commit treason after hearing the witches’ prophecies. Ambition at this time makes people carry out evil deeds that lead to terrible consequences. Shakespeare ensures Macbeth and Lady Macbeth suffer greatly for being over ambitious. His motive is to show the intended audience that being over ambitious and committing evil acts is wrong and leads to your downfall.

Evil – Evil nature exists in Macbeth. He allows himself to be manipulated by his wife and the witches. Shakespeare demonstrations the idea that evil resides in people is a common one; it is a conscious decision as to whether you act on these evil intentions or not. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth do whereas Banquo (although given a potential opportunity to act in an evil way) does not follow this path.

Fate – the dictionary defines fate as the development of events outside a person's control, regarded as predetermined by a supernatural power. However, Macbeth tries to master fate to ensure fate conforms to exactly what he wants. Fate, however, does not work that way and his inevitable downfall is sealed when he tries to alter the natural order of life.

Manhood – One major factor that persuades Macbeth to kill Duncan is the attack on his masculinity. At this time people believed witches could remove male genitalia; this frightened them beyond believe. Lady Macbeth (believing she is part of the supernatural) attacks Macbeth’s manhood more than once. This convinces him to kill Duncan. She asks if Macbeth is a man at the banquet and she questions Macduff’s decision to go to England. The recurring theme feeds Macbeth’s ambition to become king and it feeds his evil thoughts. With Macduff, his manhood motivates him to seek revenge on Macbeth for killing his wife and children.

Reality and appearance – The contrast between what is **real** and the **appearance** of something is also used by Shakespeare. The infamous dagger scene, when Macbeth is not sure if he can trust his eyes, is only one of many references to this theme. Macbeth sees Banquo’s ghost which was a sign of his guilt for murdering his best friend. Lady Macbeth sees blood as a sign of her guilt for the part she played in Duncan’s murder. The contrast between reality and appearance is also shown with all the references to thoughts, dreams and actions. Banquo talks about the 'cursed thoughts' he has had and his dreams of the witches. Macbeth talks of the world of thought and dreams and sometimes is stuck there. For instance, Lady Macbeth is critical of Macbeth's 'foolish thoughts' and talks of him being 'lost' because of this. **Sleep** is another theme associated with reality, because characters view it as vital to life, but like death or being in another world. Macbeth is told he has murdered sleep and will 'sleep no more' whilst Lady Macbeth thinks of sleep as death, calling it the severest 'goodnight'.

Loyalty and guilt – Loyalty is vividly portrayed through King Duncan at the beginning of the play when he rewards Macbeth for his loyalty to him; he executes the current Thane of Cawdor for his betrayal to the king. Banquo is very loyal to Duncan and does not desert him. Shakespeare uses loyalty as a dramatic device when he rewards Macbeth for his loyalty even though the audience knows he’s already thought about killing Duncan. Duncan takes about ‘absolute trust’ when Macbeth walks in which is causes great unrest for some of the audience – those who never think about committing treason.

Macbeth also shows his **guilt** - he is unsure before the murder and regrets it immediately after. Lady Macbeth is the opposite - she seems to show no guilt at the time and even talks about how 'a little water' cleans away the blood. Her increasing madness later on is a sign of her guilt and she imagines her hands to be stained with blood which inevitably leads to her downfall. Shakespeare ensures that guilt plays a heavy part in the demise of those who go against the natural order of life (Macbeth and Lady Macbeth) and attempt to carry out actions against God.

The supernatural – Intentionally Shakespeare ensures that the first characters we meet are the witches – also known as the supernatural. Many people, at this time, believed in witchcraft and many so-called witches were burned at the stake. The supernatural is the driving force behind the play with the audience being captivated by their roles throughout the play. Some would believe Macbeth was possessed; as a result, they would feel his visions, his belief in him becoming immortal and his lack of ability to say ‘Amen’ would all be a result of the possession the witches had over him. At the end of the play Macbeth believes he is immortal after the witches’ prophecy convinced him he will rule forever: “for none of woman born shall harm Macbeth.” Shakespeare illustrates that following the supernatural leads you down a path of no return, just like Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and subtly encourages the intended audience not to follow their ways. Shakespeare created the play ‘Macbeth’ to win favour with King James I and to show him, and all the Elizabethan citizens, that following the supernatural leads to the demise of your life without a way back in this life or the next: you seal your own fate when going against the natural order of life.