

1 Question

The ambition and focus that propel you to success can also be your downfall.

In what ways does Shakespeare explore the complexity of ambition in the play ‘Macbeth’?

2 Planning

2.1 Introduction

This is where you introduce the play. Macbeth, by William Shakespeare...

Introduce the text + main argument. What BP1 is about. What BP2 is about. Reaffirm the question and segue into Body Paragraphs.

2.2 BP1: Focus propelling to Success

2.3 BP2: Ambition leading to permanent collapse

2.4 Conclusion

Reaffirm your thesis.

3 Old Speech

Probably one of the most powerful and viewed plays of the 17th Century, Macbeth by William Shakespeare can be seen today as one of the defining tragedies of our time. But what makes such an old play so popular today? Not only is Macbeth an entertaining tale about temptation, corruption and betrayal, but through the character of Macbeth, Shakespeare explores the flawed core of humanity and how unchecked ambition and greed can poison even the purest of souls. This core coupled with manipulative external forces and his own overactive imagination cause Macbeth, a once “brave” and “noble” Scottish warrior to fall to a “devil damned in evils”.

In the play, Shakespeare demonstrates how one can fall prey to their own unchecked ambition (lust for power). This is most clearly shown when Macbeth encounters the three witches, and they tempt him with his fate All hail Macbeth, Thane of Glamis | All hail Macbeth, Thane of Cawdor | All hail Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter. This prophecy both foreshadowing and anaphoric, at first means nothing to Macbeth. But once the first prophecy comes true, Macbeth begins to think about the “imperfect speakers”, their prophecy of him becoming king and what he could do to accelerate this process. “My thought, whose murder is yet but fantastical” is an example of what is going on within Macbeth’s mind. On one hand, Macbeth’s desire wants to kill Duncan so he can be King, whilst on the other his morality revolts this idea of committing such a

heinous act. This conflict is further demonstrated by Shakespeare, through the metaphor in “whose horrid image doth unfix my hair” leading the audience to believe that Macbeths conscience clashes with his ambition. The battle between Macbeths ambition and his revulsion is a fleeting one, as his “vaulting ambition” comes out on top. Showing once again the power of an unchecked ambition.

Conversely we see, how throughout the play Lady Macbeth uses the power of an unchecked ambition to manipulate and eventually corrupt Macbeth into evil. This ‘tragic flaw’ of unrestricted ambition is first evident in Lady Macbeth, who in her ascension to power calls upon evil spirits. “Unsex me here” she says “fill me from the crown to the toe topfull of direst cruelty” + “and take my milk for gall”. The language here suggests that Lady Macbeth’s femininity, represented by breasts and milk, usually symbols of nurture, impede her from performing acts of violence and cruelty which are commonly associated with masculinity. Shakespeare continues to reveal Lady Macbeth’s true nature through the metaphorical and animalistic imagery in “look like th’innocent flower, but be the serpent under it”. Here we see how Lady Macbeth manipulates Macbeth into looking like an innocent flower but in fact being, like a serpent, evil, cunning and dangerous. This elucidates how ambition, one of Macbeths tragic flaws has been exploited by Lady Macbeth an external force, into killing King Duncan.

Overactive imagination, a key theme explored towards the end of the play, shows how hallucinations, paranoia and an inability to distinguish between appearance and reality can deteriorate one’s character. This notion of an overactive imagination was first introduced to us during Macbeth’s second soliloquy where through the use of dagger imagery, and rhetorical questioning Macbeth asks himself “Is this a dagger I see before me, the handle towards my hand?”. At first, Macbeth himself becomes confused whether the dagger is real or a figment of his imagination, but at this point it no longer matters, as the audience knows that this hallucination is only a harbinger of many more to come. Some of the hallucinations are visual “never shake thy gory locks at me!” whilst others are auditory “sleep no more, Macbeth does murder sleep”. These hallucinations continue to degrade Macbeths mental state resulting in *.

Overall Macbeth was an individual with not just one fatal flaw but with many. Shakespeare reminds the audience of this not only through techniques and imagery, but also through Macbeths over ambitious nature. This major flaw causes him to blindly negate his moral boundaries and in an attempt to attain absolute power, stumble towards his own demise. Ultimately, Macbeths hamartia was a combination of his ambition, overactive imagination and gullibility.

3.1 Feedback

4 minutes, 32 seconds.

17/20. First A mark in English. 2nd Highest in class.

I link at the end of the body paragraphs to my overall argument.

I used evidence, and I tried to unpack it in the context of my argument.

Poor expression, not perfect modality. Okay rhetoric "But what makes such an old play so popular today?" — it is still a speech.

4 New Speech

Have you ever wanted something so badly that it was all you could think about? Shakespeare's *Macbeth* shows us that the same ambition and laser-focus that lift us up can also push us over the edge. In the play, Macbeth begins as a celebrated hero, a man of courage and discipline. Yet once his ambition is left unchecked, it twists into obsession and destroys everything he values. Shakespeare explores this complexity by first showing how focus helps Macbeth rise, and then revealing how ambition, when guided by greed and fear instead of conscience, becomes the cause of his downfall.

First, ambition and focus can propel a person to success. At the start, Macbeth is praised as "brave Macbeth", a loyal soldier who protects his country. His effort is rewarded when the king names him Thane of Cawdor. This is a healthy pattern: work hard, earn trust, rise in responsibility. When the witches greet him with "All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter", his mind suddenly fills with possibility. Shakespeare lets us hear his inner struggle: the "horrid image" of killing the king "doth unfix my hair", yet he also admits to his "vaulting ambition" that wants to leap ahead. For a moment, Macbeth's focus still has guardrails. He lists reasons not to murder Duncan: kinship, loyalty, and the king's goodness. This shows that ambition is not evil by itself. With conscience and patience, it can motivate excellence. Macbeth's rise proves that drive, courage, and determination are powerful forces for success.

However, when ambition breaks free of moral limits, it leads to collapse. Lady Macbeth pushes his weak spot. Calling on darkness to "unsex me here" and telling Macbeth to "look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under't", she weaponises his desire for power. Macbeth's focus turns from honour to plotting. The night of the murder, he hallucinates: "Is this a dagger which I see before me?" After Duncan's death, the rewards of ambition vanish and the costs begin. Macbeth hears "Sleep no more", becomes paranoid, and admits "O, full of scorpions is my mind". To protect the crown he gained, he orders more violence—Banquo's murder, the slaughter of Macduff's family—each act dragging him further from the noble man he was. Even Lady Macbeth, once so confident, is destroyed by guilt, crying "Out, damned spot!" Their shared ambition, once a ladder, becomes a trap that closes in on them both.

So, what is Shakespeare telling us? Ambition and focus are powerful tools, but they must be guided by conscience, patience, and respect for others. Macbeth forgets this. He confuses success with speed and power with security, and he loses himself. The play answers our question clearly: the ambition and focus that propel you to success can also be your downfall when they overrun your values. For us, the lesson is simple and strong: set big goals, work hard, but keep your moral compass close. Otherwise, like Macbeth, you may reach the top—only to find there is nothing left of you when you get there.

5 Extension:

The ambition and focus that propel you to success can also be your downfall.

To what extent does *Macbeth* explore the dangers of unchecked ambition? Is justice served at the end of the play? Defend your answer

6 Scaffold Context GPT response.

Speech

Good morning. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is not merely a tale of political murder; it is a sustained study of ambition unrestrained by ethics. To a large extent, the play demonstrates that ambition, when severed from conscience and community, becomes self-destructive. Shakespeare achieves this through the tragic form—tracking Macbeth's *hamartia* (fatal flaw), staging moments of *anagnorisis* (recognition), and culminating in audience *catharsis* (emotional purgation)—as well as through dramatic devices such as soliloquy, imagery, and irony. Finally, while the ending enacts retributive and civic justice, it is not costless; the restoration of order arrives only after irreversible damage.

First, Shakespeare establishes ambition as potentially generative but inherently perilous. *Macbeth* begins as “brave Macbeth,” rewarded with the title Thane of Cawdor for loyal service. In blank verse soliloquy, he weighs the ethics of kingship: Duncan is here “in double trust... as his host, who should against his murderer shut the door, not bear the knife myself.” The diction of “trust” and the modal verb “should” foreground moral duty. Yet the prophecy—“All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter”—activates a desire to accelerate fate. Crucially, Shakespeare embeds the danger in the method of attaining power: Lady Macbeth's injunction to “look like th' innocent flower, but be the serpent under't” deploys stark juxtaposition to frame deception as a strategy. Outward “flower”; inward “serpent”: the image compresses the play's ethical thesis—appearance without integrity is the first symptom of corrupted ambition.

Secondly, once ambition detaches from moral constraints, it produces psychological collapse. The imagined dagger—“Is this a dagger which I see before me?”—is not mere ornament; it dramatises a mind aligning perception with desire. After regicide, Macbeth hears, “Sleep no more,” inaugurating the motif of sleeplessness as the cost of guilt. His later admission, “O, full of scorpions is my mind,” and his calculation that he is “in blood stepped in so far” that retreat equals advance, mark a grim *anagnorisis*: he recognises the trap of his own making. Shakespeare's use of soliloquy here is technical and purposeful; the audience becomes witness to an internal logic where ambition demands further violence to secure earlier violence. In tragedy, this is the mechanical slide from choice to necessity: the protagonist's focus narrows into fatal tunnel vision.

Thirdly, ambition's collateral damage exposes its civic danger. Macbeth's private desire metastasises into public disorder: Scotland “sinks beneath the

yoke,” nobles flee, and innocents—Banquo, Lady Macduff, and her child—are sacrificed to preserve a crown won by deceit. Lady Macbeth’s own arc confirms the thesis: having summoned “direst cruelty,” she cannot endure the moral residue of her actions. Her sleepwalking—“Out, damned spot!”—is the inverse of her earlier imperative voice; rhetoric yields to remorse. What began as instrumental ambition concludes as psychic ruin.

Is justice served? In tragic and political terms, largely yes. Macduff, “from his mother’s womb untimely ripped,” fulfils the counter-prophecy and executes retributive justice by killing the tyrant. Malcolm’s coronation restores legitimate rule, re-establishing the social and ceremonial frames that the play’s opening celebrates. This satisfies the structural demands of tragedy: the tyrant falls, order returns, and the audience experiences *catharsis*. Yet Shakespeare complicates any simplistic notion of moral equilibrium. The Witches, catalysts of equivocation, persist beyond the play’s human jurisdictions; Banquo’s heirs are promised future kingship, implying history’s irony outlives a single regime; and, most starkly, the dead remain dead. Justice arrives, but it is restorative only at the level of statecraft. Ethically, the ledger remains stained by the suffering of innocents and the permanent deformation of the protagonists’ souls.

In conclusion, *Macbeth* explores, to a significant extent, the dangers of unchecked ambition by mapping its progression from aspiration, to deception, to desolation—personal and political. The ending administers justice in both retributive and constitutional senses: the usurper is punished and the commonwealth is repaired. But Shakespeare ensures that our final impression is not triumphalism; it is caution. Ambition without conscience does not merely fail—it consumes. The play thus functions as a rigorous warning: let focus be guided by principle, or it will guide you to ruin.