Macbeth

What Great Looks Like: Themes
Themes:

Guilt
What Great Looks Like: Guilt

From the onset of the play, Shakespeare depicts Macbeth as a man troubled by guilt, when even the idea of murdering Duncan in Act 1 scene 3 results in a profound physical reaction. By declaring that the thought of regicide “make[s] [his] seated heart knock at [his] ribs”, Shakespeare demonstrates that fear is already having an extreme effect on his seemingly archetypal hero. Here metaphorical language is used to suggest that Macbeth’s heart is not only beating wildly – a typical image to denote fear – but actually trying to escape his body: the word “knock” implies that his heart is desperately battering his ribs in an attempt to be free. Shakespeare then reminds us that this physical reaction is “against the use of nature”, possibly symbolising that such an overwhelming reaction of fear is abnormal. The words “against the use of nature” also remind us that regicide was an unnatural deed: for a Jacobean audience, it would have been the ultimate act of sacrilege since it was ignoring the Great Chain of Being and taking destiny into one’s own hands. Macbeth ends his soliloquy with the comment that “present fears are worse than horrible imaginings” – certainly, at this point in the play, this would seem to be true; yet by act 3 scene 4 it is the “horrible imagining” of Banquo’s ghost that begins to tip Macbeth over the edge of sanity as the physical manifestation of his fear is eclipsed by the hallucinations of his troubled mind.

How is Macbeth depicted from the start of the play?
Which quotation shows that guilt is affecting him physically, and what does this mean?
Why is this “against the use of nature”?
How would a Jacobean audience have reacted to this and why?
What is the physical manifestation of his fear eclipsed by later in the play?
As the play develops, Macbeth slips further into guilt ridden insanity. In Act 3 scene 4, Macbeth appears destroyed by guilt and Shakespeare utilises an imperative verb to show Macbeth’s desperation and mental torment. Upon hallucinating and envisioning Banquo’s ghost, he screams, “never shake thy gory locks at me”, suggesting that he has become haunted by his own guilt as he feels he cannot escape the consequences of his actions. We also see that Macbeth’s mental state is deteriorating quickly and he is no longer the valiant and “brave” man he was at the start of the play. Furthermore, it becomes clear that Macbeth’s mental instability is driving a division between himself and Lady Macbeth, who is visibly disgusted by his overt display of madness, questioning his masculinity when she asks, “Are you a man?” The use of bloody imagery and the idea that Banquo is “bloody” suggests that Macbeth is tortured by his guilt and cannot escape the vision of his friend being killed. The use of imperative verb shows Macbeth’s desperation for Banquo to “Avaunt!” and “quit [his] sight” and in turn illustrates that Macbeth is slowly falling closer towards ultimate destruction. This may provide the audience with a sense of satisfaction since, during the Jacobean era, regicide was the greatest sacrilege and so the audience may be relieved to see Macbeth suffer a sense of retribution and reap the consequences of his tyrannical actions.

As the play develops, how is Macbeth affected?
Which quotation suggests that he is haunted by his own guilt?
How is this affecting his relationship with Lady Macbeth and which quotation shows this?
What does the use of bloody imagery suggest?
How would a Jacobean audience have reacted to this, and why?
Themes:

Ambition
At the start of the play, it is Lady Macbeth rather than her husband who seems to be fuelled by ambition to see him king. Directly after reading his letter, she begins to ponder the possible outcomes of the witches’ prophecies, exclaiming, “and shalt be what thou art promised.” Here Shakespeare chooses to depict her in stark contrast to her husband, possibly to emphasise how ‘unnatural’ ambitious women were in Jacobean times. Act 1 scene 5 is thus directly juxtaposed with Act 1 scene 3: whereas Macbeth agonised over whether the witches’ prophecy boded “good or “ill”, his wife does not waste time deliberating ethics but instantly seizes upon the promise of power: she has resolved to commit murder whilst Macbeth is still dithering over the choice he must make. Furthermore, rather than feeling physically afraid at the thought of murder, she explicitly invites dark forces to “fill” her with “direst cruelty” so that she might carry out this heinous deed without any guilt or remorse. Her total acceptance, without questioning, of the witches’ words invites the audience to see her in the same light as the witches themselves: not as a submissive and dutiful wife, in line with Jacobean norms, but as a strong and ruthless woman, willing to sacrifice her very soul if, in so doing, she can achieve her ambition. A Jacobean audience would be shocked and disturbed by such a portrayal of womanhood and would think that Lady Macbeth deserves her grisly end in Act 5.

At the start of the play, who is the more ambitious and why?
How is Lady Macbeth contrasted to her husband?
What does she ask evil spirits to do, and why?
What would she be willing to sacrifice her soul for?
How would the audience see Lady Macbeth, and why?
As the play reaches its first climactic event, and the murder of King Duncan, we see Macbeth begin to transition from a man of fear to a man of ambition. Within Act 1 scene 7, Macbeth – having been manipulated and emasculated by the words of Lady Macbeth - begins to contemplate the reality of killing his King. At the start of this critical soliloquy, Macbeth appears to remain loyal to King Duncan, reminding us that he “should against his murderer shut the door”, suggesting that Macbeth’s sense of devotion towards, and desire to protect, the King is greater than his yearning for power or success because he appears to feel guilty at even the thought of hurting someone so innocent that “his virtues would plead like angels.” Shakespeare also alludes to Macbeth’s internal fear of retribution, employing a metaphor to suggest that it is not only loyalty but fear that is curbing Macbeth’s ambition. He exclaims that he is worried that his actions may return to “plague th’ inventor” and see “this poisoned chalice” come to his “own lips”, thus showing that he is desperately afraid of the fatal consequences of committing regicide. Arguably, at this point, Macbeth can be seen as weaker than Lady Macbeth, who appears to be devoid of fear and even shows her distaste for Macbeth’s concerns, dismissing his nature and suggesting that he “is too full of the milk of human kindness” and should “leave all the rest” to her. The Biblical reference to “plague” highlights that Macbeth is not only afraid of the punishment he will face upon Earth but is terrified of how he will be punished by God for committing such a heinous sin. However, by the end of the soliloquy, Shakespeare uses a metaphor to show the force of Macbeth’s true craving for power: he confesses that he has “vaulting ambition” and this marks the start of his transition towards becoming a tragic hero, destroyed by his fatal flaw – his ambition. This soliloquy would encourage the audience to start to fear Macbeth since, during the Jacobean era, regicide was the greatest sacrilege as kings were seen as divinely appointed by God and thus any harm done against them was punishable by certain death.
Themes:

The supernatural
What Great Looks Like: The supernatural

From the very beginning of the play, Shakespeare employs a simile to present Banquo as a noble and honourable character who suspiciously questions the witches’ intentions, commenting that they ‘look not like the inhabitants o’ the Earth’. Whilst Macbeth is drawn into the enticing prophecies of the witches here, Banquo immediately questions their mortality and manipulative qualities as he is able to acknowledge them as unnatural, and thus frightening beings. At this point, we realise that Shakespeare intends to present Banquo as morally superior to Macbeth and in turn encourage the audience to respect Banquo’s awareness of the witches deception, as clearly we can acknowledge that Shakespeare’s’ play is not only a cautionary tale against “vaulting ambition” or questioning one’s place within the Great Chain of Being but also a stark reminder to his Jacobean audience that the supernatural is not to be trusted. Indeed, this description of the witches implies that there is something mysterious and unsettling about the witches that the soldiers have encountered, creating a tense atmosphere which encourages the audience to feel anxious about Macbeth’s engagement with their prophecies and so we understand that perhaps from the very onset of the play, Shakespeare is encouraging the Jacobean audience to question Macbeth’s morality perhaps as a warning that ambition leads to nothing but downfall. Although many would want to continue to believe that Macbeth is the ‘brave’ hero of this play, Banquo’s reaction in comparison to Macbeth’s would lead to them questioning whether Macbeth is actually a praiseworthy soldier. This would also remind audiences to be wary of the temptation of sin and crime, such as believing in the supernatural and committing regicide.

1. What type of character is Banquo and how does he react to the witches?
2. What does Banquo comment about the witches?
3. How is Banquo’s reaction different to Macbeth’s?
4. What stark reminder is the Jacobean audience being given?
5. What does Shakespeare encourage the Jacobean audience to question and why?
From the onset of the play, Shakespeare creates an atmosphere of tension and unease through use of pathetic fallacy and references to the supernatural. The tone is set from our first meeting with the witches in Act 1 scene 1: here, references to “thunder”, “lightning” and “rain” immediately give a sense of impending doom and disaster, thus inextricably linking the witches with “foul” weather. In addition to this, the witches themselves represent how evil turns everything on its head: “Fair is foul and foul is fair.” By juxtaposing these two moral opposites, Shakespeare suggests that nature itself will be subverted by the witches’ dealings with Macbeth. A Jacobean audience would feel unsettled by both the witches and the storm, since superstitious beliefs were widespread and it is likely that most, if not all, of Shakespeare’s audience would have seen them as evil omens that would ultimately bring about a tragic end. The role of the supernatural in the disruption of nature is continued in Act 2 scene 4 when many highly “unnatural” occurrences are reported by Ross and the old man. These include strong winds, strange ghostly cries in the night, an owl screeching (thought to be a bad omen) and even an earthquake. The reference to an eclipse – “dark night strangles the travelling lamp” – carries connotations of violence with the verb “strangles” and thus echoes Duncan’s violent murder at the hands of Macbeth. The old man is also at pains to emphasise how he has never experienced such a catalogue of disasters in all “three score and ten” years of his life, suggesting that the natural world has been disturbed and disrupted on a scale never seen before following the unnatural killing of a king. Further anomalies include an owl killing a hawk – possibly to symbolise Macbeth, a soldier, killing a king who is rightfully above him in the Great Chain of Being – and Duncan’s horses turning on their masters – again, symbolic of the servant rebelling against God’s natural order. This entire litany of unnatural behaviour would frighten a Jacobean audience, all of whom would believe in severe punishments for anyone daring to lift his hand against God’s anointed.

1. What does Shakespeare create from the onset (start) of the play?
2. What type of weather is referenced, and why?
3. What do the witches represent? (Include a quotation)
4. What “unnatural” occurrences are mentioned in Act 2 scene 4 and what do these suggest?
5. How does the eclipse echo Duncan’s death?
6. What other events are symbolic of Macbeth killing his king?
7. How does this link to the Great Chain of Being?
8. How would Shakespeare’s audience have reacted to this, and why?
Themes:

Gender
Lady Macbeth can be seen from the start of the play as a character who alienates herself from the audience’s sympathies as she responds to her husband’s letter about meeting the witches by calling on the powers of darkness to “unsex” her, and to strip her of all feminine softness so that the typically ‘male’ quality of ruthless determination might drive her thoughts and actions from this point onwards. When she declares, “Stop up the access and passage to remorse/That no compunctious visitings of nature/Shake my fell purpose”, she is trying to rid herself of any guilt that we would expect a moral woman to feel. For a Jacobean audience, steeped in superstition yet with a strong, almost simplistic, faith in God and the Church, the idea of supernatural spirits lurking in the shadows would have been highly believable; they would therefore feel shocked that Lady Macbeth is choosing to align herself with evil, particularly since women were supposed to be gentle, submissive creatures. She is already demonstrating that she knows her only chance of power, in a patriarchal society, is as the wife of the most powerful man in the country; and her focus now is to convince Macbeth that he wants the crown as much as she does. The witches may have ignited the spark of Macbeth’s ambition to be king, but it is Lady Macbeth who will fan that spark into a flame that will eventually destroy her husband from the inside out.

How does Lady Macbeth alienate herself from the audience at the start of the play?
What is she trying to rid herself of, and why?
How would a Jacobean audience respond to Lady Macbeth’s words, and why?
What is her only chance of power and how does this link to Jacobean society?
What must she now convince Macbeth?
What Great Looks Like: Gender

Hitherto we have seen Lady Macbeth in Act 1 scene 5 embrace evil as she called on dark spirits to “fill [her] ... with direst cruelty”, thus linking her in the audience’s mind with the witches and their own supernatural dealings; but in Act 1 scene 7, this malevolence is seen on a whole new level as Lady Macbeth deliberately turns her back on Jacobean ideals of womanhood, declaring that even though she knows what it is to be a mother (“I have given suck, and know/How tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me.”), she would willingly sacrifice her own child by tearing it from her breast to “dash[...] the brains out” in order to further her ambition. The savage violence of the phrase “dashed the brains out” would have horrified a Jacobean audience, for whom Mary, the mother of Jesus, would have been a female archetype, since a woman’s role was to bear children and nurture them. Lady Macbeth’s malevolence here, then, is twofold: she is not only talking of killing an innocent child but of killing her own baby – and in a particularly bloodthirsty and nasty way. More chilling still, she speaks of plucking the sucking baby from her breast, which could be seen as a symbolic enactment of ridding herself of all maternal urges and feminine behaviour. This image also continues her earlier statement in Act 1 scene 5 when she asked evil spirits to “take [her] milk for gall”: in a perverse parody of true motherhood, she chooses to nurture evil rather than to nurse a child. In addition, we must remember that this statement is uttered in response to (what she sees as) her husband’s inability to act: in effect, she is reminding him that, although he is a seasoned warrior who has killed many on the battlefield, she herself is by far the more ruthless and single-minded of the two since she would sacrifice anything to see her plans come to fruition. If she can talk of murdering her own child, then she will indeed feel no compunction at the thought of killing King Duncan. In this sense, then, she can be seen as just as evil as – if not more so than – the three witches.

How does Lady Macbeth turn her back on Jacobean ideals of womanhood?
Why would this horrify the audience at the time?
What does killing her baby symbolise?
Which earlier quotation links to this, and how?
In what sense can she be seen as being as evil as the witches?
Themes:

Hallucinations
What Great Looks Like: Hallucinations

Within the play, Shakespeare uses vivid hallucinations to create a mood that is both ominous and sinister. This is outlined in Macbeth's soliloquy in Act 2 scene 1, where the atmosphere is surreal: 'Is this a dagger I see before me?' The rhetorical question captures his mental and emotional state as he hallucinates, seeing a dagger that floats in front of him. Macbeth's greed and ambition are pushing him over the brink of reason, into insanity; the repetition of 'I see thee' hints that his mind may already be unravelling. The paradox between appearance and reality stresses Macbeth’s internal struggle as he seems to be aware of his actions but is unable to fight his guilty conscience. Furthermore, he mentions the darkness of his own heart and the way his crime is going to disturb the peaceful sleep people are under: 'nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse.' He is recognising the injustice of his own deeds as the disruption of the ‘Chain of Being’ leads to chaos and disarray of the worlds. It is likely that Shakespeare’s audience would find both this soliloquy and the accompanying hallucination unsettling since they underline Macbeth’s decision to rebel against the Great Chain of Being and thus emphasise the demonic purpose of his quest.

How does Shakespeare create an ominous and sinister mood?
What does he imagine he sees and what language device is used?
What effect are Macbeth’s greed and ambition having on him?
What does the paradox between appearance and reality stress (emphasise)?
Why would a Jacobean audience find this hallucination unsettling?
What has Macbeth slipped further into?
What has Macbeth departed from and what is he destroyed by?
What quotation shows Macbeth’s desperation and mental torment? What language device is being used?
What is driving a division between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and what quotation shows this?
What is stronger than Macbeth’s sense of remorse?
Why would the audience feel a sense of satisfaction whilst watching this scene?
Themes:

The Tragic Hero
From the onset of the play, Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a man with the potential to become a true tragic hero: a man with the potential to be great were it not for a tragic flaw. By referring to him in Act 1 scene 2 as “brave Macbeth”, Shakespeare underlines that Macbeth is essentially good: it is only when the witches begin to manipulate his mind with their three prophecies, telling him that he will be “king hereafter”, that we realise he also has the potential for evil. Nevertheless, Macbeth retains enough of a moral compass to feel ashamed of the “horrid image” he now sees when he visualises giving fate a helping hand by killing Duncan, declaring that even the thought of regicide “make[s his] seated heart knock at [his] ribs/Against the use of nature.” He therefore not only recognises that murder is a crime but feels physically disturbed by the idea of it. By showing Macbeth in a constant state of fluctuation within Act 1, first contemplating murder then telling his wife that they “will proceed no further in this business”, Shakespeare emphasises that his eponymous hero is not entirely evil at this stage; however, a Jacobean audience would lose all respect for Macbeth once he lets his wife bully him into changing his mind and carrying out the murder after all, since they would expect a husband to rule over his wife and would see Macbeth’s submission to Lady Macbeth as a personality flaw deserving punishment.

1. How is Macbeth presented as a man with the potential to become a true tragic hero at the start of the play?
2. When do we realise he has the potential for evil?
3. Which quotation shows that he is disturbed by the thought of regicide?
4. How do we know Macbeth is in a state of fluctuation within Act 1?
5. Why would a Jacobean audience lose all respect for Macbeth?
As the play progresses and Macbeth slips further into guilt-induced insanity and then ambition-fuelled megalomania, Shakespeare gradually strips away his heroic qualities until only a “mad butcher” remains at the end of Act 5. Macbeth’s initial guilt at killing Duncan, when he declares himself unable to return the bloody daggers since he is so traumatised by the sight of blood, is swiftly replaced by neurotic paranoia as he systematically begins to murder anyone who threatens to take his crown. After admitting that his “fears in Banquo stick deep”, Macbeth cold-bloodedly orders his friend’s death, without needing any prompting or nagging from his wife: indeed, he refuses to tell her of his plans, possibly because he does not trust her or because he fears that her ambition is greater than his. Lulled into a false sense of security by the witches’ prophecies, Macbeth starts to believe he is invincible when he is told that “None of woman born shall harm Macbeth” – despite being warned to “Beware Macduff.” In this way, Shakespeare suggests that pride and ambition combine in a truly fatal tragic flaw, depicting Macbeth in the final scenes as a man who is devoid of both fear and reason, refusing to “yield to kiss the ground/Before young Malcolm’s feet” but choosing instead to fight on, despite the recent death of his wife. By juxtaposing Macduff and Macbeth at the end of the play, Shakespeare shows his audience the true tragedy of the story as we realise that loyal, honest Macduff is the hero Macbeth could have been himself - had he not fallen victim to the schemes of the witches and his own wife.

How is Macbeth referred to at the end of the play?
How does Macbeth’s paranoia affect him once he is king?
What effect do the witches’ prophecies have on Macbeth? (Embed a quotation.)
What does Macbeth’s pride make him refuse to do?
Who is Macbeth juxtaposed with at the end of the play, and what effect does this have?