**Section 1:**

Shakespeare’s shortest and bloodiest tragedy, *Macbeth* tells the story of a brave Scottish general (Macbeth) who receives a prophecy from a trio of sinister witches that one day he will become King of Scotland. Consumed with ambitious thoughts and spurred to action by his wife, Macbeth murders King Duncan and seizes the throne for himself. He begins his reign racked with guilt and fear and soon becomes a tyrannical ruler, as he is forced to commit more and more murders to protect himself from enmity and suspicion. The bloodbath swiftly propels Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to arrogance, madness, and death. *Macbeth* was most likely written in 1606, early in the reign of James I, who had been James VI of Scotland before he succeeded to the English throne in 1603. James was a patron of Shakespeare’s acting company, and of all the plays Shakespeare wrote under James’s reign, *Macbeth* most clearly reflects the playwright’s close relationship with the sovereign. In focusing on Macbeth, a figure from Scottish history, Shakespeare paid homage to his king’s Scottish lineage. Additionally, the witches’ prophecy that Banquo will found a line of kings is a clear nod to James’s family’s claim to have descended from the historical Banquo.

*Macbeth* is not Shakespeare’s most complex play, but it is certainly one of his most powerful and emotionally intense. Whereas Shakespeare’s other major tragedies, such as *Hamlet* and *Othello* explore the intellectual predicaments faced by their subjects and the fine nuances of their subjects’ characters, *Macbeth*tumbles madly from its opening to its conclusion. It is a sharp, jagged sketch of theme and character; as such, it has shocked and fascinated audiences for nearly four hundred years.

**Section 2:**

Elizabethans believed that God set out an order for everything in the universe. This was known as the Great Chain of Being. On Earth, God created a social order for everybody and chose where you belonged. In other words, the king or queen was in charge because God put them there and they were only answerable to God (the Divine Right of Kings). This meant that disobeying the monarch was a sin, which was handy for keeping people in their place! It also led to the idea that if the wrong person was monarch everything would go wrong for a country, including whether the crops would be good, or if animals behaved as they should. The Elizabethans were very superstitious.

The Great Chain of Being includes everything from God and the angels at the top, to humans, to animals, to plants, to rocks and minerals at the bottom. It moves from beings of pure spirit at the top of the Chain to things made entirely of matter at the bottom. Humans are pretty much in the middle, being mostly mortal, or made of matter, but with a soul made of spirit. The theory started with the Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato, but was a basic assumption of life in Elizabethan England. You were a noble, or a farmer, or a beggar, because that was the place God had ordained for you.

The Great Chain of Being is a major influence on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Macbeth disturbs the natural order of things by murdering the king and stealing the throne. This throws all of nature into uproar, including a story related by an old man that the horses in their stables went mad and ate each other, a symbol of unnatural happenings.

**Section 3:**

Throughout the ages and in all countries there have been people who have believed in witches and witchcraft. The people of Shakespeare’s day were no different. Shakespeare drew on the popular traditions of his time and used them for his own purposes. In ‘Macbeth’ he used popular beliefs about witches and witchcraft. Witches were associated with the dark and death. In Christian countries they were thought to be the agents of Satan going about their business at night, and they were believed to gather near graves to conduct their evil rites and make poisons.

When Shakespeare wrote Macbeth, witchcraft was a topic of considerable interest. The new king of England, James I, had written a book called Demonology which was published in 1597 - a study of witchcraft and its evils. James I tightened up laws against witchcraft in 1604, passing a **statute** where anyone exercising witchcraft ‘shall suffer pains of death as a **felon** or felons, and shall lose the privilege and benefit of **clergy** and **sanctuary**.’ James I was convinced that a group of witches had raised a storm and tried to drown him and, as a result, considered the works of the devil. Evidence of a relationship with evil spirits **condemned** a suspect to death by hanging, burning or drowning. Whether Shakespeare himself believed in witches does not matter. He used them for his play, and many of his audience would have believed in them as thoroughly evil servants of the devil. For the people of Shakespeare’s time, the devil was very real who they believed spent his time trying to trap men and women into his power.

Witches were supposed to be capable of doing all the things that the three weird sisters are said to perform in Macbeth. It was believed that they could see into the future; that they could create storms, hail, thunder and lightning; that they were able to sink ships; dry up springs; stop the sun and change night into day and day into night. They could also cause the death of their enemies, and could make themselves invisible. In order to work their charms they would open graves and steal parts of the bodies to make potions. For this purpose the bodies of unbaptised babies were especially prized. And witches could call up the dead. For a king like Macbeth to visit and have dealings with witches would have seemed both a crime and a sin. Macbeth is easily captured by their power and by their **prophecies**. But note that they never tell him a lie. However, they do allow him to deceive himself. The devil does not lie...but leads us into temptation.

**Section 4:**

Elizabethan society was patriarchal, meaning that men were considered to be the leaders and women their inferiors. Women were regarded as "the weaker sex", not just in terms of physical strength, but emotionally too.  It was believed that women always needed someone to look after them. If they were married, their husband was expected to look after them. If they were single, then their father, brother or another male relative was expected to take care of them. Even though there had been an unmarried woman on the throne in Elizabethan England, the roles of women in society were very limited. There were very clear expectations of men and women, and in general men were expected to be the breadwinners and women to be housewives and mothers. On average, a woman gave birth to a child every two years, but as a lot of babies and children died from sickness, families were not always large. Childbearing was considered a great honour to women, as children were seen as blessings from God.

Women were not allowed to enter the professions i.e law, medicine, politics, but they could work in domestic service as cooks, maids, etc. Women were also allowed to write works of literature, providing the subject was suitable for women: mainly translations or religious works. Women were not allowed to act on the public stage or write for the public stage. Acting was considered dishonourable for women. In Shakespeare's plays, the roles of women were often played by young boys. A man was considered to be the head of a marriage, and he had the legal right to chastise his wife. However, it is important to understand what this "headship" meant. It did not mean, as if often supposed, that the husband was able to command his wife to do anything he pleased. He was expected to take care of her, make sure she had everything she needed, and most importantly to love her and be a good father to any children they had. If a husband felt the need to chastise his wife, then he was not allowed to be cruel or inflict bodily harm. If he did abuse his wife, then he could be prosecuted or prevented from living with her. There was no divorce: marriage generally lasted as long as the couple both lived.

**4. Summarise each section in no more than FIVE sentences**

**SECTION 1: SECTION 4:**

**SECTION 2:**

**SECTION 3:**