



Multiple Critical Perspectives

Teaching William Shakespeare's

Macbeth

from Multiple Critical Perspectives

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ISBN: 1-58049-694-6

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What you will not find is an answer key. To the feminist, the feminist approach is the correct approach, just as the Freudian will hold to the Freudian. Truly, the point of this guide is to examine, question, and consider, not merely arrive at “right” answers.

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Multiple Perspectives on William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK

1. *Macbeth* is a play, specifically a tragedy, specifically a Shakespearean tragedy.

A Shakespearean tragedy generally involves a TRAGIC HERO (Macbeth)

who holds an ELEVATED POSITION IN HIS SOCIETY (Thane of Glamis, cousin to the King, trusted general in the army).

Some KEY CHARACTER TRAIT (Macbeth is a man of action)

motivates the hero to perform an ACTION or to set in motion a SERIES OF ACTIONS. (Macbeth believes it is his destiny to become king. Unwilling or unable to wait for his destiny to unfold, he kills the king and assumes the throne.)

This series of actions creates INTENSE SUFFERING BOTH FOR THE HERO AND FOR THE SOCIETY AT LARGE (Macbeth is plagued by intense guilt about the murder of Duncan. He fears for the security of his throne and kills anyone he believes might pose a threat to him. His wife eventually goes insane and kills herself, and all descriptions of the kingdom under his reign indicate that there is widespread poverty, fear, and dissatisfaction. His own noblemen ultimately desert him as he does not reward them for their loyalty as a proper king should.)

Finally, THE HERO IS KILLED BY SOMEONE WHO HAS BEEN CAUGHT UP IN THE OVERALL INTENSE SUFFERING (Macbeth is killed by Macduff, whose family Macbeth had slaughtered).

Macbeth

Peace and order are restored.

Sometimes AN OUTSIDE AGENT (a villain or some other intruder) acts as a catalyst to the hero's beginning the action or series of actions. (The witches bring Macbeth's desire to be king to the front of his consciousness, and Lady Macbeth exacerbates his impatience.)

CAST OF CHARACTERS

| | |
|--------------|--|
| DUNCAN | king of Scotland. |
| MALCOLM | his elder son |
| DONALBAIN | his younger son |
| MACBETH | cousin to the king, general in the king's army |
| BANQUO | general in the king's army |
| MACDUFF | a nobleman of Scotland, Thane of Fife |
| LENNOX | another nobleman of Scotland |
| ROSS | yet another nobleman of Scotland |
| MENTEITH | still another nobleman of Scotland |
| ANGUS | ditto |
| CAITHNESS | ditto, ditto |
| FLEANCE | son to Banquo. |
| SIWARD | Earl of Northumberland, general of the English forces. |
| YOUNG SIWARD | his son. |
| SEYTON | an officer attending on Macbeth. |
| | Boy, son to Macduff. |
| | An English Doctor. |
| | A Scottish Doctor. |
| | A Soldier. |
| | A Porter. |
| | An Old Man |
| LADY MACBETH | |
| LADY MACDUFF | Gentlewoman attending on Lady Macbeth |
| HECATE | Three Witches |
| | Three Apparitions |
| | Lords, Gentlemen, Officers, Soldiers, Murderers, |
| | Attendants, and Messengers |
| | Sergeant |
| | Servant |
| | First Murderer |
| | Second Murderer |
| | Third Murderer |
| | Messenger |

SYNOPSIS

ACT I: Three witches meet on the heath and indicate their intent to meet Macbeth after the end of a battle. We learn from Duncan, the king, that Scotland is involved in two conflicts: an internal rebellion headed by Macdonwald and a Norwegian invasion jointly headed by the king of Norway and Scotland's Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth and Banquo are instrumental in ending both conflicts. Macbeth slays Macdonwald on the battlefield, and the traitorous Thane of Cawdor is sentenced to death. The witches tell Macbeth that he is Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and will be king. They tell Banquo that his descendents will be kings. Ross and Angus meet Macbeth and Banquo and tell Macbeth that the king has executed Cawdor and bestowed the title on Macbeth. Now Macbeth believes the prediction that he will be king might also be fulfilled. Duncan expresses his inability to thank Macbeth sufficiently for the service he has performed. He then names his son Malcolm heir to the throne. Macbeth had expected to be named heir and feels somewhat betrayed. Lady Macbeth receives a letter from Macbeth telling her about the witches and the title of Thane of Cawdor. Immediately she begins to plan the murder of the king to clear the way for Macbeth. Macbeth hesitates but ultimately agrees to participate in the plot.

ACT II: Banquo expresses some misgivings about Macbeth and the witches' prophecies, and he offers to talk to Macbeth about them. Macbeth murders Duncan, and Lady Macbeth returns the bloody daggers to the scene of the crime. They both wash their hands and assume innocent guises. Macbeth, however, is plagued with guilt. Lady Macbeth chides him for his remorse. Macduff arrives, and the body is discovered. Macbeth, assuming righteous anger, kills the two groomsmen who appear to be the culprits. The sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, flee — Malcolm to England, Donalbain to Ireland. Macbeth is named king, and Macduff refuses to attend his coronation.

ACT III: Banquo continues to express misgivings about how Macbeth assumed the throne. Macbeth manipulates some peasants into assassinating Banquo and his son. Banquo is killed, but the son, Fleance, escapes. The Macbeths hold a state dinner at which the ghost of Banquo appears. Macbeth decides to visit the witches again to see what his future holds.

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ACT IV: Macbeth visits the witches and demands to know his future. Three apparitions appear: an armed head that warns Macbeth to beware Macduff, a bloody child that tells Macbeth that no man born of woman can harm him, and a child carrying a tree branch who tells Macbeth that he will never be vanquished until Birnam wood climbs up Dunsinane hill to fight against him. The witches then show him a parade of kings – Banquo’s descendents. There are eight kings in the parade, the last carrying a mirror to show that the line will continue indefinitely. Some of the kings are carrying the orbs and scepters of multiple kingdoms: Scotland, England, and possibly Ireland or America. Learning that Macduff has fled to England, Macbeth sends assassins to Macduff’s castle where Macduff’s entire family is slaughtered. In England, Macduff convinces Malcolm to raise an army and march into Scotland against Macbeth.

ACT V: Lady Macbeth, having repressed her guilt for many years, suffers a nervous breakdown and confesses to the crimes of killing Duncan, Banquo, and Macduff’s family while walking in her sleep. She eventually commits suicide. Macbeth finds himself deserted and betrayed by virtually all of his former supporters. He faces Macduff in hand-to-hand combat, and is killed. Macduff was not born of woman, having been delivered by Caesarian section. Malcolm becomes king of Scotland, and order is restored.

LIST OF POTENTIAL THEMES

- How much of Tragedy (if any) can be blamed on Destiny, and how much is simply the result of individual choices and actions?
- How does a man of action handle knowing his destiny?
- Can a truly honest man be tempted/corrupted, or do Macbeth's actions indicate that he is less than the honorable man everyone believes him to be?
- To what extent is Lady Macbeth culpable for Macbeth's actions?
- What are the effects of guilt on a person's conscious and subconscious abilities to function?
- What are a monarch's obligations to his/her subjects? (How was James I living up to that obligation?)

THEORIES TO BE APPLIED

- Feminist theory
- Psychoanalytic/Freudian criticism
- New historicism

FEMINIST THEORY APPLIED TO *MACBETH*

NOTES ON THE FEMINIST APPROACH

Feminism is an evolving philosophy. Feminism in literature is an even newer area of study and thought. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The social movement of feminism found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgement. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts to reevaluate their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes about women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing elements in literature that have been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that are clearly rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females should be added and judged on a different, feminine scale.

Three main areas of study/points of criticism:

- differences between men and women
 - women in power or power relationships between men and women
 - the female experience
1. Differences between men and women
 - The basic assumption is that gender determines everything, including values and language.
 - The canon must be expanded to include the study of those genres in which women “traditionally” write: journals, diaries, and personal letters.
 - Note the differences in both the topics or issues about which men and women write and the perspectives from which they write about them.
 2. Women in power or power relationships between men and women
 - Note and attack the social, economic, and political exploitation of women. Note whether women have any power and what type it is.
 - Society has not treated all of its constituencies with equality, and literature is a means by which inequities can be identified, protested, and possibly rectified.
 - Note the division of labor and economics between men and women.
 - Note how men and women interact with one another in a variety of relationships (romantic, professional, etc.) Does the woman act in any way subservient to the man? Does the man treat the woman like an adult? A political and economic equal?

3. The female experience

- On the most basic level, women experience different things in life than men do. Examine what aspects of feminine life are included in the work. Note the point of view through which the events are told. Is it male or female? Pay attention to how the narrator, male or female, treats the events. For example, are they depicted with sensitivity, harshness, etc.
- Reject any view of female personality in contrast to male personality. Feminists believe that the female personality is a separate entity from the male personality, and if judged by the same measures, is judged incorrectly. The female personality can stand independent of the male personality, just as the male can stand independent of the female.
- Examine (and possibly celebrate) the creative, life-giving role of femininity. Though traditionally women have been portrayed as dependent on men for everything, the fact is that men are dependent on women for the most basic necessity in the world—birthing children. A male’s relationship to his mother has always been portrayed as a very strong bond (whether in the Freudian theory of the Oedipal complex or modern phrases such as “Mama’s boy”).
- Explore the concept that men and women are both incomplete without each other (women cannot conceive without men, etc.) not of feminine “incompleteness” alone (Adam’s rib, Freudian theories on sexuality, etc.).

Essential questions for a feminist reading:

1. What stereotypes of women are present? Are female characters oversimplified? Weak? Foolish? Excessively naive?
2. Do the female characters play major or minor roles in the action of the work? Are they supportive or independent? Powerless or strong? Subservient or in control?
3. If the female characters have any power, what kind is it? Political? Economic? Social? Psychological?
4. How do the male characters talk about the female characters?
5. How do the male characters treat the female characters?
6. How do the female characters act toward the male characters?
7. How do the female characters act toward each other?
8. Is the work in general sympathetic to female characters? Too sympathetic?
9. Are the female characters and situations in which they are placed oversimplified or presented fully and in detail?
10. What are the predominant images? Are they images usually associated with women? Why or why not?
11. Do any of the work's themes touch upon any idea that could be seen as a feminist issue? Is the theme supportive or disparaging of women?
12. Overall, do you think that the female characters are believable (based on women you know)? For that matter, do you think that the male characters are believable?

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FOCUS OF STUDY:

- Examine the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth
- Examine the role of Lady Macbeth in the dramatic tragedy
- Examine Lady Macbeth, specifically in her roles of wife (and mother)
- Examine the relationship between Macduff and Lady Macduff
- Examine Lady Macduff, specifically in her roles of wife and mother
- Contrast Lady Macduff and Lady Macbeth

ACTIVITY ONE: Contrasting the language of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth:

Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small groups) examine the following key scenes and compare the language Shakespeare wrote for Macbeth and for Lady Macbeth:

Lady Macbeth: Act I, scene v (after the letter) with Macbeth: Act I, scene vii (opening soliloquy);

Lady Macbeth: Act 2, scene 2 (entire scene) with Macbeth: Act 2, scene iii (after discovery of Duncan's body);

Lady Macbeth; Act 5, scene 1 (entire scene) with Macbeth: Act 5, scene v (Tomorrow, tomorrow, and tomorrow ...)

Points of comparison:

- If there are any prose passages, who speaks in prose?
- Consider any rhyme schemes; whose rhymes are more subtle? Whose are more simple and obvious?
- Who speaks more plainly, and who speaks more in metaphors and similes?
- Who uses more allusions?
- What, if anything, does Shakespeare's use of language in the development and portrayal of his characters say about his feelings toward (and intentions for) that character?

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ACTIVITY TWO—Examining the development of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s marriage:

Divide the class into male/female pairs (or small groups with even numbers of boys and girls).

Have each group choose a scene from the following, or assign each group an appropriate scene:

Act I, scene v

Act I, scene vii

Act II, scene i

Act III, scene ii

Make every attempt to have every scene from the above list covered by at least one group.

Each group is to rewrite its scene into “modern,” colloquial English, paying special attention to maintaining the integrity of the characters and their relationship. Where there are no stage directions, have students create them, indicating action, tone of voice, facial expression, again maintaining the integrity of the characters and their relationship.

Each group presents its scene to the class in the order in which they appear in the play.

Either as an introduction by the presenting group, or as a post-presentation discussion, the class should address the following questions:

1. What stereotypes, if any, does Lady Macbeth exhibit in this scene?
2. Who is the dominant character in this scene? In what way(s) is he/she dominant?
3. What role does Lady Macbeth play in the action of the story at this point (i.e., leader? supporter? subservient? equal? etc.)?

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4. How does Macbeth treat Lady Macbeth in this scene?
5. How does Lady Macbeth act toward Macbeth in this scene?
6. What (if anything) do Macbeth and/or Lady Macbeth say about women, the nature of women, the role of women in this scene?
7. How has Lady Macbeth's character developed from previous scene(s) to this one?
8. How has Lady Macbeth's role in the play changed from previous scene(s) to this one?
9. Is the scene in general sympathetic to the female character? Why or why not?

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ACTIVITY THREE—Contrasting Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff:

Have students read (or re-read) Act IV, scene ii and discuss the following questions:

1. What stereotypes, if any, does Lady Macduff exhibit in this scene?
2. Who is the dominant character in this scene? In what way(s) is he/she dominant?
3. What role does Lady Macduff play in the action of the story at this point (i.e., leader? supporter? subservient? equal? etc.)?
4. How do the male characters (Ross, Son, and Murderers) treat Lady Macduff in this scene?
5. How does Lady Macduff react or respond to this treatment?
6. What, if anything, does Lady Macduff say about women, the nature of women, and/or the role of women in this scene?
7. What is the purpose of Lady Macduff's presence in this scene? In the play?
8. Is the scene in general sympathetic to the female character? Why or why not?
9. Does Lady Macbeth or Lady Macduff exhibit more female stereotypes?
10. How do Lady Macbeth's and Lady Macduff's roles in their respective marriages differ?
11. Who is the more sympathetic character, Lady Macbeth or Lady Macduff? Why?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How might the fact that only men were allowed to perform on stage in Shakespeare's day have affected his portrayal of female characters?
2. What effect, if any, would the fact that England had until recently been ruled by a popular queen have had on Shakespeare's portrayal of women?
3. Why might Shakespeare have wanted Lady Macbeth to play such a large role in the action of the play?
4. How would the play have been different if Lady Macbeth had been absent from the action? If Lady Macbeth had been a man (e.g. Macbeth's brother)?
5. How responsible for Macbeth's actions is Lady Macbeth? (Be sure to support your assertions with direct references to the text.) What does this say about Macbeth as a man and husband? What does it say about Lady Macbeth as a woman and wife?

ESSAYS AND WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. In Act V, scene viii, Malcolm announces that Lady Macbeth “by self and violent hands / Took off her life,” indicating that she has committed suicide (we first hear of her death in Act V, scene v). Write Lady Macbeth’s suicide note.
2. A popular motif for painting and poetry in the Middle Ages and Renaissance was the *Madonna and Child*. Research this image, and then write an essay contrasting it with Lady Macbeth’s depiction of herself in Act I, scene vii.
3. Ultimately, does Lady Macbeth shatter or support Renaissance stereotypes of femininity? Be certain to support all of your assertions with direct and specific references to the text.
4. Research classical, Medieval, and Renaissance models for the tragic hero. Gender aside, could Lady Macbeth be considered a tragic hero? Be certain to support all of your assertions with evidence from the text and your research.

PSYCHOANALYTICAL/FREUDIAN CRITICISM APPLIED TO MACBETH

NOTES ON PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

The terms “psychological,” or “psychoanalytical,” or “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses solely on the text itself with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining the conflicts, characters, dream sequences and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is very similar to the Formalist approach to literature. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level, to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory believes that dreams are where a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and done in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.
- According to psychoanalytic theory, there are three parts to the subconscious, which is the largest part of the human personality. The three parts are:

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1. The id—the basic desire. The id is the fundamental root of what each person wants. There is no sense of conscience in it, thus making it everyone’s “inner child.” Children, before they are taught social skills, operate entirely through the id. They cry in public, wet their diapers, and demand immediate gratification of their needs and desires, to name just a few things.
2. The superego—the opposite of the id. This is the repository of all socially imposed behavior and sense of guilt. While the id is innate, the superego is learned through parental instruction and living in society. Humans develop a superego by having parents scold them and other members of society criticize or teach them.
3. The ego—reality. The balance between the id and the superego. The ego takes the desires of the id and filters them through the rule base in the superego and comes up with an action that satisfies both entities. The ego realizes that the id must be satisfied, but that there are certain socially acceptable ways to go about satisfying it.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the second view:

According to the second view, an essential relationship exists between the author of the work and the work itself. This view is in direct contrast to the Formalist approach to literature. In order to understand a work, one must fully understand the author’s life and emotional stance, and vice versa. Though a work might not be blatantly autobiographical, psychoanalysts argue that there is always something of the author in the work, whether it is a character, character trait, theme, or motif. Often, authors will satirize people they dislike or will be overtly sympathetic to people they do like. This author bias often has an effect on the reader, which is exactly what the author wants. When reading, people are very vulnerable to the author’s chosen point of view (the only way they hear the story is through the author’s narrator). This view of the psychoanalytic view is a very subjective and controversial approach to literature, but the psychoanalysts of the world argue it is a valid and important type of literary study.

This type of psychoanalytic reading includes the following:

- Reference to what is known or surmised about the author's personality is used to explain and interpret a literary work. For example, Charles Dickens grew up poor and later wrote books very sympathetic to boys who grew up poor.
- Reference to a literary work is made in order to establish an understanding of the mind of the author. For example, judging by Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, one might reasonably conclude that Harper Lee herself was sympathetic to the plight of black Americans.
- Studying the literary work of an author is a means of knowing the author as a person. The more novels by Charles Dickens one reads, the clearer idea one can infer about the author's beliefs, values, hopes, fears, etc.
- An artist may put his or her repressed desires on the page in the form of actions performed by characters. Pay attention to behaviors that are not socially "normal" to see if there is any evidence of the id at work. For example, an author who consistently writes stories in which his femal characters are weak, dependent, or unintelligent might be expressing latent misogynist tendencies.

Essential questions for a psychoanalytic reading:

1. What are the traits of the main character?
2. How does the author reveal those traits?
3. What do you learn about the character through the narrator?
4. What do you learn about the character from the way other characters relate to him or her?
5. What do you infer about the character from his/her thoughts, actions, and speech?

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6. What discrepancies exist between the author's portrayal of the character and how other characters react to him or her?
7. What discrepancies exist between the author's portrayal of the character and the reader's inferences?
8. Is the main character a dynamic character (does he or she change throughout the course of the story)? If so, how and why?
9. How does the character view him or herself ?
10. What discrepancies exist between a character's view of him or herself and other characters' reactions, the author's portrayal, and/or reader inference?
11. How do the characters view one another?
12. Is there any discrepancy between a character's personal opinion of himself and how others think about him?
13. What types of relationships exist in the work?
14. What types of images are used in conjunction with the character? What do they symbolize?
15. What symbols are used in the course of the story? What do they symbolize?
16. Do any characters have dreams or inner monologues? What is revealed about a character through dreams that would not otherwise be revealed?

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17. Are there any inner conflicts within the character? How are these conflicts revealed? How are they dealt with? Are they ever resolved? How?
18. Do any characters perform uncharacteristic actions? If so, what? What could these actions mean?

FOCUS OF STUDY:

- Examine the text for evidence of Shakespeare's views on women and marriage
- Examine the text for evidence of Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's motivation
- Examine the Weird Sisters and Banquo as extensions of Macbeth's psyche
- Contrast Macduff's motivation with Macbeth's
- Contrast Macbeth and Lady Macbeth

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ACTIVITY ONE—Contrasting the influence of the Weird Sisters and Banquo on Macbeth:

Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small groups) examine the following key scenes and paraphrase or outline the essential exchanges between Macbeth and the Weird Sisters and Macbeth and Banquo.

Act I, scene iii ;

Act 2, scene i;

Act 3, scene i.

For consideration:

1. What is Macbeth's *immediate reaction* to the Weird Sisters' announcement? What is unusual or unexpected about this reaction? What would be a more "appropriate" reaction? Under what circumstances might Macbeth's reaction be expected? (Further, who points out this reaction to the audience?)
2. What is Banquo's *immediate reaction*? How does this begin to establish Banquo's character?
3. When next do Banquo and Macbeth speak of the Weird Sisters? What is the gist of their conversation? (What does Macbeth ask of Banquo in this conversation? What does he offer in exchange? How does Banquo respond?)
4. What does Banquo confide in his soliloquy in Act III scene i?
5. Establish a chain of events from Macbeth's second visit with the Weird Sisters to his death in Act V.
6. What element of Macbeth's psychological construct does Banquo represent?
7. What element of Macbeth's psychological construct do the Weird Sisters represent?

ACTIVITY TWO—Examining the text for clues to Shakespeare’s views on women and marriage.

Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small groups) research the circumstances surrounding Shakespeare’s marriage to Anne Hathaway and answer the following questions:

1. How old was Shakespeare at the time of his marriage? How old was Anne?
2. What provided the apparent impetus for his marriage to Anne?
3. What apparently happened to Anne after Shakespeare emerged in London as an actor and playwright?
4. What did Shakespeare leave Anne in his will?
5. What parallels, if any, can you find in Shakespeare’s relationship with Anne and Macbeth’s relationship with Lady Macbeth?
6. What parallels, if any, can you find in Shakespeare’s relationship with Anne and Macduff’s relationship with Lady Macduff?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What evidence is there in Act 1 that Macbeth is already considering murdering Duncan even before speaking with Lady Macbeth?
2. Examine Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's relationship from the standpoint of who is the dominant partner. How does the dominant partner maintain this dominance?
3. Reread Macbeth's soliloquy at the beginning of Act 1, scene vii. Consider Duncan's immediate bestowal of Thane of Cawdor (Act 1, scene ii), his promise to Macbeth of further honors (Act 1, scene iv), and Malcolm's promise to those who supported him in his claim against Macbeth (Act 5, scene viii). Based on these scenes, what do you suppose Shakespeare considered the characteristics of a good king to be?

ESSAYS OR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. What is ironic about Lady Macbeth's telling her husband, "These deeds must not be thought / After these ways; so, it will make us mad" (Act 2, scene ii)? Research the psychological phenomena of "repression" and "suppression" and write an essay in which you explain how Lady Macbeth serves as a study of these phenomena and their effects.
2. Using what little you know about Shakespeare's marriage and his treatment and portrayal of Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff, write an essay in which you theorize how Shakespeare felt toward women.
3. When the murder of Duncan is discovered, Macbeth says, "Had I but died an hour before this chance, / I had lived a blessed time; for, from this instant, / There's nothing serious in mortality: / All is but toys: renown and grace is dead; / The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees / Is left this vault to brag of." (Act 2, scene i) and write Macbeth's diary entry for that night in which he explains his feeling about the murder and its discovery.

NEW HISTORICISM APPLIED TO MACBETH

NOTES ON NEW HISTORICISM

A common tendency in the study of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as that culture really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another culture is often lost to history because it is the powerful that have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the ironclad truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the south during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of and change certain elements of that culture.

Main areas of study/points of criticism:

- Traditional history is, by its nature, a subjective narrative, usually told from the point of view of the powerful. The “losers” of history do not have the means to write their stories, nor was there usually an audience interested in hearing them. Most cultures, once dominated by another, were forced to forget their past. To maintain its sovereignty, the dominant culture simply did not allow the old, defeated culture to be remembered.

Multiple Critical Perspectives

- Traditional history is not only subjectively written, it is also read and discussed subjectively. Although modern readers say they take history at face value, no one can help but compare the past to the present as a means of understanding it, which makes it subjective.
- The powerless also have “historical stories” to relate that are not to be found in official documents, mostly because they played no hand in creating them.
- No reader can claim to have the “truth” of a text or event; or even that an understanding of the “truth” is possible. At best, one can acknowledge the “truth” of a particular point of view.
- The questions to ask are not: “Were the characters based on real people?” “Are any characters or events in the text drawn from the author’s life and experiences?” or “Is the text an accurate portrayal of the time period in which it is set?” Instead, ask “What view or understanding of the relevant culture does this text offer?” and “How does this text contribute to or shape the understanding of the culture it represents?”
- The text, rather than being a static artifact of a definable culture, is a participant in a dynamic, changeable culture. Every time someone reads it, he or she brings a unique set of experiences and points of view that change the meaning of the text, however slightly.

Essential questions for a New Historicist reading:

1. What events occurred in the writer’s life that made him or her who he or she is? What has affected his or her look on life?
2. Who influenced the writer? What people in his or her life may have helped her form her world view?
3. What did the writer read that affected his or her philosophy?

4. What were the writer's political views? Was he or she liberal? Conservative? Moderate?
5. At what level in the social order was the writer raised? How did his economic and social situation affect him?
6. At what level in the social order did the writer *want* to be?
7. From what level in the social pecking order did the writer's friends come? How were they employed?
8. How powerful was the writer socially?
9. What concerned the writer about society? What did he or she do about it?
10. What type of person was the writer in his or her society?
11. What was happening in the world at the time the book was written? What was occurring during the the time in which it's set?
12. What were some major controversies at the time the book was written? The time in which it is set?
13. Who was on either side of the controversy? Who were the powerful? Who were the powerless?
14. Why were the powerful in their positions of power? What qualities did they have? What events transpired to get them to their positions?
15. What is similar about the views and "facts" of this book and other books written in or about the same era? What is different?
16. How did the public receive the work when it was first published?
17. How did the critics receive the work when it was first published?

Multiple Critical Perspectives

18. Did any change in culture result from the work? What changed?
19. What different perspectives of history does this text represent?
20. How does this text fit into the rules of literature in the era in which it was written?

FOCUS OF STUDY:

- Examine *Macbeth* as a tragedy (as opposed to a history)
- Examine *Macbeth* as representative of pre-English-Civil-War Literature (MB-1606-1607 ECW-1642)
- Examine the role of Banquo as a means for Shakespeare to secure his king's patronage
- Examine how *Macbeth* is written both to entertain and perhaps educate various levels of Jacobean society

ACTIVITY ONE—Examining the text for clues to the political situation in England in 1606 – 1607

Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small groups) examine the text and list the key scenes in which the action or dialogue offer anything that could be construed as a political “message.”

Then have them answer the following questions:

1. What impact, if any, would the fact that Shakespeare is writing this play during the reign of James I (James VI of Scotland) have on the subject matter of the play?
2. What impact, if any, would the fact that Shakespeare is writing this play during the reign of James I (James VI of Scotland) have on its reception in England?
3. What evidence is there, if any, of problems in Duncan’s reign?
4. List the problems cited throughout the play with Macbeth’s reign (do not include the fact that he murdered Duncan).
5. To what extent are the roles/conditions of the “less powerful” represented in the play?
 - women
 - children
 - the poor
 - the elderly
6. What can be inferred from the treatment of these groups (or their absence) in the play?

Multiple Critical Perspectives

ACTIVITY TWO—Examining the impact of literary genre on content and purpose

Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small groups) research the “actual” history of Macbeth, Duncan, and Malcolm. (NOTE: This could be accomplished by a short trip to the school’s computer or Internet lab. A simple Google search using the keywords “Macbeth history” will yield sufficient information from a variety of viewpoints.)

Next, have students (again, independently, in pairs, or in small groups) examine the text and complete the chart on their activity sheet by indicating what scenes, actions, dialogue, or characters constitute the essential elements of Renaissance tragedy.

Then, have them answer the following questions:

1. In order to establish his intended theme, what changes might Shakespeare have had to make in the following characters?
 - Duncan
 - Macbeth
 - Lady Macbeth
 - Malcolm
 - Banquo
 - Macduff
2. For what possible reason(s) would Shakespeare have chosen to alter the following facts in *Macbeth*?
 - the ages of Malcolm and Donalbain
 - the circumstances surrounding Duncan’s defeat and death
 - the circumstances surrounding Macbeth’s defeat and death
 - the nature and apparent length of Macbeth’s reign

ACTIVITY THREE—Examining the impact of an audience’s needs and expectations on content

Review with students the fact that Shakespeare was a playwright, an entertainer, and that his business was “show biz” and not academia. Review with students the physical arrangement of theaters of the time period, and the diversity of the audience that attended Shakespeare’s plays.

Then, have students (independently, in pairs, or in small groups) speculate what each member of Shakespeare’s audience would be likely to expect from a play he or she had paid money to attend.

- groundlings (men)
- groundlings (women)
- groundlings (male youths)
- “professional” women
- “gentlemen” (gallants)
- “gentle” ladies
- ladies of the court*
- gentlemen of the court*
- royalty (men)*
- royalty (women)*

*While noble and royal persons would not have attended the theater, they would have had the opportunity to see the plays performed at court, and their expectations would be as much a consideration as would the expectations of the theater audience—possibly even more so, taking into consideration the playwright’s desire to attract and maintain wealthy patrons.

Finally, have students (again, independently, in pairs, or in small groups) examine the text and note on their activity sheet what scenes, actions, dialogue, or characters were possibly included or altered to increase the play’s popularity with each segment of the audience.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If *Macbeth* were our sole source of historical information, what conclusions would we draw about 11th century Scotland? About 17th century England?
2. Why might Shakespeare have chosen the genre of tragedy rather than history for this story?
3. How might Shakespeare's knowledge of his audience have shaped the social and political view of *Macbeth*?
4. What situations or issues presented in *Macbeth* are at all "relevant" in twenty-first-century United States?
5. What changes (in setting, plot, characters, etc.) would a playwright have to make in order to adapt the play for a contemporary audience? Why would those adaptations be necessary? What might future scholars assume about twenty-first-century United States culture and society from this adapted version?

ESSAYS OR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write a letter from William Shakespeare to King James I in which Shakespeare discusses his plan to include the characters of Banquo and Fleance in the play.
2. Using your study of *Macbeth* as evidence for your assertions, discuss some of the problems with trying to "recreate" history for a "contemporary" audience.
3. Explore how a twenty-first-century American audience would react to the issues and situations in *Macbeth* differently from a seventeenth-century English audience.

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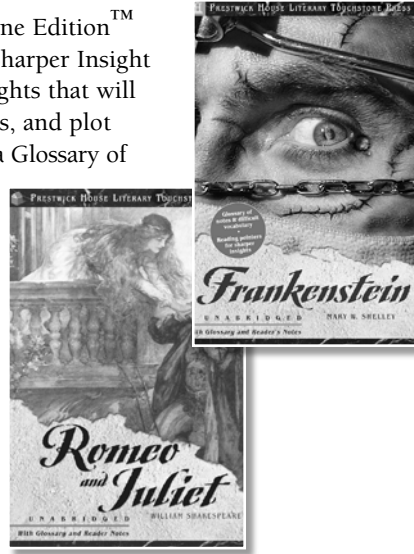
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