

Tone and Voice in *Macbeth*

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Drama, with its emphasis on voice, interpretation, and subtext, is a bountiful source of ideas for teaching an awareness of literary tone. Student actors, having worked with text and subtext, are often most adept at observing and articulating the nuances of tone in literature. An intense study of drama in the AP English Literature class can lead all of our students to begin developing this crucial sensitivity. The menacing atmosphere of secrecy, murder, and vengeance in William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* provides abundant opportunities for students to hear a broad range of tones and voices in the sharply contrasting characters while they also consider varied interpretations supported by the text.

Listening for Tone: Performance and Oral Reading

Most high school students, even those experienced in reading Shakespeare, greatly benefit from physically hearing the bard’s language either through reading the entire text aloud in class, through listening to a taped performance, or by doing both—reading selected passages aloud; pausing to discuss voice, characterization, tone, and theme; and then listening to professional renditions on tape or CD. Such dual exposure can guide students as they move beyond basic familiarity with plot and characterization and into a more nuanced awareness of tone and interpretation. Most students will not be able to hear tone inside their heads until they’ve heard it with their ears. As they read aloud, have them pause frequently, asking them to consider not only what is happening and how these developments delineate character and theme, but what is going on “beneath the text”—the subtext, or tone, that is conveyed with words. What choices could an actor or director make in delivering these lines? Which interpretations seem most valid and supportable? As the students then listen to a professional recording, they can hear and validate or even question the choices made by actors and directors.

Understanding Tone Through Diction

Although I will highlight several situations and lines where tone is significant, these examples offer only a few of the many starting points for rich discussions of text, meaning, and tone. An alert teacher will watch for moments when the students are most engaged; those are the scenes where they can dig deeply into the text. Keeping in mind that diction creates tone, students can tap their increasing comfort with Shakespearean

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language as they look for words, lines, and phrases through which tone creates or amplifies meaning, underlies character portrayal and the unfolding of themes, or, through quick or subtle shifts in tone, signals crucial developments in the text.

Just as the dark and sinister opening of *Macbeth* establishes the brooding tone of the entire play, so, too, can it set the mood of intense and exciting classroom scrutiny of the play. The very presence of the witches suggests the bleak vision of the entire play, and the urgency of their diction as they prepare to meet Macbeth (“Where the place? / Upon the heath / There to meet with Macbeth”) heightens their riddling reference to everything being its opposite: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair / Hover through the fog and filthy air.” Only 10 lines into the play, we already sense uncertainty, secrecy, and the anticipation of evil deeds, underscored by the portentous sympathy between the stormy weather and “night’s black agents.” Point out to students that this “fair” versus “foul” contrast, a major theme of the play, is carried out tonally throughout act 1 with quick shifts between “dark scenes” (the opening witches’ lines, the witches’ anticipation of first meeting Macbeth, their prophecies, Macbeth’s darkly brooding reflections that go straight to contemplation of murder, and Lady Macbeth’s immediate thoughts of regicide) and “light scenes” (the captain’s account of Macbeth’s bravery and victory, Duncan’s pride in the military victory, the honor of title bestowed on Macbeth, and the king’s joyful plans to visit Macbeth). Students can demonstrate their increasing consciousness of tone by finding phrases and lines supporting these tonal states and shifts, which are audible in the alteration between iambic pentameter (“For brave Macbeth—well he deserves that name— / Disdaining fortune, with his brandished steel”) and the witches’ steadily droning trochaic tetrameter (“Weary sev’ nights nine times nine, / Shall he dwindle, peak and pine”). The first act’s vacillating tone derives from two very contradictory rhythms and its pervasive light and dark imagery.

Act 1, scene 5 provides opportunities for further examination of tone as we both see the loving, domestic relationship of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (“my dearest partner of greatness,” “[m]y dearest love”) and hear their increasingly sinister words as secret thoughts of murder become the reality of their evil plans. Only a few short speeches into the first dialogue of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare gives us sufficient ambiguity to infer several possible tones, all plausible in the context of the tormented Macbeth who, as Lady Macbeth so well knows, “wouldst wrongly win” the coveted throne. After Lady Macbeth’s effusive greeting (“Great Glamis! Worthy Cawdor!”), Macbeth raises the topic of Duncan: “My dearest love, / Duncan comes here tonight.” These short, unadorned lines convey a tone of hesitancy: he knows he wants to talk about Duncan, the only obstacle to the throne, but he will let Lady Macbeth take the lead in planning murder. She, too, is

cautious, perhaps breathless at the thought of Duncan being so near and the murderous plans taking substance: “And when goes hence?” Macbeth’s short reply— “Tomorrow, as he purposes” —opens the door to the study of ambiguity in tone, leading students to interpret for themselves the extent of Macbeth’s villainy at this point. Is his answer purely factual and guileless (“he’s leaving tomorrow”) or imbued with further implications (“He *thinks* he’s leaving, but we know otherwise”) of a conspiratorial Macbeth who has already committed himself to murder? A Macbeth who is still vacillating could convey indecision (“He thinks he’ll leave tomorrow, but will he? Can we stop him?”) or dawning awareness (“Tomorrow . . . but maybe not: I see what you’re suggesting”) or urgency (“We’d best be about it if we’re going to do it”).

Tone and Symbolism: Water and Blood

As they examine the symbolism of water and blood that plays out so vividly in *Macbeth*, students should certainly look closely at Lady Macbeth’s tone in act 2, scene 2 and the despondent, remorseful echoes of her words in act 5, scene 1. Consider Macbeth’s hyperbole after he has killed Duncan: “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather / the multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red.” He is horrified, panicked, and rueful if not remorseful (“Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!”), but it is Lady Macbeth’s tone throughout this scene that students should see as the more meaningful development.

First, they might notice that she cannot herself commit the murder because the sleeping Duncan reminds her of her father: “Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done ’t.” These words reveal the first fissure in the icy resolve she has shown to this point. But she is unimaginatively literal as she impatiently chides Macbeth for being unwilling to bring the bloody daggers back into the murder room: “Infirm of purpose! / Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead / Are but as pictures.” Can students see in these words not only controlling impatience but a too-easy assumption that the deed can be put behind them, and a deafness to the voice of conscience that will ultimately destroy her? An even richer dramatic irony clings to her later words, “A little water clears us of this deed.” Students may see the same tone of ironic futility in these words as are found in the biblical Pontius Pilate’s attempts to wash his hands of the blood of Christ. They should also be guided to see the ironic foreshadowing in these lines, possibly by returning to them later after witnessing Lady Macbeth’s anguished sleepwalking in act 5, scene 1 and hearing the wrenching despair in the hyperbole that echoes Macbeth’s earlier words: “Here’s the smell of blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!” Only by hearing her tone of unbending tenacity in act 2, scene 2 will students fully grasp the intensity of Lady Macbeth’s later breakdown.

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Reversals in Character Through Tonal Shifts

Working through the play, students can also note that the vacillating, hesitant Macbeth gradually becomes inured to killing while the once resolute Lady Macbeth, no longer in his confidence, begins to crack. Careful attention to the language of the play will reveal many instances of these reversals. A quiet but important domestic moment occurs in act 3, scene 2, where Lady Macbeth's tone reveals increasing despair in a short soliloquy: "Naught's had, all's spent, / Where our desire is got without content: / 'Tis safer to be that which we destroy / Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy." Students should listen carefully for Lady Macbeth's sudden shift to a tone of forced optimism as Macbeth enters and she greets him, curbing the naked emotion we have just witnessed. As she tries to pacify her husband with her banal assurance ("What's done is done"), it is primarily her own misgivings she tries to quell. Students can no doubt relate to the experience of affirming something that's not quite true in an effort to persuade themselves as much as their listeners. Lady Macbeth's tone, but not her underlying mood, changes as she takes on her perceived role of loving, dutiful wife—trying to mollify her vexed husband with empty words that fail them both.

The Banquet Scene: Staging in the Classroom

In its vivid spectacle, the banquet scene (act 3, scene 4) provides more evidence of these character reversals and, more significantly, disturbing signs of the increasing disorder effected by Macbeth's rule. Acting out this scene in the classroom is a powerful way to illustrate just how crazed and bloodthirsty Macbeth has become and how horribly Scotland is suffering under its evil sovereign.

Teachers without directing experience can comfortably incorporate minimal staging in the English classroom. Simply set up two desks or chairs at the front of the room for the monarchs and turn the remaining tables or desks to face each other in a manner suggesting a long banquet table. Every student should take part in this scene, with Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and the ghost at the front of the class and all others seated at the table; such an arrangement best allows the students to feel in their bones the tension and horror of this spectacle. Even the two students who initially play the murderers at the top of the scene should return to the table where the lords and ladies all rise, sit, and toast when indicated in the text. The student playing Banquo's ghost should hide (a map or projection screen works effectively), entering—and sitting in Macbeth's seat—only when Macbeth calls him to the table, toasts him ("I drink . . . to our dear friend Banquo, whom we miss"), or expresses distress at his absence. The black humor of Banquo's conveniently "agreeable" appearances plays nicely in the classroom, but more importantly, students enact and witness the horror of a sovereign ruler going mad before their eyes. Moreover,

acting out this scene will clarify the points where Macbeth alternately addresses the ghost, Lady Macbeth, and his guests and where Lady Macbeth speaks to Macbeth only or to the guests. The scene provides a paradoxical tone (bringing again to mind the “fair is foul” theme) as Macbeth affirms his well-being, dismissing his outbursts as “a strange infirmity, which is nothing / To those that know me” only to fly into hysterical rage at the sight of the bloody ghost he alone can see. The vivid imagery of Macbeth’s ravings at the ghost anticipates the feverish tone we will encounter again in act 5.

There are rare moments when the irony and paradox that seam the text are deliberately applied by the characters. One occurs shortly after the banquet scene, as Lennox speaks to a lord in act 3, scene 6. In hushed, secretive tones, revealing the fearful state of Scotland at this point, Lennox drily informs the lord (and us) that “Things have been strangely borne.” Irony intensifies to outright sarcasm in Lennox’s speech beginning, “How it did grieve Macbeth!” Since this short and unspectacular scene may elude students’ attention, it is worth emphasizing not only the important plot developments it offers (Macduff now lives in disgrace; Malcolm and the English king, Edward, have formed an alliance) but also the implication of Lennox’s ironic tone in tracing Macbeth’s loss of authority as the play progresses.

Macbeth’s Intense Tone Shifts Through Crisis and Doom

As Macbeth’s mania intensifies in act 4, students will find further opportunities to study tone—darkly supernatural riddles from the witches as Macbeth visits them a final time, the melodrama of Lady Macduff and her son heroically facing death, and the fearful, guarded tone of Malcolm accusing himself of imaginary faults before finally trusting that Macduff truly wants to see him restored to his rightful throne. However, it is the play’s final short act through which students can absorb not only Lady Macbeth’s despair and demise but Macbeth’s mercurial shifts in tone as he recognizes his imminent doom. Act 5, scene 3 opens as Macbeth prepares for battle, trying unsuccessfully to convince himself that Birnam Wood cannot come to Dunsinane and that he need fear “no man of woman born.” His boastful, overconfident tone betrays his growing doubt about the witches’ riddles, and his insecurity, revealed in the frenzied insults he hurls at a terrified servant (“cream-faced loon,” “lily-livered boy,” “whey-face”), is quickly supplanted by introspection (“I have lived long enough. My way of life / Is fall’n into the sear, the yellow leaf”), which in turn gives way to bitter mockery of the doctor (“Throw physic to the dogs, I’ll none of it”). Similarly, as act 5, scene 3 opens, Macbeth expresses restored confidence (“Our castle’s strength / Will laugh a siege to scorn”) but is soon moved by the cry of women to a state of subdued reminiscences (“I have almost forgot the taste of fears”) and then, having learned of Lady Macbeth’s death, voices his memorable reflections on life’s futility (“Tomorrow and

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tomorrow and tomorrow...”). His tone reverts again to rage (“Liar and slave!”) when he is told of the “moving grove,” and his dawning realization of the witches’ duplicity renews his determination to play out his fate (“At least we’ll die with harness on our back”). As Macbeth faces defeat and death throughout act 5, his abrupt tone shifts illustrate for students the remarkable complexity of human emotions in times of crisis and change.

Macbeth entralls us—and our students—with its powerful characters, its tightly focused, suspenseful plot, its enduring theme, and Shakespeare’s unparalleled language. Though these may seem sufficient to stimulate our students’ literary taste buds as we satisfy our own palates, focusing on the extensive range of tones and voices can greatly enhance the overall study of this masterpiece. Such a concentration can deepen students’ understanding of *Macbeth* while also solidifying their insights into tone as a fundamental and dynamic element of all literature.