Teaching William Shakespeare's

Macbeth

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Macbeth*

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). 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.)

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.

Activity One

Contrasting the Language of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth

1. 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 II, Scene II (entire scene) with Macbeth: Act II, Scene III (after discovery of Duncan's body);

    • Lady Macbeth; Act V, Scene I (entire scene) with Macbeth: Act V, 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?

Psychoanalytic/Freudian Theory Applied to *Macbeth*

Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

Tʜᴇ ᴛᴇʀᴍs "ᴘsʏᴄʜᴏʟᴏɢɪᴄᴀʟ," ᴏʀ "ᴘsʏᴄʜᴏᴀɴᴀʟʏᴛɪᴄᴀʟ," ᴏʀ "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.

Activity One

Contrasting the Influence of the Weird Sisters and Banquo on Macbeth

1. 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 II, Scene I;
    • Act III, Scene I.

For consideration:

• 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?)

• What is Banquo's *immediate reaction*? How does this begin to establish Banquo's character?

• 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?)

• What does Banquo confide in his soliloquy in Act III, Scene I?

• Establish a chain of events from Macbeth's second visit with the Weird Sisters to his death in Act V.

• What element of Macbeth's psychological construct does Banquo represent?

• What element of Macbeth's psychological construct do the Weird Sisters represent?

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.

Activity One

Examining the Text for Clues to the Political Situation in England in 1606 – 1607

1. 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."

2. Then have them answer the following questions:

    • 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?

    • 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?

    • What evidence is there, if any, of problems in Duncan's reign?

    • List the problems cited throughout the play with Macbeth's reign (do not include the fact that he murdered Duncan).

    • To what extent are the roles/conditions of the "less powerful" -represented in the play?

      • women
      • children
      • the poor
      • the elderly

    • What can be inferred from the treatment of these groups (or their absence) in the play?