

Tara - MYP3
Creative Journal - Macbeth

Statement of Inquiry:

Ambition is a key driver for success but the choices we make and the consequences they have define our identity and create our narrative.

In this unit we will be looking at Macbeth, an intense drama that starts with mystical prophecies and ends in the violent death of five main characters. The play "Macbeth" also known as "The Scottish Play" is about a man called Macbeth and how he and his wife's ambition and thirst for power exceeded their moral beliefs and as a result, left them in hysterical remorse.

For one of our lessons, we had to identify some of the key themes included in Macbeth. For this exercise, we heard a summary of the events that occurred in the play and decided which category each fitted in to. For example, when Macbeth meets the three witches there are themes of power and the supernatural.

Power, ambition, reality and appearance, fate and guilt are the main themes explored in Macbeth.

There is a clear moral lesson in the moment of the play when Lady Macbeth famously reveals her guilt by exclaiming "Out, damned spot! out, I say! ...". Initially, Lady Macbeth had been the driving force in the plot to murder the king. For example, in her soliloquy in Act 1 Scene 5 she forcefully convinces Macbeth to behave innocently and leave the murder to her: "you shall put this night's great business into my dispatch". However, towards the end of the play, in Act 5 Scene 1, her conscience is pricked at the sight of her "blood stained" hands.

Fate has been a theme in literature and philosophy since the ancient Greeks who influenced Shakespeare's tragedies. Even today, there is debate among scientists about how much we are in control of our own destinies or whether our genes or our up bringing determines our character (this is known as the nature/nurture debate).

Perhaps the theme of fate versus free will was popular in Elizabethan times as ordinary people, who would have been Shakespeare's audiences, lived in uncertain and impoverished conditions. There were rapid changes and violence in society because of the Reformation (when Britain broke away from the authority of the Pope). Death and disease were more apparent in daily life and the average life expectancy was only 42 years of age. People most likely thought of fate as a way of explaining their circumstances.

In Macbeth, nothing is as it seems. This is highly relevant to today's politics and society. For instance, Donald Trump used the phrase "fake

news" throughout his presidency and claimed the election result was fraudulent. Many ordinary people found it hard to know what to believe, leading to violence in Capitol Hill, with scenes that would not have been out of place in *The Scottish Play*. The witches, in the opening scene of *Macbeth* warn of a time when "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" - perhaps this phrase could apply to today.

Queen Elizabeth the first died in 1603, three years before *Macbeth* was first performed. As she had no heir, James Stuart, king of Scotland replaced her on the throne in what has become known as the Jacobean period. Early in his reign, there were questions about systems of government, which led to "The Gun Powder Plot". Shakespeare's plays are renowned for their skilful blending of contemporary political themes and popular historical chronicles of the time. It's no accident that Shakespeare chose to set this play in Scotland, although it is set before king James's time, in the 11th century, drawing on records of events from Holinshed's *Chronicles* which was well known at the time.

As stories and plays go, there is generally a "good" character and a "bad" or "evil" character. However, I feel that in this play, *Macbeth's* character is complex, as in real life. He and his wife are ambitious and yet they have a conscience. I definitely think that *Macbeth* is a tragedy in the Greek tradition (which influenced Shakespeare) where the main character has a fatal flaw that enables the audience to learn something. Therefore the main tragedy in the play is that *Macbeth's* longing for greater power leads to his own death.

Lady *Macbeth* is a complex character that represents the themes of power and gender in this play. *Macbeth* says that she is a woman with a masculine side - implying that her ambition and violence make her masculine. However, Lady *Macbeth* achieves her ambitions in the play through manipulation, something that in Shakespeare's society would be considered more "lady like"- a stereotype that persists today. For example, Donald Trump called Hillary Clinton "manipulative".

Lady *Macbeth* also exploits gender expectation and preys on her husband's weaknesses in order to achieve her desires with the provocative question, "are you a man?" Eventually *Macbeth* believes that the only way to prove himself, is to kill king Duncan.

Even as early on in Act 1, Lady *Macbeth* reveals her character to be shrewd - she knows her husband's well - Thou wouldst be great/Art not without ambition.." And she thinks that she can compensate for her husband not having the moral "illness" to make him King. By the end of the play, however, her conscience starts to show. In Act 5 Scene 1, her remorse is so intense that she loses her mind. The next we hear of her, she has (most likely) committed suicide.

For part of our summative assessment, we had to perform Act 5 Scene 1, where the famous line “Out damned spot” comes from. In this scene, I will be playing Lady Macbeth dipping in and out of hallucinations whilst the doctor and maid are observing this.

Lady Macbeth is a challenge for any actor. The theme of ruthless ambition may not be familiar to most ordinary people and so to draw on Stanislavsky’s method requires finding ways to humanise the character drawing on everyday life. As with most of Shakespeare’s plays, there is a lot up for interpretation. In this scene, it is clear that she is experiencing a lot of guilt. Additionally, the line “no more ‘o that my lord, no more ‘o that” indicates she is reliving moments relating to the murder of the king. I chose to connect with the character’s sense of guilt by remembering moments when I have regretted actions and instead of making larger than life gestures, I decided to make my posture small which I think will also encourage the audience to empathise with her character.

Our first rehearsal was on zoom, which was challenging, as it was hard to get into character without all the visual cues and body language that actors normally rely on. We used this time to learn our lines more than anything else. Our second rehearsal, this time in person, was dedicated to blocking out where we were standing, as well as practising the performance. I found that it took me a couple of times round performing it to get into character because it is an intense scene and I was playing the ‘lead’ part. One of the main challenges I had was staying in character at moments when I had no lines - it felt awkward to be on stage whilst other characters were talking. I need to practice feeling comfortable in character when I am not occupied by speaking lines. Perhaps having a prop would help, for example, holding a handkerchief or a candle.

Additionally, I hadn’t given enough preparation on how I would interpret the lines - whether her tone was vulnerable or distant like someone gone mad. When I reviewed the script again, I drew on the Stanislavski method and chose to portray her as vulnerable rather than mad, as this felt more relatable.

As a group, we had some discussions about the interpretation of the lines. For instance, one person asserted that Lady Macbeth in this scene is speaking a soliloquy but I imagined that she was speaking to a hallucination of her husband. We agreed to blend both ideas so that some of her performance was her speaking to herself, and at other times directing her thoughts to Macbeth. It is fascinating to see how many ways there are to interpret the lines and how many diverse productions there have been of Macbeth.

During the final rehearsal, I was able to improve my performance taking on board Nathan’s advice on how to connect with the audience. I was able to integrate changes, which I think helped the audience to

understand my portrayal of the character in this scene. I became much more aware about the space available on stage, and how I positioned myself in relation to the audience and in relation to the other actors. For instance, when I spoke the line "I tell you again, Banquo's buried..." I moved extremely close to the other two characters on stage expressing agitated body language and I also spoke through them as if they were not there, which emphasised Lady Macbeth's insanity. I feel that I could have improved on letting go of my inhibitions further by sighing more freely during the scene and also I if I were less self conscious I would have spoken some lines much more loudly and with more emotion.

Macbeth is my first introduction to Shakespeare and I was pleasantly surprised that the characters and themes were complex and interesting and recognisable to people of today. I'm interested in the philosophical questions asked in the play around fate and responsibility. Also, having studied the lines in various scenes, I came to appreciate the poetic and philosophical language such as "It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." It shows that throughout all of the history of humanity, people have asked the same question about the meaning of life. Shakespeare makes this enjoyable and satisfying to explore through his complex characters and memorable language.

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In answer to the statement above, Shakespeare is exploring the morality of ambition. Clearly, killing to gain power is wrong and ultimately leads to tragedy. But the play also explores the theme of fate and asks whether we are responsible for our own actions or whether we are at the mercy of circumstances or "fate". The answer is both. For example, we know that criminals are not wholly evil but often make decisions based on their life situation. Our identity is shaped largely by our surroundings and influences and the expectations of people around us. The Macbeths made the decision about how they responded to the witch's prophecy and so in this sense were responsible for their actions. But they did not entirely create their own narrative - the witches set this in motion with their prophecy.