

Stripped Down Macbeth

by William Shakespeare

*A Shakespeare In The Ruins
Study Guide*

Introduction

Macbeth has long been one of my favourites of Shakespeare's tragedies. Its themes and motifs, with their focus on such BIG ideas as ambition, chance, trust, war, power, love, alienation, evil, etc., are all of interest to young people. The play, itself, is a great read (and not nearly as long as *Hamlet!*).

In typical *Shakespeare In The Ruins* fashion, you and your students can expect an atypical production. Only four performers play all the characters, which number 31 in the script, not even counting various messengers, servants, attendants, lords, soldiers, and other peripheral, often non-speaking, players.

Stripped-Down Macbeth's focus is on the theme of what happens when we step outside the boundaries of our natural code of ethics: how the world we live in seems to affect our ethics, often not in a positive way. Three words that describe the progression of the play are "war, insanity, death." The play begins with the ending of a war, and ends with the crowning of Malcolm as the new king. In this production, however, the ending comes *before* the crowning of Malcolm. This creates an impression of a world where nothing changes. The next leader will be as bad as this one, since he, too, will have internalized the values of aggression and ruthlessness.

This is a play that, like so many of Shakespeare's other works, although written over 400 years ago, speaks to us as human beings of the world in which we still live. This Study Guide includes suggestions for activities that will help to prepare students for their visit to MTYP for SIR's production of *Stripped-Down Macbeth*, as well as follow-up activities and a short list of additional resources.

"But it is not our province, who only gather his works and give them you, to praise him. It is yours that read him: and there we hope, to your divers capacities, you will find enough both to draw and hold you; for his wit can no more lie hid than it could be lost. Read him, therefore; and again and again..." (John Heminge and Henry Condell from the First Folio, 1623, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. The Shakespeare Head Press, Oxford, Edition, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., Cumberland House, Great Britain, 1996.)

- Pamela Lockman for
Shakespeare In The Ruins

BEFORE THE PLAY

1. HISTORY

The history here is *really* interesting. Shakespeare wrote this play for James I of England, who was also James VI of Scotland. At the time it was written, Scottish themes were already popular. James believed that he was descended from Banquo. He was especially interested in witches and evil spirits, and he believed in the power of the devil. He wrote a book on witches, and is said to have personally interrogated witches before having them burned at the stake. He was interested in “Scottish royal pedigree”, and Shakespeare must have intended to make the king sit up and watch what was happening on the stage. (Wood, Michael. *Shakespeare*, 287. – Complete information in “Additional Resources”.)

2. MORE HISTORY AND MORE

On my own internet search, I came across a gem of a website by aficionado Ed Friedlander (www.pathguy.com/macbeth.htm). He has great knowledge of the play, a great sense of humour, provides lots of background information and history, includes pictures from various theatrical and film productions, offers a terrific section on resources and links, and treats students and teachers as if we’re all intelligent. Students will love the dripping blood between sections. I, personally, appreciate the following warning he includes on plagiarism:

Warning: Every English teacher dreams of catching a student plagiarizing. Unless your teacher is computer-illiterate, he/she has very likely obtained some free / cheap prewritten papers. And you know the likelihood of one of your classmates turning in the same paper. In either situation, you get caught, you get expelled, everybody makes fun of you, and you can forget about being a doctor, lawyer, or whatever. And you'll be getting what you deserve. People will even say it's your "tragic flaw". Ha, ha!

His section titled “The Real Macbeth and His Times” uses well-known Holinshed as background and provides links for further reading. He speaks directly to students who are curious and self motivated and includes little tidbits like “You can get a good paper out of this.”, “For interested students, Good job.” and “Kids...this is true to life. Try to live better than the Macbeths did.”

The website opens with the warning that “*Macbeth* is supposed to upset people. It shows life at its most brutal and cynical, in order to ask life’s toughest question...is human society fundamentally amoral, dog-eat-dog? If so, then Macbeth is right, and human life itself is meaningless and tiresome. Or do the hints of a better life such as King Edward’s ministry, Malcolm’s clean living, the dignified death of the contrite traitor, and the doctor’s prescription for pastoral care, display Shakespeare’s Christianity and/or humanism?”

How can you not like a guy who, although he obviously knows, loves and respects Shakespeare and his work, includes this along with his more profound materials:

*Macbeth, in a manner most flighty,
Aspired to the high and the mighty.
Urged on by his wife,
He stuck in his knife,
And the blood got all over his nightie!*
-- Author Unknown!

3. ANTICIPATION GUIDE

Students should mark True or False for the following statements. This should lead to some interesting discussions.

1. There are truly "good" people and truly "bad" people.
2. You should never kill anyone, even if you'll get something really important if you do.
3. You should never compromise your values.
4. Witches are real.
5. You should always listen to your husband or wife and do what they tell you to do.
6. Someone who uses violence to get power is more likely to lose power through violence.
7. If you make one mistake (even a big one) you are a failure.
8. Greed only leads to bad things.
9. If you kill someone, you should be punished for it.
10. The direction of our lives is decided by something or someone else (fate), not by our own actions.
11. Do you agree or disagree with this statement: "He who lives by the sword dies by the sword."

[Anticipation Guide by Sinead Waters Turner © Copyright 2000. On the website: www.westga.edu/~kidreach/macbethlesson.html]

4. Read and discuss a variety of poems that deal with some of the major motifs of the play. These might include:
- * “Insomniac” by Octavio Paz (from *Collected Poems 1957 – 1987*, © 1986)
 - * “Better than Counting Sheep” by Robert Penn Warren (from *Being Here: Poetry 1977 – 1980*, © 1978)
 - * “Yscolan” by Myrddyn, translated by W.S. Merwin (from *Selected Translations 1948 – 1968*, © 1962)

[The above three poems are located in *Macbeth and Related Readings* in McDougal Littell’s *Literature Connections* series.]

- * “The Hollow Men” by T.S. Eliot
- * “The End of the World” by Archibald MacLeish
- * “Out, Out—” by Robert Frost
- * “Recalling War” by Robert Graves
- * “In Golden Gate Park that Day” by Lawrence Ferlinghetti
- * “Poets Hitchhiking on the Highway” by Gregory Corso
- * “Woman Poem” by Nikki Giovanni

[The above seven poems are located in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, edited by Richard Ellmann and Robert O’Clair.]

- * “Mad Girl’s Love Song” by Sylvia Plath
- * “Storm Warnings” by Adrienne Rich
- * “Her Kind” by Anne Sexton
- * “The Second Coming” by William Butler Yeats
- * “Siren Song” by Margaret Atwood
- * “The Tiger” by William Blake

[The above six poems are located in *Perrine’s Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense*, 8th Edition, edited by Thomas R. Arp and Greg Johnson]

READING THE PLAY

Nothing takes the place of actually reading the play, and the best way for students to do this is to get up on their feet! In some classes (my own included), students are assigned to one of five groups, and each group is assigned one complete act of the play. Students read the act and scene summaries to put their assigned section in context of the whole play, and then have several days in class to prepare their specific act. We start with Act I and read all the way through, stopping at the end of each scene for questions (often in the form of “hot seat”, explained below) and discussion. Some teachers also like to give a variety of quizzes during the reading to check comprehension.

If you don't have enough time to read the play in its entirety, choose from what follows. The list is chronological with Act, Scene and Line numbers from *The New Folger Library Shakespeare: MACBETH* (1992).

- I.i. The witches turn morality upside down. (*Fair is foul and foul is fair...*)
- I.iii. The witches meet with Macbeth and Banquo. Ross and Angus show up before long.
- I.v. Lady Macbeth receives Macbeth's letter and worries that he's too kind to do what he needs to do to be King. Macbeth returns home and they discuss Duncan's upcoming visit. This is a wonderful scene with some great lines, like:

*Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood. (47 – 50)*

*Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant. (64 – 66)*

*Look like th' innocent flower,
But be the serpent under 't. (76 – 77)*

- I.vii. Lady Macbeth and Macbeth discuss Duncan's murder. Macbeth is nervous and Lady Macbeth won't hear of it, as in:

Mac. *If we should fail—*

Lady Mac. *We fail?
But screw your courage to the sticking place
And we'll not fail. (69 – 70)*

II.i.44 – end of scene. This is Macbeth's wonderful *Is this a dagger which I see before me...* speech. Now he's not only nervous, but hallucinating as well!

II.ii. The deed is done and Lady Macbeth has to pick up the pieces while Macbeth continues his unravelling.

*Metought I heard a voice cry "Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep"... (47-48)*

There's also some foreshadowing of Lady Macbeth's later nightmares:

Mac. *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.*

Lady Mac.

*My hands are of your colour, but I shame
To wear a heart so white. (78 – 84)*

II.iii.46 – end of scene. Everyone discovers Duncan's murder. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth play dumb, and Donalbain and Malcolm flee.

III.i.1 – 47. Banquo suspects that Macbeth had something to do with Duncan's murder:

*Thou hast it now—King, Cawdor, Glamis, all
As the Weird Women promised, and I fear
Thou played'st most foully for 't. (1 – 3)*

They talk...

III.ii. Even though Macbeth is King, neither he nor Lady Macbeth is happy. The scene ends with Macbeth hinting at more murder and mayhem to come.

III.iii. Although a bit confusing (just where *does* that third murderer come from?), students usually enjoy acting this one out.

III.iv. Macbeth hears the news that Fleance has escaped and, in front of everyone at the banquet, freaks out at the sight of Banquo's ghost (who nobody else can see). Lady Macbeth tries to cover for Macbeth, at first by saying this is normal behaviour for him, but she gives up before long and sends all the guests away.

IV.i. This is THE creepy, spooky, even yucky scene where the witches show Macbeth the apparitions and the final prophecies are made. Lennox later tells Macbeth that Macduff has fled to England.

IV.ii. Ross brings news of Macduff to the abandoned Lady Macduff, who, along with her son, is soon after murdered. The figurative language is noteworthy here:

*He loves us not;
He wants the natural touch; for the poor wren
(The most diminutive of birds) will fight,
Her young ones in her nest, against the owl.(10-13)*

IV.iii.160 – end of scene. In England, Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty. In this same scene, Macduff learns of his wife and son's murders. There are some great lines here:

Macduff: *What's the disease he means?*
Malcolm: *'Tis called the evil (168)*

Macduff: *Stands Scotland where it did?*
Ross: *Alas, poor country,
Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot
Be called our mother, but our grave, where nothing
But who knows nothing is once seen to smile;
(188-192)*

And Macduff continues Lady Macduff's avian motif when he says:

*What, all my pretty chickens and their dam
At one fell swoop? (257-258)*

V. Read it all! Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene (*Out, damned spot, out, I say!*) comes immediately. In scene five, Macbeth hears of her death and delivers the famous *She should have died hereafter (20)* speech. The

other scenes move back and forth swiftly between the coming armies and Macbeth, and he finally learns the meaning of the earlier prophecies:

*Be bloody, bold, and resolute. Laugh to scorn
The power of man, for none of woman born
Shall harm Macbeth.* (IV.i.90-92)

*Macbeth shall never vanquished be until
Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill
Shall come against him.* (IV.i.105-107)

After Macduff surprises Macbeth with

*Despair thy charm,
And let the angel whom thou still hast served
Tell thee Macduff was from his mother's womb
Untimely ripped* (V.viii.17-20)

there is bravado on both sides, ending with Macbeth's well known last words:

*Lay on, Macduff,
And damned be him that first cries "Hold! Enough!"* (38-39)

Shakespeare's original ends with Macduff carrying Macbeth's head on a stick, and the throngs hailing Malcolm, the new King of Scotland. Malcolm asserts his position in a way that gives us hope for better days to come.

Hot Seat: At the end of each scene, teacher and students (who are not in the performing group) ask questions to students in the performing group about what's going on in the scene just read. These students must answer the questions in the persona of whichever character they read. In other words, the students must speak "in the shoes" of the selected character.

For example, at the end of I.vii: Lady Macbeth, how can you be so two-faced? Your husband loves Duncan and Duncan appreciates his loyalty. Duncan comes to your house and calls you an "honoured hostess". You respond to him gracefully and lead him to think that you are glad to have him there. Yet what you're really thinking about is his murder. How do you explain this?

Hotseat is an excellent technique for delving into the characters and plot, and it is also a way to deal with specific lines and to explore varying interpretations. For example, after V.v: Macbeth, how do you *really* feel about your wife? I mean, when you say "She should have died hereafter" do you mean

you wish she had lived a lot longer because you love her, or is this just an inconvenient time for her to die?

Activity Using Alanis Morissette's "Wake Up" (edited from the internet <http://home.cogeco.ca/%7Erayser3/macalan.txt>):

This activity should follow a reading and discussion of Act I, Scene 7 in which Macbeth expresses his indecisiveness about killing Duncan and Lady Macbeth berates him regarding his indecision.

You'll need the song "Wake Up" by Alanis Morissette (from her album *Jagged Edge*) and copies of the song lyrics.

Play "Wake Up" and ask the following questions:

What is the speaker's attitude in this song? Does this seem more similar to Macbeth's or Lady Macbeth's viewpoint?

Refer to the first three lines – what is the speaker expressing in these lines about the person to whom she is referring?

Remind students of the cliché, "have your cake and eat it, too."

Put students in groups of 3-4 and tell them to rewrite some of the lines as if Lady Macbeth is speaking them to Macbeth. Remind them to consider Macbeth's state of mind at this point in the play, as well as Lady Macbeth's attitude toward him. Have students share their lines with the class.

AFTER THE PLAY

1. **Reflect on the experience** of the theatre production. Was it what you expected? Were the characters as you imagined they would be? What did you notice about Lady Macbeth and Macbeth's relationship with each other? Who appeared to be the stronger, more ambitious, of the two? Or were they equals? In what way did the music enhance the play? What are some of the changes you noticed between the performance and the text you read? Why do you think the director might have made these changes? (For example, in the SIR production, cut scenes include II.iv, Ross and the Old Man; III.iii, Banquo's murder; III.v, Hecate; III.vi, Lennox; and IV.ii, Lady Macduff's murder.) If you had a chance to act in this production, which character(s) would you have liked to play? Why? If you were directing, would you have anything differently?

2. **Revisit the text** to trace and discover who is the more power-hungry: Lady Macbeth or Macbeth? Copy lines and line numbers for easy reference during discussion.

3. **Collect quotations** to show the development and changes in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. For each quotation, write a brief comment. Be sure to bring out various conflicting aspects of each character, i.e., Macbeth: ambition/duty and bravery/fear; Lady Macbeth: loving/ambitious and strength/guilt.

This activity can lead to a class discussion and/or essay of character analysis. (Edited from Philip Gardner on the internet. Complete info in Additional Resources.)

4. **Creative and Humorous Stylistic Imitation Assignments (from Ray Grynol at St. John's-Ravenscourt School):**

* Using Shakespearean English, the script format of writing and some "reinvested allusions" from *Macbeth*, write a conversation between or among one of the following groups of characters:

- Homer and Marge (of *The Simpsons*)
- Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer (of *Seinfeld*)
- any two or more characters from *Friends* or *That 70's Show*
- any other characters from a well know television program

* In Shakespearean English write a parody (humorous imitation) of a soliloquy from the play. Consider Macbeth's "If 'twere done" speech in Act 1, Scene 7, for example. What if he were talking about the consequences of something much more trivial such as cooking a cake for the feast at the castle?

* In a much more colloquial and “modern” style (even in rap), rewrite a scene of the play. Some suggestions:

- Lady Macbeth’s attempts to convince Macbeth about committing the murder
- The dialogue between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth after the murder
- Banquo’s ghost at the feast.

* Using the style of another well-known author such as J.D. Salinger in *The Catcher in the Rye*, rewrite the events of the play or a scene as Holden Caulfield/Macbeth might see them.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Friedlander, ER (1999). *Enjoying Macbeth by William Shakespeare*.

<http://www.pathguy.com/macbeth.htm>

GREAT info, entertainment, and links!

Wood, Michael. *Shakespeare*. Basic Books (Perseus Books Group), New York, 2003. [Published to accompany the BBC TV series, *In Search of Shakespeare*.]

The most readable and up-to-date resource.

www.eastdonsc.vic.edu.au/home/pgardner/teaching/Macbeth2000.htm

The website of Philip Gardner, East Doncaster Secondary College, Melbourne, Australia. Philip has lots of good ideas in the areas of individual and group work, discussion, recitation, research and writing.

www.educeth.ch/english/readinglist/shakespearew/macbeth.html

This website is powered and updated by Hans G. Fischer at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich. Really. Definitely worth a look!

www.folger.edu/education/teaching.htm

No one loves Shakespeare more than the good folks at Folger Library!

<http://home.cogeco.ca/%7Erayser3/macalan.txt>

The site with the Alanis Morissette activity. You can find the song lyrics there.

www.lesstutor.com/ci2.html

More good ideas from another Australian teacher, Christopher Ingham.

www.pbs.org/shakespeare

The TV show, “In Search of Shakespeare,” premiered on February 4th, but I’ll bet it’s going to be repeated.

<http://www.stjosephacad.com/library/macbeth.html>

“Macbeth Websites” is an annotated guide to Macbeth-related websites.

www.westga.edu/~kidreach/macbethlesson.html

The home page of this website says that “KidReach is an online resource and teaching aid that teachers in the public classroom can use to motivate students and cultivate reading skills”. This particular lesson plan is from Jennifer Tanner and there are lots of activities from which to choose.