

Interpreting Media: Polanski's *Macbeth*

Directions: Choose three questions from each section to answer in a paragraph each. Remember, a paragraph needs to contain at least three sentences.

Part I (30 min.)

1. The three witches are of varying ages. How does this tie into the idea that the witches are actually the Norns or Fates?
2. The three witches seem to be distracted and walk away from Macbeth and Banquo while making their predictions. What do you think is the intended effect of this?
3. The witches seem to show no obvious supernatural abilities, other than perhaps insight into future events. Why do you think the director would de-emphasize these?
4. Why does the director see a need to present most asides and soliloquies in this play as voice-overs rather than as words actually spoken by the characters?
5. How does the actor playing Lady Macbeth convey a softer and more sensual version of her character than we would expect?

Part II (30 min.)

6. What is the director's purpose for presenting the scenery as simple, dark, and dirty?
7. Discuss two scenes of violence that Polanski includes that even Shakespeare doesn't. Why do you think Polanski includes these?
8. What is the intended effect of Macbeth gradually growing facial hair as the play progresses?
9. The entire play is made up of single-camera shots rather than multiple-angle jumps. What is the effect of this technique?

Part III (30 min.)

10. Who is the mysterious third murderer? How does this change our view of him regarding his visit with Macduff in England later on?
11. As Banquo is about to be slaughtered, where does he shoot his single arrow and why? Why doesn't he kill his attacker instead?
12. Why does Polanski have the murderers imprisoned?
13. What is the significance of having Macbeth drink a potion in order to see his visions when in the witches' cave? Why don't they just show the visions?
14. During the scene of the murder of MacDuff's family, how are we clued in that Ross knows they are about to be killed? Do you think that Shakespeare intended Ross to be in on Macbeth's evil crimes? Explain.

Part IV (30 min.)

15. Notice that there is rarely, if any, music playing during any of the spoken lines of the performers, yet in such movies made from plays, music often plays during speeches to heighten the drama of the lines. Why does Polanski choose not to do this?
16. Macbeth's castle is vacated and he is left alone when the English army comes to storm the castle. Why does the director have this happen?
17. How does the director portray Macbeth's naïve belief in his own invulnerability after his castle has been invaded?
18. Who visits the witches right before the credits appear? What does this imply?

Key: Guidelines for possible responses. Note: Although the play is a bit longer than two hours, to divide it into four sections works well, allowing for response and/or discussion time during the latter half of a typical class period.

1. The norms represented the past, present, and future, so to represent them in various stages of life makes sense.
2. Hmm. Perhaps the witches show little interest in the happenings of mere mortals to emphasize their higher role and greater purposes in the universe. They are not your run-of-the-mill witches.
3. Perhaps the director is implying that it all might be in Macbeth's head. The first prediction was perhaps a lucky guess or based on information they heard from a messenger. The idea that Macbeth gives more credence to their words than he should is perhaps emphasized by not giving them an initial display of overt supernatural power.
4. Since there is no stage, and thus no immediate audience, a voice-over makes sense with regard to the medium of the play. Movies don't require one talking to oneself for the audience to hear the thoughts of a character like a play might.
5. The brutal realism of the setting depicts a more historically accurate scene. It also helps to create a dark and ugly mood that is so appropriate for this play.
6. She doesn't ever actually talk down to Macbeth with regard to tone. She speaks softly and pleadingly, not aggressively. Her looks don't hurt much either. One wonders if Hugh Hefner, the executive producer, had anything to do with creating this more submissive Lady Macbeth . . .
7. There are more, but the death of Cawdor and the bear bating are elements of violence that Shakespeare doesn't include. Of course, one could speculate on Polanski and his own recent past on why he includes so much violence, but such events certainly emphasize how bloody this play actually is. Of course it would still be bloody with out the extras. Hence the criticism in the media . . .
8. Perhaps the facial hair represents the maturation of his evil. His face becomes more and more scruffy (animalistic?) as he becomes more wicked. Also, months are passing, and there has to be some way to reflect this since it's not in the dialogue.
9. The audience becomes a kind of witness with the single-camera perspective. It is almost like the viewer is in the room with Macbeth and company.
10. Ross. There is nothing said or necessarily implied in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* about Ross doing Macbeth's bidding, but he has been interpreted as playing this roll. Ross as the third murderer, whose identity is the subject of much speculation in the scene in which Banquo is killed, demonstrates that the director sees Ross as involved.
11. Banquo shoots the horse of the third murderer who begins to chase Fleance. This furthers Banquo's role as a good father and all around noble guy. He could have defended himself instead. As a near-equal of Macbeth in fighting skill, he could have shot the younger murderer point blank and easily taken out the older one. But his son would have died. You gotta love this guy.
12. It reinforces Macbeth's treachery. However, in this writer's opinion, it detracts from the idea of Macbeth having any real honor or goodness at all beyond Act I. He is thus unconvincing as a tragic hero and thus takes away from the tragedy. After all, if he's purely evil, we can't pity or fear for him. Thus, no pathos, no identification, no catharsis. See Aristotle's *Poetics*.
13. Again, do the witches really have this incredible power or is Macbeth just carrying out the suggestions pent up in his own deranged mind, only to be released by some psychotropic substance? This was produced in the early 70s, after all.
14. Ross slightly waves to the approaching murderers as he leaves the Macduff residence. Polanski wanted to make sure that we know he is in on everything evil that Macbeth does. Does Shakespeare intend this? Wait. I'll ask him . . .
15. A lack of music during dialogue would be more in step with the original production. It's also stark. The words are all we have. Kinda creates an atmosphere of moody isolation, doesn't it?
16. Macbeth is pretty much on his own anyway, once his wife has mysteriously died. He always was, really. This is made apparent by an empty castle. It's a great scene where the English soldiers prepare to storm and find the castle gate ajar, the wind whistling through the gate. Isolation!
17. Macbeth alone goes out to attack hundreds of armed soldiers. He's ready to die, but he's also delusional with regard to his power over life and his naive belief that he actually understands the witches' prophecies.
18. Donalbain, King Malcolm's brother (note the limp from earlier in the movie). This implies the renewal of the cycle. The bloodshed will continue. This is completely in line with early Scottish history.