

Comparing film versions of macbeth essay sample

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Macbeth is a play that was written by William Shakespeare over four hundred years ago. It was written by Shakespeare for James I to show people how James I was descended from the true line of kings. In the play Macbeth is a noble in Scotland. When he meets three witches they tell him that he will be king. When he tells his wife she urges him to murder the present king Duncan to gain control of the throne. Eventually he does so and becomes king when the heir to the throne flees.

The rest of the play shows how Macbeth is deposed and the “ true” heir to the throne is restored. When it was written people believed in divine right of kings - that the king was chosen and directed by God. For example in this play Duncan, who was the king of Scotland at the start of the play, is referred to as having ‘ golden blood’ and his body is described as the lords anointed temple. These phrases make people think he was touched by something divine. Macbeth however is never described in this way, even when he is king. This is because in this play Macbeth is shown as being directed by witches, who were believed at the time to be servants of the Devil. This was done to make people think that Macbeth was an evil king and it should have been James’ ancestor (a relative of Duncan) that became king.

Plays were often used for this purpose - to alter people’s memories of history. For example another play by Shakespeare - Richard III - was written to make people remember Richard III as an evil king and think that the line of kings continuing from Richard’s successor Henry VII was the true line, after all history is what people remember and people are more likely to remember what they see in a play than what is recorded in history books.

When the play was written most people believed in witches and their magical powers (such as foretelling the future or being able to disappear into thin air) so the idea of witches meddling in the affairs of normal humans would have seemed quite plausible. Some modern versions of Macbeth choose to have the witches portrayed as something other than what they were originally envisaged as. For example, in one of the versions I am examining (Macbeth on The Estate) the witches are shown as teenagers on a modern housing estate meddling with the occult. The witches are portrayed as something else to either provide a bigger impact or to allow the target audience to understand the story more easily.

Despite the fact that it was written for an audience over four hundred years ago Macbeth remains a popular source of inspiration for films and productions worldwide today. The story of an ambitious young man with a burning desire to get to the top of the pile and not willing to let anyone get in his way remains relevant and appealing to audiences from any culture or time. The fairly open ended script with little in the way of stage directions allows the film or play director to alter the way the play is acted to either make it more appropriate for a specific audience or to fulfil his own personal version of Shakespeare's original vision. Two such interpretations are Polanskis version made in the 1960's which is a fairly standard interpretation of the script and ' Macbeth on the Estate' (MOE) an adaptation especially for television made in the 1990's that features Shakespeare's original script but is performed in a modern day setting on a housing estate in Birmingham with the actors dressed up as modern day members of gangs. In this essay I

am going to look at a scene from these two interpretations and examine how they differ.

Act 4 Scene 1 is a scene in Macbeth where the protagonist called Macbeth returns to talk with a trio of witches who had previously predicted he would become king. Their prediction was correct as Macbeth decided (after being persuaded by his wife) to murder the current king (King Duncan) and he became king himself as the king's sons fled fearing that they might be accused of murdering Duncan. Macbeth is worried however because the witches also told him that the sons of his friend Banquo would become king. Macbeth had Banquo killed but the son of Banquo escaped so Macbeth is worried he will come back to kill him and gain control of the throne. Before this scene Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have been talking and Macbeth is very worried that he is going to get his comeuppance for his evil deeds " blood will have blood" he also says that he will have to kill more people to be safe " I am in blood Stepped in so far, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious to go over". Blood is a recurring theme throughout the play. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have hallucinations of blood on their hands, which symbolises that they are guilty of murder.

They try to wash this blood off which symbolises that they are trying to get rid of the guilt but it doesn't work showing that they cannot get the guilt of what they have done off of their conscience. Towards the end of the play Lady Macbeth becomes obsessed with attempting to get rid of the blood (guilt) and washes her hands constantly " out damn spot". Macbeth is hoping that the witches will tell him if Banquo's sons will ever become kings. The

audience have not seen the witches for some time and so the impact of their appearance is increased. The last time the witches were seen they provided clues as to what was going to happen later in the play so the audience will be interested in what they have to say and how it will relate to events later in the play. When Macbeth arrives at the cavern where he first met the witches the witches are preparing a spell. After the spell Macbeth walks in and demands that they tell him the future. They show him three apparitions - an armoured head, a bloody child and a crowned child holding a tree in its hand.

There have already been several apparitions so far in the play - just before Macbeth is about to murder Duncan he sees an apparition of a dagger pointing towards Duncan's quarters. Macbeth has also seen several ghosts of people that he has killed or had ordered to be killed. When Shakespeare wrote this play originally he probably didn't intend for the apparitions to be shown on stage. This was because at the time the technology available on the stage was primitive and they wouldn't have been able to show things floating or appearing then disappearing. This is why Macbeth says what he sees when the apparitions appear so that if the apparitions were not able to be shown then the audience would be able to imagine what the apparitions looked like from what Macbeth says. Lines such as "Is this a dagger I see before me?" "Thou'rt the way that I was going" "and on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood" described the dagger very well when it appeared so that the audience can picture what Macbeth is seeing.

When Macbeth sees the third apparition in this scene he says “ what is this, that rises like the issue of king, and wears upon his baby brow the round and top of sovereignty?” he is describing what the third apparition looks like so that we can understand what it is he is seeing inside his own head. The three apparitions tell him one thing each - the first tells him to beware Macduff; the second tells him that he shall never be harmed by anyone woman-born and the last tells him he shall never be vanquished until great Burnham wood comes to Dunsinane Hill (where Macbeth’s castle is). After they tell him this he feels invincible but decides to kill Macduff anyway to make double sure that he is safe. He also asks if Banquo’s issue (sons) will ever rule in the kingdom. They show him another apparition of eight kings followed by Banquo (these are described in the same way as earlier apparitions so they do not have to be shown) so Macbeth thinks that this means that Banquo’s sons will become king and he becomes afraid. Then the witches disappear.

In the scene before Act 4 Scene 1 in The Polanski version when Macbeth and lady Macbeth are talking about the blood and guilt they are lying in bed together and the red light effects make it seem as though they are lying in blood! The Polanski version is set in a cavern on an isolated hillside, which is probably how Shakespeare originally intended for it to be. MOE’s version however is set in an abandoned house in a housing estate. Inside the house is a hidden shrine or altar inside through a hole in the wall and behind a curtain, which is where the witches perform their spell. The Polanski version sets it in an isolated area to make it seem more scary and ethereal. He made it so that the cavern was below the ground so that it seems as though the witches are lower or not as good as other people in the world. When Macbeth

descends into the cavern the music changes slightly and so does the look on his face - he looks more evil. This may also be something to do with downwards being associated with Satan and witches also being associated with Satan. MOE's setting is used to show that these are just ordinary people who possess special powers.

The Polanski version has a fairly traditional group of witches, which are old and ugly women. However there are more than three of them and they are all naked. They chant when performing the spell and speak in high-pitched voices. In MOE the witches are all teenagers and two of them are male. They are dressed up in typical modern day clothing and look quite normal. In the Polanski version the witches are shown as ugly to show that what they are doing is not a pleasant or good thing. They are shown naked because they are in their home environment and they do not have to conform to the standards of outsiders. They are also shown as naked to show that they no longer have anything to hide from Macbeth or the audience. The MOE witches are shown as teenagers to fit in with the rest of the film. It would not make sense in the context of the MOE version to have traditional witches because MOE is set in the present day.

The fact that children are performing the evil magic also seems more unpleasant in a way than the archetypical witch doing it. This is because children are usually seen as innocent vulnerable people but in the MOE version they are shown as doing evil. They act as though they are in control and seem amused at Macbeth's attempts to control them. Macbeth in the Polanski version is a Scottish noble who is a medieval warrior. He wears

typical clothes of a knight and looks similar to the way most people would imagine Macbeth. He speaks like a typical medieval person. He acts as though he is in control at the start of the scene but by the end he seems afraid and worried. Macbeth in MOE is a typical person who you wouldn't look twice at if you walked past him in the street. He is dressed in normal clothes and does not look especially like a king (or gang leader). He speaks in a modern voice but uses Shakespearian language and these do not sound right together. He acts normally at the start of the scene but seems faint by the end of it.

Polanski uses discordant music played on bagpipes as we draw closer to the witches' den to make it feel unnatural and unpleasant. The playing on the bagpipes may be because bagpipes are traditionally associated with Scotland. When the witches do their spell they all chant the chorus while individuals speak lines as they put ingredients into the pot. MOE has 'churchy' background music at the start of the scene when we first see the altar. Later on in the scene when the witches are showing Macbeth the apparitions the background music changes to include a faint sound of drums. This makes you think of voodoo magic. Polanski uses thunder at places where Shakespeare's script said to whereas MOE doesn't use very many sound effects.

Polanski starts with a long shot zooming in on the witches' den this lets us recognize this as the place where Macbeth first met the witches and it lets us see that it is very isolated. When we first see the inside of the cavern it is a medium shot to show how many witches there are in there. When the

witches perform the spell the camera switches from one close shot to another to show each witch putting the ingredients in. It then zooms out when they put the last ingredient in to show Macbeth. When Macbeth takes the potion we zoom in to a close shot showing his expression as he drinks it then we quickly zoom out again and pan down as he falls to his knees. We then get a POV shot showing what Macbeth sees as he looks into the cauldron and sees the apparitions. The armoured head is the head of Macbeth and after it finishes speaking it rolls off into the distance and we see that it is a decapitated head. This gives us the idea that the armoured head is Macbeth warning himself about what is going to happen from the future.

This also gives us a clue of what is going to happen. The second apparition shows a child being born by Caesarean section. This gives us a large clue that when the apparition says that none of woman born shall harm Macbeth this does not mean that Macbeth is invincible because someone born by Caesarean could still harm him. This is what happens later in the story. When he attacks the suit of armour we pan down to watch it fall. When the armour crashes against the ground at the bottom we see that the armour is actually Macbeth, which shows that Macbeth brought all his troubles upon himself. After we see this, a snake comes out of the armours visor. The snake makes a reference back to the idea that Macbeth is being directed by the Devil because a snake is traditionally a symbol of the Devil and evil. When the third apparition appears we zoom out to see Macbeth standing in the wood talking to the sons of Duncan. When one of them talks the other echoes what he says. They are shown in a wood because they are talking about Great Burnham Wood.

After they run off we pan away from Macbeth as he hacks through the forest asking the witches to tell him about Banquo's sons. Then we move to a POV shot as Macbeth sees Banquo's son sitting on a throne with the light glare from his crown filling most of the scene at the same time as Macbeth says, "thy crown does sear mine eyeballs". Then the king holds up a mirror and the camera zooms forward through it then turns around to see another king holding another mirror that the camera then zooms through. This is repeated several times and when we move through the eighth mirror we see Banquo's bloody body smiling and laughing at the camera. Macbeth then smashes the mirror with his sword and the scene cuts back to the cavern. Macbeth wakes up and all the witches are gone.

MOE starts with a downward panning of the witches' altar. The predominant colours are brown red and gold. We then have medium shots switching to whoever is talking until the witches go through the curtains then we see a close up shot of Macbeth's worried face. Then we see a close shot of the curtain where the three apparitions appear. Then we see Macbeth again and see his face. Then the scene ends.

Polanski was trying to adhere quite closely to the original ideas of the script with the medieval witches and old-fashioned clothing etc. However he also introduced some elements to change to appeal more to the audience he was targeting. He had Macbeth drink the potion, which did not happen in the play, to make people of the era more interested in what was happening (the 60's being the age of drugs after all). He also gave a lot of clues when the apparitions appeared as to how the story was going to end. This made it a lot

easier to understand. He succeeded in making it a traditional adaptation of Shakespeare. MOE however used a very different setting from the original Shakespeare version. By setting it on a housing estate he tried to appeal to the younger generation. It was also quite a lot shorter than the original with many scenes or lines being removed. This is partly to make it appeal more to younger viewers but also because it was designed for television so it had to be split into several shorter segments. However the Shakespearian language in a modern setting seems very strange so I personally prefer the Polanski version.