

# How does macbeth engage modern audiences? essay sample

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Macbeth, an exciting and suspenseful drama written in the seventeenth century by William Shakespeare, still engage modern audiences. The three universal themes of Macbeth are the supernatural, the conflicts of order and ambition, which are still relevant today. This is demonstrated through the original play and Roman Polanski's film of Macbeth produced in 1971.

Shakespeare's theme of supernatural is apparent all through his play, Macbeth. It was believed that he wrote it especially for King James, who was very fascinated by witchcraft like many others in seventeenth century England. The vision of the ghostly dagger, "Is this a dagger I see before me?" and Banquo's ghost during the climax of Macbeth are only a few examples of the witches' influences. As a responder, we see them as an overwhelming, physical presence of evil that vividly creates an atmosphere of fear, danger and suspense. Shakespeare's dramatic use of incantations, spells and rhymes of equivocation engaged audiences of his time where words convey everything, "Double, double toil and trouble; fire burn and cauldron bubble".

Although Shakespeare explores the presence of evil and their role in fate and destiny, Polanski has swayed his film more to the supernatural. Polanski's film of Macbeth focuses mainly on the influences of the supernatural, through the characters of the witches. He has carefully modified and added scenes with the use of dramatic film techniques, to engage audiences at during this Vietnam War context, where the supernatural was more engaging than Christian beliefs. Interest was sparked almost immediately among the audiences when the film started with a scene of the "weird sisters", portrayed as dirty ugly hags in an isolated beach predicting the future. The

presentation of the dagger is shown accurately, with special effects, as sparkling and chintzy-looking; this made it more of a vision. The most prominent modification made was the addition of a final scene, in which Donalbain seeks the witches at the same place as Macbeth. This emphasises the repetition of evil throughout history are beyond our control. Polanski has use identical music and the faint chanting of witches for each meeting, to create suspense and excitement, or merely as a constant reminder of evil to the audience.

Macbeth, as a play, focuses primarily on the conflicts of order. These ideas can be seen in the beliefs of the seventeenth century, framed by Christianity, in concepts such as the “ great chain of being”. The inner conflict of mental hierarchy, reason and self morality, is emphasised within the character of Macbeth. He is constantly tortured by his conscience, as shown by Shakespeare’s imagery “ O, full of scorpions is my mind...”. As responders to the play, Macbeth’s soliloquy give us an insight into his mind and that he acts accordingly to instinct instead of reason “...We’d jump the life to come”. Shakespeare has also shown external conflict throughout the plot, regicide destroyed order and brought chaos to Scotland, “...the earth was feverous and did shake”. At the end of the play, the death of Macbeth and the arrival of the new king Malcolm symbolised the restoration of order. Shakespeare has engaged his audience through this notion of order, which we all know, can never be restored as it is a repeating struggle in history.

Polanski has further questioned the conflicts of order throughout history, as well as emphasising the moral degradation of inner order through Macbeth.

During the 1970s the hippy movement valued individual views and morality, especially the ideas of freedom in the community. Macbeth has lost his self-morality after the murder of Duncan. He follows only his instincts with no consideration of the brutality to kill innocent women and children, “ Seize upon Fife; give to th’edge ‘ th’sword his wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls”. Polanski added a terrifying scene showing the rape of a servant and piles of corpses, mainly children. This built a truly horrifying atmosphere for the audiences, sensing the real physical horror of Macbeth’s disordered mind. Polanski has added a last scene, where Donalbain seeks the witches, he believed that order is something that will not last long, since it is merely the nature of man. Ambition is the strongest and most powerful theme reoccurring throughout Shakespeare’s play of Macbeth.

The seventeenth century society valued the necessary quality of Ambition that draws one towards success, especially in the role of high standing leaders. The plot of Macbeth is basically constructed around this notion of ambition. Shakespeare used the imagery of horse-riding to indicate Macbeth’s fierce ambition in his soliloquy, “ I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, but only vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself and falls on th’ other”. Macbeth’s “ vaulting ambition” caused his inner degradation, blinding him from his continuing list of murders such as those close to him, Banquo. Through the use of tragedy conventions, Shakespeare was able to engage his audience by relating them to themes such as ambition, which is seen all through civilisation when considering the notions of success. In Polanski’s Macbeth, ambition controls Macbeth’s decisions to do almost anything.

During the 1970s, ambition has still been the highest motivation towards success. Before the murder of Duncan, a dramatic scene was added by Polanski that shows Duncan waking up and Macbeth's realisation of this. Macbeth's " vaulting ambition" made him murder without hesitation, this is represented by the repeated jabbing of Duncan. Another example of this deep ambition within Macbeth is symbolised by Polanski's addition of a new scene in which Macbeth dreams of Fleance taking his crown. By adding these scenes in considering context, Polanski has engaged the audience of his time to the film of Macbeth. As seen in the original play and Polanski's interpretation of Macbeth, the way Shakespeare presented his play might be old but the themes he used can still be related to the modern context. By using universal themes such as the supernatural, conflicts of order and ambition in a presentation with dramatic quality will create suspense and excitement, engaging modern audiences.