

Roman polanski's  
and orson welles' film  
adaptation of the  
opening scene of  
macbet...



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There have been many film adaptations of Shakespeare's play, Macbeth. These are widely varied, from the Japanese version ' the Throne of Blood' to the gangster version ' Joe Macbeth'. Two of the best-known adaptations are, Orson Welles (1947) and Roman Polanski's (1971).

This essay will seek to compare and contrast the two films' very different but effective opening scenes. Both directors have been drawn to the work of Shakespeare in very different ways. Welles most likely gained an interest in Macbeth through his earlier career as a Shakespearian actor where as, Polanski may have wanted to portray the workings of evil by using Macbeth. This is possibly the result of the tragic murder of Polanski's pregnant wife by Charles Manson and his followers. Using the first scene of both films, I intend to make a comparison as to the effectiveness of how both directors adapted Shakespeare's Macbeth. There are certain similarities and differences between the two versions.

While both directors have adopted Shakespeare's text effectively to the screen, they both use very different methods to convey Shakespeare's intentions. For example, Orson Welles uses text from act four of the play, beginning ' Double double toil and trouble'. This is the first line in the film and Welles uses it to suggest that the witches are agents of evil and perhaps to give the impression of forthcoming trouble. However, Welles leaves out the lines about Greymalkin and paddock perhaps due to the twentieth century audience not being familiar with witches spirits and the their names.

On the other hand, Roman Polanski uses Shakespeare's text vividly throughout the first scene of his version of Macbeth. Polanski moves the line

' fair is foul and foul is fair' from the end of the scene to the beginning. This shows how important he believes this line is in emphasising the appearance of the witches and the two-sided nature of some of the characters in the play. By omitting certain lines both directors are able to build up the suspense before the name Macbeth is spoken or displayed in the critical first scene. Also, the use of different techniques has allowed both directors to convey the witches in different manner. Welles doesn't show the witches in detail and keeps their appearance hidden with the use of shadow and silhouette.

This adds to the mystery shrouding the witches. One of the witches has a very masculine voice adding to their unsightly character and Welles has clearly linked the traditional image of witches with pointed hats and black cauldrons to his witches in the film allowing viewers to have an instantaneous understanding of these characters. Also, towards the end of the scene it can be seen that the witches are scraping a lump of clay. The object they shape turns out to be a figure of Macbeth, which creates a sense of foreboding for him. In my view, Polanski presents the witches closer to the original vision Shakespeare had for them.

His portrayal of the witches suggests that they are ordinary people, not wearing pointed hats or black robes but rather ordinary rags. Polanski clearly shows the appearance of all three witches and it can be seen that two of the witches are older women whilst one is a younger woman. He also refers to the original text by presenting the witches as dirty and unclean. It is easy to speculate that one of the older witches is blind, as her eyes are closed throughout the scene. As well as this, another seems to be deaf and the <https://assignbuster.com/roman-polanskis-and-orson-welles-film-adaptation-of-the-opening-scene-of-macbeth/>

youngest seems to be dumb. Both Polanski and Welles use settings and other cinematic techniques to good effect in creating an atmospheric opening scene.

Both directors use remote and deserted areas for the setting and they both have adapted quite well what Shakespeare wanted to convey by an open place. Welles sets his scene on top of a cliff. He uses this, as it is a remote and unpopulated area. Again, Welles uses the traditional image of witches. He creates an intense and spooky ambience by moving the camera back and forth from the clouded sky to the bubbling cauldron. Welles' version is aided by the fact that it is made in black and white which helps create a dark tone throughout this scene.

Contrasting with that, Polanski's version is set on a desolate beach. This gives the impression of evil being everywhere even in the most beautiful of places. The sky is red this may be associated with proverb 'red sky in the morning, Shepard's warning'. This imagery might imply an omen of evil things to come. The camera focuses in on the witches digging in silence, leading to a sense of purpose and mystery. At the end of this scene the witches walk slowly away from the camera into the surrounding mist.

This generates a strong feeling of secretive and unknown evil. In conclusion, both Welles and Polanski have successfully achieved what Shakespeare had portrayed in the first scene of Macbeth. Both directors have adapted Macbeth very effectively to the screen. However, Polanski has created a more realistic setting, conveying that evil is everywhere. Welles has not achieved success with his unconvincing scenery.

Both directors successfully portray the witches although in a different manner. Polanski keeps to the depiction of the witches by Shakespeare in that they are not dressed as traditional witches for the viewer's benefit. Polanski also imposes the intentions of Shakespeare to make his film truer to the original play, whereas, Welles utilises maximum artistic license to create his own vision of Macbeth.