

LESSON TITLE: Supernatural Shakespeare and *Macbeth*

GRADE LEVEL: Grades 9-12

TIME ALLOTMENT: One to two 45-minute class periods

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will explore how Shakespeare uses supernatural elements in *Macbeth*. The lesson will begin with an exploration of beliefs about the supernatural and witchcraft in Shakespeare's time as presented in a segment from the PBS series ***Shakespeare Uncovered***. Students will then compare these beliefs to modern-day notions about the supernatural and consider how these beliefs shape people's behavior. Next, students will turn to the text of *Macbeth* and analyze the action, imagery, characterization, and language of Act I, Scene iii (the scene in which Macbeth and Banquo first encounter the witches and hear their predictions). Then, students will view another segment from ***Shakespeare Uncovered*** and explore key questions about the role of the witches in the action of *Macbeth*. Finally, they will examine other supernatural episodes in the play and produce a paper exploring the impact and meaning of one of these episodes. This lesson is best used during a reading of *Macbeth*.

SUBJECT MATTER

English/Language Arts

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- Compare historical perspectives on the supernatural with today's understanding of these phenomena.
- Describe how Shakespeare uses the theme of the supernatural in *Macbeth*.
- Interpret a literary text by identifying the techniques used by the author and how they contribute to its meaning.
- Analyze themes, plot, and character in *Macbeth*.

STANDARDS

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

<http://www.ncte.org/standards/ncte-ira>

Standard 1

Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

Standard 2

Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

Standard 3

Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

Common Core Literature Standards for Grades 11-12

<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/11-12>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2 Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.3 Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

MEDIA COMPONENTS

Video:

Shakespeare Uncovered: Ethan Hawke on Macbeth, selected segments
Access the video segments for this lesson at the Video Segments Page.

Segment 1: “Witchcraft in Shakespeare's Time”

A discussion of what people in Shakespeare's day believed about witches.

Segment 2: “A Force of Evil: The Witches and Macbeth”

An exploration of the impact and meaning of the witches in the play.

MATERIALS

For the class:

- Computer, projection screen, and speakers (for class viewing of online video segments).

For each student:

- One copy of *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene iii
- One copy of “The Supernatural in *Macbeth*” Handout

PREP FOR TEACHERS

Prior to teaching this lesson, you will need to:

Preview all of the video segments used in the lesson. Prepare to watch them using your classroom's Internet connection.

Print out and make copies of *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene iii and "The Supernatural in *Macbeth*" Handout for each student.

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY

1. Tell your students that as part of your study of *Macbeth*, you'll be exploring how Shakespeare uses the supernatural. Explain that throughout the class period, they should think about where various supernatural elements appear in the play and consider how these elements influence the action or affect their perception of the characters.
2. Introduce the first video segment by telling students they'll start by learning about witchcraft beliefs during Shakespeare's time. Ask them to reflect on the following questions as they watch the segment: What did Shakespeare's audience believe about witches? How do you think those beliefs affected the way the audience thought about the witches in this play? Play the segment "Witchcraft in Shakespeare's Time." (Access the video segments for this lesson at the Video Segments Page.)
3. After viewing the segment, pose the questions you asked students to think about: What did Shakespeare's audience believe about witches? How do you think those beliefs affected the way the audience thought about the witches in this play? *(Answers should include: Shakespeare's audience believed witches were real. Most of them would know stories of people they knew who were believed to be witches. An audience who believed the witches were real might think that the witches have total control over Macbeth. The witches might seem more fearsome, and the audience might be more likely to anticipate a bad outcome for Macbeth. They might also feel that Macbeth's interest in what the witches say and his desire to hear more suggests that he's already corrupted in some way.)*
4. Tell your students that you'd like them to examine how the beliefs described in the segment compare to modern-day ideas about the supernatural. Ask your students to identify different beliefs in the supernatural that they have encountered. Some examples may include:
 - Horoscopes
 - ESP
 - Psychics, mediums, and fortune tellers
 - Ghosts
 - Superstitions, such as breaking a mirror or walking under a ladder bringing bad luck

Optional: You may want to bring in examples of the above from newspapers, magazines, the internet, etc.

5. Once you've compiled a list of examples, break the class into small groups. Assign one phenomenon to each group, and ask your students to discuss the following questions:
 - When have you encountered mention of this phenomenon in your life? Have you seen movies or news stories about it, or heard stories from other people about it?
 - Do people believe in this phenomenon today? Is that surprising? If so, why?
 - Why do you think the idea of this phenomenon still has power for people today?

Tell your students that they will have 10 minutes to discuss their topics, and that afterwards, you'll have them present their conclusions to the entire class.

6. After each group has presented its conclusions about the discussion topic, point out that there are widely varying opinions as to whether each phenomenon is "real." Ask: Do you think a supernatural phenomenon has to be "real" to affect our lives? How might belief in supernatural phenomena influence a person's behavior or decisions? As an example, ask them to consider horoscopes. If a person really believed in astrology, how would that impact his/her daily life? *(Accept all answers. Guide them toward realizing that belief in the supernatural can influence what decisions a person makes, even if that phenomenon isn't real. For example, if someone believed in astrology, they'd be more likely to look for ways that events in their daily life were predicted by a horoscope from the newspaper.)*
7. Ask students to reflect on this notion as they continue to explore *Macbeth*, and ask them to think about what the different characters' responses to supernatural phenomena suggest about the characters themselves.

LEARNING ACTIVITY

1. Tell your students that you are going to take a closer look at the role of the witches in the play. Explain that as a class you are going to read aloud from Act I, Scene iii from *Macbeth*. Remind students that this is the witches' second appearance in the play—the witches are introduced in the very first scene, and then they appear in this scene after we learn about Macbeth's victory over the Thane of Cawdor.

Distribute the excerpt from Act I, Scene iii (lines 1-88) of *Macbeth*. Ask for volunteers to read the scene aloud. Remind your students that there are five

characters in this scene and ask for brief descriptions of each character. *Answers should include:*

- *The three witches: These are eerie characters that are viewed as being allied with dark forces. They might sound like crones, and the students who read them will want to pay attention to Shakespeare's use of long and short lines and rhyme when they read.*
 - *Macbeth: Macbeth is a very decisive soldier. In this scene, he is learning things he didn't expect, and he is disturbed by what he learns from the witches.*
 - *Banquo: Banquo is also a soldier and a close friend of Macbeth's. He is honest and upright, and is as amazed by the witches as Macbeth.*
2. Ask all the students to follow along and to pay attention to how Shakespeare indicates that the witches are different from the other characters in the play. What sorts of things suggest the witches are supernatural? Tell them that during the reading they should circle any key words or lines that seem to suggest that the witches are not part of the natural world. Ask students to observe the kind of language and poetic verse the witches use, the images in their speeches, the things they talk about before Macbeth and Banquo enter, and the way that Macbeth and Banquo describe and respond to them.
 3. After the reading, ask all the students to write a short (less than one paragraph) synopsis of what happens during the scene.
 4. When everyone is done writing, ask a few students to read their synopses aloud. Check comprehension, and make sure students understand what the witches tell Macbeth and Banquo and how they respond to these predictions. (The key points are: *As the scene opens, the witches are discussing their different evil activities, and they cast an evil charm. They encounter Banquo and Macbeth, who are returning from defeating the Thane of Glamis, who has rebelled against the King of Scotland, Duncan. The witches greet Macbeth as the Thane of Glamis and Cawdor and the King of Scotland. Banquo asks Macbeth why he is so startled, and asks the witches to tell them more. The witches tell Banquo his sons will be kings. The witches vanish.*)
 5. Now ask your students to consider the question you posed before they read the scene: How do we know that the witches are not of this world? Prompt them to notice all the techniques Shakespeare uses and ask for examples of each. Guide them to notice:
 - *References to common beliefs about witches: In the opening lines, the witches make reference to being able to fly, controlling the weather, cursing people, causing illness, and predicting the future.*
 - *Banquo's comments about the witches: He says they are "So wither'd and so wild in their attire" and that they "look not like the inhabitants o' the earth."*

He also notes they "should be women, /And yet your beards forbid me to interpret /That you are so."

- *Meter and rhyme: In the opening section, the witches speak in shorter, sing-song verses that differ from the blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) used by the other characters in the play. Their lines also include rhyme, while Macbeth's and Banquo's do not.*
6. Summarize the findings and note that Shakespeare uses all these techniques to mark the witches off as different from the natural world.
 7. Explain that next you'd like your students to think about the relationship of the witches to Macbeth, and how they affect his decisions and character.
 8. Introduce the next video segment by instructing students to pay attention to the questions that are asked about how the witches' predictions influence the rest of the action in the play. Play the segment "A Force of Evil: The Witches and Macbeth". (Access the video segments for this lesson at the Video Segments Page.)
 9. After viewing the video, lead a discussion by asking students to respond to the following statement and questions from the segment: "Macbeth's reaction will drive the action for the rest of the play. But had he always desired the crown? Or have the witches planted that idea?"
 10. To help your students consider the ramifications of this question, ask: Why do you think the witches make their predictions? Do they foresee the future or cause it? With their words are they tempting him or are they corrupting him? Who is the source of evil in this play – the witches or Macbeth? Poll students as to whether they think the witches are foreseeing events or creating them. Ask them to back up their case with evidence from the text.
 11. Remind the students of your earlier discussion in which you talked about modern-day supernatural phenomena. Ask students: If you were going to rewrite *Macbeth* in a modern-day setting, with what supernatural phenomenon would you replace the witches? Ask them to suggest some ideas and talk about how the scene you read in class might be rewritten using that phenomenon. (*Accept all answers.*)

CULMINATING ACTIVITY

1. When you are done discussing the witches, point out that there are also other supernatural elements in the play. Guide them to identify the appearances of these elements:
 - Other appearances of the witches (Act I, Scene i; Act 4, Scene i)
 - The apparitions (Act IV, Scene i)
 - The air-drawn dagger (Act II, Scene i, lines 30 and following)
 - Banquo's ghost (Act III, Scene iv)

- The conversation between Macbeth and Lennox about strange phenomena experienced on the night of Duncan's murder (Act II, Scene iii, lines 43-60)

Students may not immediately recall or identify all these elements. To help them, provide the following prompts:

- What is our first indication that this play will include the supernatural?
 - How often do the witches appear? What do they do in each scene in which they appear?
 - In Shakespeare's day, it was believed that if you killed the king, you upset the natural order. What indication do we have that the natural order is disrupted when Duncan is murdered?
 - In the case of the witches, both Banquo and Macbeth experience the supernatural. Are there any eerie or uncanny events in the play that are only witnessed by Macbeth?
2. Either as an in-class writing assignment or as homework, have students choose one of the supernatural elements the class has identified and write a 1-2 page paper that explores whether this element predicts, influences, or reflects Macbeth's behavior and character. In their essays, students should consider the following questions:
 - Where does the event happen within the play? What precedes it, and what later events does it affect?
 - Do you think the supernatural event really happened or is it a figment of Macbeth's imagination? How does this affect how we interpret this event and its impact on the play?
 - What does this element add to the play? Think about how it affects the mood, relates to themes, or reveals character.
 - Does this event suggest that Macbeth is totally under the control of supernatural forces, or is Macbeth still responsible for his own actions?
 - What particular lines from the play support your interpretation?
 3. Distribute "The Supernatural in *Macbeth*" Handout, which lists the questions provided above.
 4. Collect the students' papers for an assessment of the lesson.