Katie Lake

Seventh Period

MACBETH Background and Theme Expert

The Shakespearian play, MACBETH is set in Scotland. Shakespeare wrote MACBETH as a tragedy for King James I. It is immediately clear that MACBETH is a tragedy when the 3 witches chant, “When the hurly-burly’s done, when the battle’s lost and won, there will be ere the set of sun.” (1:1, lines 3&4) and “Fair is foul, and foul is fair…” (1:1, line10) in act one. Hurlyburly means turmoil and suffering. Within the tragic play are several underlying themes such as ambition, impulses and desires, the supernatural. Also the themes of reason and mental stability are within the tragedy of MACBETH.

There are many themes in MACBETH. The most profound is ambition, which is an earnest desire for power. When Macbeth first meets the “weird sisters” (1:3, line 32), they call him the Thane of Cawdor, and predict that he will be king and his sons will be heirs to the throne. He is confused by this prediction, but moments later, the Thane of Ross comes up and tells Macbeth that he is the new thane of Cawdor. (1:3, line 105) Macbeth writes to Lady Macbeth and tells her about his rendezvous with the witches and his promotion to Thane. She fears that he is not ambitious enough to kill the king so he can take over. After killing Duncan, Macbeth feels that “We have scorched the snake, not killed it.” (3:2, line 13). He decides to kill Banquo before the night is over. He is ambitious with this venture and does not think through the effects it has on his psyche. He even tells Lady Macbeth that “Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill.” (3:2, line 55) which means that once you commit a crime, it is easier to commit another.

The theme of impulses and desires is very strong in this play. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth want power so badly, that they give up their moral standards and values. This is a tragic flaw that these two characters share. Lady Macbeth pressures Macbeth into killing Duncan, the king. She undermines his self esteem by saying “When you durst do it, then you were a man; and to be more than what you were, you would be so much more a man.” (1:7, lines49-51) This also shows that they have a very poor marriage. When a wife is pressuring her husband to commit murder and he follows through with it is not right. This relationship is destined to fail.

Macbeth is full of supernatural occurrences that control the course of the play. In the beginning, three witches are talking about the prophecy of Macbeth. They say the line “fair is fowl and fowls fair”. (1:1, line) This signifies that there is going to be a blurred line between good and evil. In Act 4, scene 1 the witches are brewing a potion to bring “hurlyburly” to mankind. After this Macbeth visits the witches to get some questions about the future answered. The witches give him three predictions; a floating head to warn him of Macduff, a bloody child will warn him that anyone who is born of a woman will hurt him, and finally he will not be defeated unless Birnam Wood comes toward his castle. This last prediction gives Macbeth confidence that he will be victorious.

Reason and mental stability is a considerable question in MACBETH. When Lady Macbeth is reading a letter from Macbeth telling her of his meeting with the three witches, she says that she does not think he will “catch the nearest way” (1:5, line 18) because he is “too full o’ the milk of human kindness”. (1:5, line 17) The “nearest way” that she is thinking of is murder. She wants Macbeth to be ambitious so that he will have a reason to commit the murder of King Duncan. She calls upon the evil spirits to “unsex” her so she will not feel the guilt and suffer from having a conscious. (1:5, lines 40-45) If you have no conscious, you are considered a sociopath which means you do not care about anything and are mentally unstable. When Macbeth comes home, Lady Macbeth pressures him about being more ambitious so he will do the right thing and murder Duncan so he can be king. Macbeth finally agrees to this “quell” (1:7, lime 72) so he is also mentally unstable if he agrees to such a diabolical plan. Before killing Duncan, Macbeth sees a bloody dagger pointing towards Duncan’s bedchamber. This symbolizes the bloody affair that he is about to undergo. Once Macbeth has “done the deed” (2:2, line 14), he starts going crazy. He kills Banquo, because he thinks he will get in the way of his plans. At his party, he sees Banquo’s ghost sitting at the table and makes a scene. (3:4, lines 47- 109)

The tragedy of MACBETH is a play with themes of ambition, impulses and desires, the supernatural, and reason and metal stability. The play was probably based on the real Macbeth who was a historical Scottish king in the 11th century. He killed the king who was before him, King Duncan I. Shakespeare wrote MACBETH for King James I, who was the king of England at the time. Before King James I came to England, he was the King of Scotland. His cousin, Elizabeth, who was the Queen of England, passed away so he took her throne. He became a patron of Shakespeare’s acting company. It was renamed the King’s Men. Shakespeare added witchcraft to the play because King James I was very interested in the topic. MACBETH is a classic Shakespearean play of ambition and the tragedies resulting from impulses.

**Works Cited**

Macbeth. By William Shakespeare. The Globe Theatre, London. 1606.

McDougal Littell. "The Tragedy of Macbeth." British Literature. McDougal Littell Inc., 2000. 323-416.