

## Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and witchcraft (VWO)

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### Essential unit question:

How do authors use language and social, cultural, and historical context to get their intentions across?

### Intended Learning Objectives:

- \* Students can explain in English and with examples from the texts how Shakespeare used his contemporary historical and social context to create a certain effect with his audience.
- \* Students can explain in English and with examples from the texts the intended effect of language use in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

### Lesson summary:

Students study the opening scenes of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* with regard to the historical and social context as well as the use of language.

### CEFR references :

#### Reading (C1/B2)

- Can understand contemporary literary prose. (B2: Council of Europe, 27) <sup>1</sup>
- Can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. (C1: Council of Europe, 27)
- Can understand in detail lengthy, complex texts, whether or not they relate to his/her own area of speciality, provided he/she can reread difficult sections. (C1: Council of Europe, 69)

#### Writing (B2)

- Can write clear, detailed texts on a variety of subjects related to his/her field of interest, synthesising and evaluating information and arguments from a number of sources. (Council of Europe, 61)

#### Listening (B2)

- Can follow extended speech and complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar, and the direction of the talk is sign-posted by explicit markers. (Council of Europe, 66)
- Can follow the essentials of lectures, talks and reports and other forms of academic/professional presentation which are propositionally and linguistically complex. (Council of Europe, 67)

#### Speaking (B2)

- Can give clear, systematically developed descriptions and presentations, with appropriate highlighting of significant points, and relevant supporting detail. (Council of Europe, 58)

### **Dit lesvoorbeeld komt uit:**

Bloemert, J. & van Veen, K. (submitted). Teaching Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in a Dutch secondary school EFL classroom. In: Paran, A. (ed). *Shakespeare in the L2 classroom*.

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<sup>1</sup> Council of Europe. (2001). Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.



### Assignment 1

Class discussion/ group work on the following questions:

- a) What do you believe constitutes a scary start of a contemporary book or film? (**R**)<sup>2</sup>
- b) Shakespeare's *Macbeth* opens with three witches on the stage. What effect does this have on you? Do you believe in witches? (**R**)

### Lecture on 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century witch trials

For many of his plays, Shakespeare drew on the traditions of his time. King James's England was a Christian country and people literally believed in Heaven, Hell and evil spirits. Throughout Shakespeare's life, witchcraft, for example, was a topic of considerable interest. Witches were credited with diabolical powers and were thought to be agents of Satan. They could see into the future, create storms, were able to sink ships, and raise evil spirits by creating horrible concoctions. If people (mainly women) were found guilty of having a relationship with evil spirits they were condemned to death by drowning, burning or hanging. Witches were also the object of fascination of King James I. In 1597 he published *Demonology*, a book on witchcraft and in 1604 an Act of Parliament decreed that anyone found guilty of practicing witchcraft should be executed. Now that witchcraft had become a capital offence, persecution reached terrifying proportions. (**C, R**)

### Assignment 2

- a) Read the following extract (the opening lines of *Macbeth*).(**L**)

#### Extract A: *Macbeth* Act 1 scene 1

##### [A desert place]

*Thunder and lightning. Enter three Witches*

##### **Modern translation from No Fear**

##### **Shakespeare**

##### **First Witch**

When shall we three meet again  
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

When should the three of us meet again?  
Will it be in thunder, lightning, or rain?

##### **Second Witch**

When the hurlyburly's done,  
When the battle's lost and won.

We'll meet when the noise of the battle is over  
when one side has won and the other side has lost.

##### **Third Witch**

That will be ere the set of sun.

That will happen before sunset.

##### **First Witch**

Where the place?

Where should we meet?

##### **Second Witch**

Upon the heath.

Let's do it in the open field

##### **Third Witch**

There to meet with Macbeth.

We'll meet Macbeth there.

##### **First Witch**

I come, Graymalkin!

*(calling to her cat)* I'm coming, Graymalkin!

##### **Second Witch**

Paddock calls.

My toad, Paddock, calls me.

##### **Third Witch**

Anon.

*(to her spirit)* I'll be right here!

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<sup>2</sup> **T** (text approach), **C** (context approach), **R** (reader approach), **L** (language approach)

**ALL**

Fair is foul, and foul is fair:  
Hover through the fog and filthy air.  
*Exeunt*

Fair is foul, and foul is fair.  
Let's fly away through the fog and filthy air.

- b) How would the Elizabethan audience have experienced such an opening of a play? (**T, C**)

**Assignment 3**

- a) In the second scene of Act 1 we encounter the witches again and we learn that two Scottish generals, Macbeth and Banquo, fought courageously and Macbeth is named the hero of the victorious army. Read the following extract of scene 3. (**L**)

**Extract B: *Macbeth* Act 1 scene 3**

**[A heath near Forres.]**

*Thunder. Enter the three Witches*

**First Witch**

Where hast thou been, sister?

**Second Witch**

Killing swine.

**Third Witch**

Sister, where thou?

**First Witch**

A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,  
And munch'd, and munch'd, and munch'd:--  
'Give me,' quoth I:  
'Aroint thee, witch!' the rump-fed ronyon cries.  
Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o' the Tiger:

But in a sieve I'll thither sail,  
And, like a rat without a tail,  
I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.

**Second Witch**

I'll give thee a wind.

**First Witch**

Thou'rt kind.

**Third Witch**

And I another.

**First Witch**

I myself have all the other,  
And the very ports they blow,  
All the quarters that they know  
I' the shipman's card.  
I will drain him dry as hay:  
Sleep shall neither night nor day  
Hang upon his pent-house lid;  
He shall live a man forbid:  
Weary se'nnights nine times nine  
Shall he dwindle, peak and pine:

***Modern translation from No Fear Shakespeare***

Where have you been, sister?

Killing pigs.

And you, sister?

A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap  
and munched away at them  
"Give me one," I said.  
"Get away from me, witch!" the fat woman cried.  
Her husband has sailed off to Aleppo as master of a  
called the *Tiger*.

I'll sail there in a kitchen strainer  
turn myself into a tailless rat  
and do things to him

I'll give you some wind to sail there.

How nice of you!

And I will give you some more.

I already have control of all the other winds,  
along with the ports from which they blow  
and every direction  
on the sailor's compass in which they can go  
I'll drain the life out of him  
He won't catch a wink of sleep  
either at night or during the day  
He will live as a cursed man  
For eighty-one weeks  
he will waste away in agony



Though his bark cannot be lost,  
Yet it shall be tempest-tost.  
Look what I have.

**Second Witch**

Show me, show me.

**First Witch**

Here I have a pilot's thumb,  
Wreck'd as homeward he did come.

*Drum within*

**Third Witch**

A drum, a drum!  
Macbeth doth come.

**ALL**

The weird sisters, hand in hand,  
Posters of the sea and land,  
Thus do go about, about:  
Thrice to thine and thrice to mine  
And thrice again, to make up nine.  
Peace! the charm's wound up.

*Enter MACBETH and BANQUO*

**MACBETH**

So foul and fair a day I have not seen.

**BANQUO**

How far is it call'd to Forres? What are these

So wither'd and so wild in their attire,  
That look not like the inhabitants o' the earth,  
And yet are on't? Live you? or are you aught  
That man may question? You seem to  
understand me

By each at once her chappy finger laying  
Upon her skinny lips: you should be women  
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret  
That you are so.

**MACBETH**

Speak, if you can: what are you?

**First Witch**

All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Glamis!

**Second Witch**

All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!

**Third Witch**

All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter!

Although I can't make his ship disappear  
I can still make his journey miserable  
Look what I have here

Show me, show me

Here I have the thumb of a pilot  
who was drowned while trying to return home.

A drum, a drum!  
Macbeth has come.

We weird sisters, hand in hand  
swift travelers over the sea and land  
dance around and around like so  
Three times to yours, and three times to mine  
and three times again to add up to nine.  
Enough! The charm is ready.

I have never seen a day that was so good and  
bad at the same time.

How far is it supposed to be to Forres?  
What are these creatures?  
They're so withered-looking and crazily dressed  
They don't look like they belong on this planet  
but I see them standing here on Earth

Are you alive? Can you answer questions? You  
seem to understand me,  
because each of you has put a gruesome finger  
to her skinny lips: You look like women  
but your beards keep me from believing  
that you really are.

Speak, if you can. What kind of creatures are you?

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to you, thane of Glamis!

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to you, thane of Cawdor!

All hail, Macbeth, the future king!



## BANQUO

Good sir, why do you start; and seem to fear

Things that do sound so fair? I' the name of truth,  
Are ye fantastical, or that indeed  
Which outwardly ye show? My noble partner

You greet with present grace and great prediction  
Of noble having and of royal hope,  
That he seems rapt withal: to me you speak not.  
If you can look into the seeds of time,  
And say which grain will grow and which will not,  
Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear  
Your favours nor your hate.

### First Witch

Hail!

### Second Witch

Hail!

### Third Witch

Hail!

### First Witch

Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.  
greater.

### Second Witch

Not so happy, yet much happier.

### Third Witch

Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none:  
you will

So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!

### First Witch

Banquo and Macbeth, all hail!

## MACBETH

Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more:  
By Sinel's death I know I am thane of Glamis;

But how of Cawdor? the thane of Cawdor lives,

A prosperous gentleman; and to be king

Stands not within the prospect of belief,

No more than to be Cawdor. Say from whence

You owe this strange intelligence? or why

Upon this blasted heath you stop our way

With such prophetic greeting? Speak, I charge you. Prophetic greeting? Speak, I command you.

My dear Macbeth, why do you look so startled and  
afraid

of these nice things they're saying?

Tell me honestly, are you illusions, or are you really  
what you seem to be? You've greeted my noble  
friend

my noble friend with honors and talk of a future  
so glorious that you have made him speechless

But you don't say anything to me.

If you can see the future

and say how things will turn out,

tell me. I don't want

your favors and I'm not afraid of your hatred.

Hail!

Hail!

Hail!

You are lesser than Macbeth but also

You are not as happy as Macbeth, yet much happier.

Your descendants will be kings, even though

not be one. So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!

Banquo and Macbeth, all hail!

Wait! You only told me part of what I want to know.  
I already know I am the thane of Glamis because I  
inherited

the position when my father, Sinel, died. But how can  
you

call me the thane of Cawdor? The thane of Cawdor is  
alive,

and he's a rich and powerful man. And for me to be  
king is

completely impossible, just as it's impossible for me  
to be

thane of Cawdor. Tell me where you learned these  
Strange

things and why you stop us at this desolate place  
with this



### *Witches vanish*

- b) How does Macbeth react to their appearance? Use examples from the text. (**T**)
- c) Considering *Macbeth* is an eponymous play, what does the appearance of the witches foreshadow? (**T**)
- d) How would you describe the mood (atmosphere) at the beginning of this play? (**T, R**)
- e) Explain with examples from the text how Shakespeare used his contemporary historical and social context to create this mood with his audience. (**T, C**)

### **Assignment 4**

- a) Read the dialogue between the witches in scene 1 and scene 3 once more. How would you describe the language the witches use? Use examples from the text. (**T, R, L**)
- b) What is the effect of their use of language on your understanding? (**R, L**)
- c) Explain what effect you think this use of language should have had on the Elizabethan audience? (**C, R, L**)

### **Assignment 5**

- a) Considering the 16th century audience, what do you think would be an effective way of uttering these lines? (**T, C, R, L**)
- b) Find various stage performances and film fragments of Act 1 of *Macbeth*. Compare and contrast the way the witches utter their lines. Which one do you think is most effective and why? (**T, R, L**)
- c) Re-write the dialogue between the witches, Macbeth and Banquo in contemporary English and in a contemporary setting in order to create the same intended effect this dialogue had on an Elizabethan audience. (**T, C, R, L**)

