Concept/Vocabulary Analysis

Literary Text: Macbeth by William Shakespeare

Organizational Patterns: The text is a Standard Shakespearean tragedy divided into five acts. The text is further divided, varying in length from three to eight scenes per act. The body of the text is preceded by a preface and brief historical background on the text, the author, and Elizabethan theater in general. A key to famous lines and phrases follows the body of the text. Throughout the text, there are scene-by-scene plot summaries and explanatory notes clarifying unfamiliar vocabulary and expressions.

Issues related to the study of literature:

Theme: This play describes the ambitious rise and subsequent fall of Macbeth. It addresses many themes:

1. Fate vs. free will: The Three Witches represent fate. Their predictions for Macbeth ignite in him a desire to bring about their fulfillment, inciting the action of the play.
   * “All hail, Macbeth, that shall be King hereafter!” (I,iii,54-55)
2. Loyalty related to gender and family roles: Why was it easier for Lady Macbeth than for Macbeth to plan Duncan’s death?
   * “Thou shalt be what thou was promised...Leave all the rest to me.” (I,vi,15,82). Why did Lady Macduff proclaim her husband a traitor but later assert his innocence?
   * “When our actions do not, our fears do make us traitors.” (IV,ii,4-5)
   Why did Macbeth respond to his wife’s death with annoyance, not sorrow?
   * “She should have died hereafter; there would have been a time for such a word.” (V,v,19-20)
3. Ambition/Power-acquiring, maintaining, affects: Macbeth’s efforts to maintain his power became increasingly more drastic according to the amount of power he had obtained. It became easier for him to murder: family, friends, women and children.
4. The value/purpose of life: Macbeth justifies his behavior with the philosophy that what you do in life does not matter because once you die, you are just forgotten.
   * “Out, out brief candle! Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.”(V,v,25-28).

Setting:
The play takes place primarily in Scotland, with a few scenes dealing with Malcom’s escape in England. Although the time is not specified, the play was written around 1606, and the historical Macbeth lived from 1042-1066.

Point of View, Narrative Voice:
As a dramatic text, it is written entirely as dialogue. This provides excellent opportunity for students to practice speaking and presenting, as well as reading skills.

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Tone:
As a classical tragedy, the play is overwhelmingly dark. Although the scenes with the Three Witches provide opportunities for lighter interpretations and activities, the overall feel of the piece is serious and contemplative. It seeks to bring the audience to a cathartic state, where they learn from Macbeth’s mistakes and consciously decide to avoid them in their own lives.

Paradox:
The Three Witches present their predictions as paradoxes (statements that seem contradictory, but may be true in fact). This contributes greatly to the irony in the text.
*“So foul and fair a day I have not seen.” (I,iii,39)
*“Not so happy, yet much happier.” (I,iii,71)

Irony:
The greatest irony in the text is that The Three Witches’ predictions, which give Macbeth the security and certainty that he will prevail prove themselves the cause of his eventual undoing.
*“But ‘tis strange! And oftentimes to win us to our harm, the instruments of darkness tell us truths, win us with honest trifles, to betray’s in deepest consequence.” (I,iii,13-16)

Affective issues related to the work:

- Many students feel that they are controlled by the “Three Witches” in society who give predictions of students’ capabilities and potentials. Who or what are the Three Witches in their lives? Do students accept limitations placed upon them by society’s predictions? As students explore how Macbeth could have fought against the Three Witches predictions, they can discover ways to overcome the limiting expectations that may be placed on them.

- Understanding Lady Macduff can help students who feel abandoned (i.e. through the divorce of their parents). Where are students’ loyalties? What are some reasons for leaving? Should students remain loyal to friends and family members when they disapprove of their behavior?

- Like Macbeth, disruptive students are seeking power through inappropriate means. By defining power as “being in control”, students come to recognize that the more Macbeth fought, the less power he had. Students can enumerate their ambitions (goals for the class) and identify steps to appropriately help them reach those goals.

- Many students question their worth in the class, the home, and society in general. What is the value of an individual? Can one person make a difference in the world? Who are individuals who have made a difference in the students’ lives? How can students impact the lives of others?

Vocabulary Issues:
1. Obscure and obsolete words and expressions: These include many words and phrases common to the Elizabethan audience but completely foreign to contemporary readers. Although they are often necessary to understand the text, they offer little

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to no practical use outside of the context of Shakespearean plays. I would not suggest putting excessive emphasis on this comparatively useless vocabulary.

i.e. “Striding the blast” (I,vii,22)

2. Advanced vocabulary: Much of the vocabulary in the text is new to students but is still working in the language. These words should be used to create vocabulary lists which should be quizzed or tested to help expand students’ vocabularies.

i.e. “confounds” (II,ii,15)

3. Colorful, descriptive language: By becoming aware of the word usage and writing tools utilized in the text (metaphor, simile, personification, etc.) students can improve their own writing.

i.e. “I have lived long enough. My way of life is fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf;...” (V,iii,25-26)

Major Concepts:

The major concepts addressed in the play are ambition and the pursuit of power. Ambition is portrayed as a negative attribute because it leads to the murder of the king, of Macbeth’s friends, and of innocent women and children. This has far-reaching implications for students. They may infer from their studies that ambition and goals should be avoided because they produce greed, malice, selfishness, etc. On the contrary, we want students to set high goals for themselves, but we also want them to learn to pursue those goals through positive and effective means. Each student will have to determine for him or herself how far they are willing to go to accomplish the things they set out to do.

Background Knowledge:

It would be helpful for students to study at least briefly the historical figures of Macbeth and Banquo. Shakespeare wrote the Macbeth to flatter King James I by incorporating witches, which James was considered an expert on, and by Shakespeare’s characterization of Banquo, who was an ancestor of King James. This information would also help students better understand the characters and the discrepancies between the text and the historical account.

Implications for students of diversity:

Students of diversity may be particularly interested in the issues related to overcoming the expectations placed upon you. The Three Witches of society often prophesy that minorities and students with physical or learning disabilities will not be able to succeed, and they accept that idea as fate—an unchangeable truth. As students learn that Macbeth’s downfall was in response to his own actions and not the Three Witches’ prophesies, they can learn to ignore supposed limitations and choose actions that will enable them to reach their goals.

Furthermore, students who seek power through disruptive behavior can learn to channel their efforts to more productive means as they learn to understand the relationship between power, self-control, and acceptable behavior.

The Central Question/Enduring Issue:

The goal of the unit is to help students enumerate their ambitions. They also

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learn to recognize the genesis of those ambitions (exterior or interior motivations) and identify the personal and social obstacles in the way of their success. Finally, students will use this knowledge to establish specific behaviors, attributes, and skills that will help them achieve their aspirations. The self-evaluation involved will improve students’ confidence, performance, and behavior in and out of the classroom as they learn to visualize the consequences (positive and negative) for their actions.

Research Issues/Project Ideas:
1. Scene presentations: In partnerships or small groups, students study an assigned series of scenes in depth. They illustrate and abridge the scenes, pulling out the essential lines. They prepare a handout for the class that includes a plot summary, key quotes, necessary vocabulary, and three thought-provoking questions that could be used on the exam. They teach their scenes using a creative activity that involves the class in the learning process.
2. The Catharsis Essay: Students explain the value of analyzing tragedy by examining the lessons they learned from their study of Macbeth. Questions to consider might be: What was Macbeth working towards? What was the cause of his downfall? What could have prevented the tragedy? What am I working towards? What could potentially keep me from reaching my goal? What will I do or not do in order to reach my goal?
3. Character Comparison Project: Students choose any character from the play. They identify 10 traits of that character with a line from the text for support and explain how they are either similar to or different from that character. Then, they create a visual representation of their character (photo collage, clay sculpture, drawing, 10 separate items, etc.). Students present their characters in class.
4. Research Topics: In partnerships, students write a 2-3 page summary of research they conduct on the topics that follow. As the classroom “experts” on their chosen topics, the teacher can call on them to share their research at appropriate times throughout the unit. Two groups will probably research each topic.
   1. Modern interpretations and productions of Macbeth
   2. The historical characters of Macbeth and Banquo
   3. King James I and his influence on Macbeth
   4. Traditional performances: actors, sets, costumes, etc.
   5. The Fates and their connection to The Three Witches
   6. Extrinsic vs. intrinsic motivation
   7. Definitions of “power”
   8. William Shakespeare

5. Scene Interpretation and Performance: Students memorize and perform one of the following scenes or monologues, incorporating visual elements (costumes, props) and oral skills (projection, articulation, interpretation) that demonstrates an understanding of the characters and dialogue.
   1. “Double, double, toil and trouble” (group of three) (IV,i,10-21)
   2. “Out, out brief candle! Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.”(V,v,25-28).

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3. “Out, damned spot! out, I say” (V,i,31-48-Doctor and Lady’s lines omitted)

Informational/Functional Texts:
   1. Books, articles, and Internet sites about assigned research topics.
   2. Video: Macbeth: Thane of Cawdor from the Utah Shakespearean Festival

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