**Big Ideas/Theme and Essential Questions by Theme**

**Macbeth Theme of Fate and Free Will**

*Macbeth* takes seriously the question of whether or not fate (destiny) or human will (choice) determines a man's future. Shakespeare seems, ultimately, to be interested in what it is that causes a seemingly decent man (Macbeth) to commit evil acts. On the one hand, the play is set in motion by the weird sisters' prophesy that Macbeth will be king, which turns out to be true. It also often seems that outside forces (related to the weird sisters, who are in many ways associated with the three fates) control Macbeth's actions. On the other hand, the play goes out of its way to dramatize how Macbeth deliberates before taking action, which suggests that he alone controls the outcome of his own future. Alternatively, some critics suggest that Macbeth's fate may be set in stone but his choices determine the specific circumstances by which he arrives at or fulfills his destiny. In the end, the play leaves the question unanswered.

*Essential Questions:*

1. What is Macbeth's initial response to the weird sisters' prophesy? Does his attitude change at some point? If so, when does the change occur?
2. Macbeth is repeatedly described as giving the witches his "rapt" attention. Why is that? What does this suggest about Macbeth?
3. Do all of the witches' prophesies come true?
4. What role does Lady Macbeth play in her husband's actions? Is she always involved in Macbeth's decision making?

**Macbeth Theme of Ambition**

*Macbeth* is often read as a cautionary tale about the kind of destruction ambition can cause. Macbeth is a man that at first seems content to defend his king and country against treason and rebellion and yet, his desire for power plays a major role in the way he commits the most heinous acts (with the help of his ambitious wife, of course). Once Macbeth has had a taste of power, he seems unable and unwilling to stop killing (men, women, and children alike) in order to secure his position on the throne. Selfishly, Macbeth puts his own desires before the good of his country until he is reduced to a mere shell of a human being. Of course, ambition isn't Macbeth's only problem. Be sure to read about the play's portrayal of "Fate and Free Will" also.  
  
*Essential Questions:*

1. How does Macbeth's ambition overrun the witches prophesy?
2. Evaluate the difference in the projected outcome and the eventual outcomes based upon Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's ambition.

**Macbeth Theme of Power**  
*Macbeth* is interested in exploring the qualities that distinguish a good ruler from a tyrant (what Macbeth clearly becomes by the play's end). It also dramatizes the unnaturalness of regicide (killing a king) but walks a fine line by portraying the killing of King Macbeth. Although the play is set in 11th century Scotland (a time when kings were frequently murdered), *Macbeth* has a great deal of contemporary relevance. In 1603, King James VI of Scotland was crowned King James I of England, becoming England's first Stuart monarch. The play alludes to an unsuccessful Catholic plot (the Gunpowder Plot of 1605) to blow up Parliament and King James. Shakespeare also pays homage to the Stuart political myth by portraying Banquo as King James's noble ancestor.  
  
*Essential Questions:*

1. What kind of a ruler is King Duncan? How would you compare his leadership to that of Macbeth (once the latter is crowned king)?
2. What is the play's attitude toward the murder of King Duncan?
3. In Act iv, Scene iii, Malcolm pretends that he thinks he'll become a tyrant once he's crowned king. Why does he do this? What's Macduff's response? What's the overall purpose of this scene?
4. Does the play ever portray an ideal monarch? If your answer is yes, what textual evidence supports your claim? If your answer is no, why do you think the play never shows us a good king?

**Macbeth Theme of Versions of Reality**  
"Fair is foul and foul is fair." That's what the witches chant in unison in the play's opening scene and the mantra echoes throughout the play. In *Macbeth*, appearances, like people, are frequently deceptive. What's more, many of the play's most resonant images are ones that may not actually exist. Macbeth's bloody "dagger of the mind," the questionable appearance of Banquo's ghost, and the blood that cannot be washed from Lady Macbeth's hands all blur the boundaries between what is real and what is imagined. This theme, of course, is closely related to the "Supernatural."  
At the beginning of the play the witches say "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." What does this mean? Does this idea resonate throughout the play? If so, how?

*Essential Questions:*

1. How do Macbeth and Banquo respond to the witches' prophesy in act one, scene three? Does it seem real to them? Why or why not?
2. What kinds of hallucinations and visions occur in the play? What purpose do they serve?
3. Why is a doctor called in to tend to Lady Macbeth? What's wrong with her?

**Macbeth Theme of Violence**

Violence in *Macbeth* is central to action. The play begins with a battle against rebel forces in which Macbeth distinguishes himself as a valiant and loyal warrior. Later, Macbeth's murder of King Duncan is condemned as an unnatural deed but the play also raises the question of whether or not there's any real difference between killing a man in combat and murdering for self gain. Violence in all forms is frequently associated with masculinity – the play is full of characters (Macbeth, Macduff, Young Siward, and so on) that must prove their "manhood" by killing. Even Lady Macbeth asks to be "unsexed" so that she may be "filled with direst cruelty." At the same time, the play also suggests that unchecked violence may lead to a kind of emotional numbness that renders one inhuman.

*Essential Questions*

1. The battlefield is central to most characters in the play, who have won their honors by killing others in this arena. Can the political realm of these players also be described as a battlefield? To what degree?
2. What kind of violence is acceptable on this political front?
3. Nature always seems to be rebelling against the unnatural acts going down in Dunsinane, yet violence is a central part of the natural world. Are humans any more than animals here?
4. The play ends with as much violence as the original battle against another traitor to the crown. Is there a suggestion here of cyclical and never-ending violence? Is there any way to argue against Macbeth's claim that blood demands blood? And when will all the killing stop?
5. When Malcolm takes a break in England with Macduff, he wishes to stop and grieve. Macduff tells him instead that violence in the name of Scotland is a better cure. Yet when Macduff finds out his family is murdered, he grieves deeply and then turns to revenge. Is violence a justified reaction to a wrong, or is it just an emotion out of control that can be rightfully calmed with thought?

**Macbeth Theme of Gender**

*Macbeth* is notorious for its inversion of traditional gender roles – Lady Macbeth is the dominant partner (at the play's beginning) in her marriage and she frequently browbeats her husband for failing to act like a "man" when he waffles about killing the king. Lady Macbeth isn't the only emasculating figure in this play – the weird sisters cast a spell to literally "drain" a man as "dry as hay" and set out to ruin Macbeth. It's important to note that traditional gender roles are ultimately reestablished by the end of the play when Lady Macbeth is excluded from all decision making and goes mad before she finally commits suicide. The play is also notable for the way it portrays femininity as being synonymous with "kindness" and compassion while it associates masculinity with cruelty and violence. (A seeming paradox given that Lady Macbeth and the witches are quite cruel. The point seems to be, however, that these women are "unnaturally" masculine.) Macduff appears to be a lone voice in the play when he argues that the capacity to "feel" human emotion (love, loss, grief, etc.) is in fact what makes one a "man."

*Essential Questions*

1. How does Lady Macbeth convince her husband to kill Duncan? What's her strategy?
2. What is meant when Lady Macbeth says Macbeth is too "full o'th'milk of human kindness"?
3. Why does Lady Macbeth call on spirits to "unsex" her? And, what does she mean by that?
4. How does the play define "manhood"? What is it that makes one a "man" in *Macbeth*?
5. How are women characters portrayed in *Macbeth?* What kinds of roles do they play?
6. What kind of a ruler is King Duncan? How would you compare his leadership to that of Macbeth (once the latter is crowned king)?
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