

Macbeth

High School Study Guide
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Based on Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*

Premiered in Florence on March 14, 1847

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TEACHER'S INTRODUCTION

This study guide will introduce your students to Verdi's opera *Macbeth* through lessons that will incorporate the opera's plot; elements of its and the composer's historical background; and some contemporary issues of staging that should resonate with your class and take class discussions beyond the boundaries of the opera. Short writing activities followed by class discussions will be central to the success of the lesson.

The following pages should ideally be copied and handed out to students. The basic structure of the study guide relies on a simple formula: the students will read, then be asked to participate in an activity or answer a few questions. The teacher's role is implied in the handouts and should be easy to grasp without further instructions. Everything needed for all these activities is also included in the handout, though blank pieces of paper could become necessary in some places such as the "cause and effect" section. The structure of the study guide allows a great deal of freedom on the part of the teacher to introduce alternative questions or subjects as they pop up, so feel free to take detours when inspiration takes hold.

In supplement to this guide, watching a production of *Macbeth*—either in dramatic or opera form—could greatly benefit your classes understanding of the plot and also provide you with further examples of the different decisions that directors make when producing the play or the opera. This study guide recommends for a dramatic version the 1948 film directed by Orson Welles entitled *Macbeth*, though there are many other good productions to choose from. This study guide recommends for an opera version the Zurich Opera 2001 production of *Macbeth*, which is available on DVD. Here is a list of other *Macbeth* adaptations and films with shared themes that would also be beneficial to screen to your class. Be forewarned however that many are violent, rated R, and possibly inappropriate for high school students whether shown in whole or in part. The links will point you to further information about the movies.

"Throne of Blood" – Criterion Collection (1961)

http://www.amazon.com/Throne-Blood-Collection-Akira-Kurosawa/dp/B00008RH1H/sr=1-1/qid=1157726702/ref=pd_bbs_1/104-8154740-7582315?ie=UTF8&s=dvd

"King of New York" - 1990

http://www.amazon.com/King-York-Special-Abel-Ferrara/dp/B0001FGBUW/sr=1-1/qid=1157729537/ref=pd_bbs_1/104-8154740-7582315?ie=UTF8&s=dvd

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"Scarface" - 1983

http://www.amazon.com/Scarface-Widescreen-Anniversary-Brian-Palma/dp/B0000AMRJC/sr=1-1/qid=1157729439/ref=pd_bbs_1/104-8154740-7582315?ie=UTF8&s=dvd



GIUSEPPE VERDI

1813-1901

Giuseppe Verdi was born in 1813 in the Italian village of Le Roncole near Busseto, and was introduced to music at a very young age. Giuseppe Verdi spent his early years studying the organ and by the age of seven, he had become an organist at San Michele Arcangelo. It was there that the young Verdi was an altar boy and, according to myth, his mother saved him from the French in 1814.

In 1823, Verdi moved to Busseto and attended the music school run by Antonio Provesi. By the age of 13, he was an assistant conductor of the Busseto orchestra. After finishing the school, Verdi applied for admission to the Milan Conservatory. He was rejected for admission, although one of the examiners suggested that he "forget about the Conservatory and choose a maestro in the city." Verdi went on to study composition in Milan with Vincenzo Lavigna, a composer and the maestro at La Scala.

Verdi bounced back and forth between Milan and Busseto until he was named maestro of the Busseto Philharmonic in March 1836.

By May 1836, he had married childhood sweetheart, Margherita Barezzi, his greatest benefactor's daughter. He returned to Milan several years later, this time with a young family.

Verdi's first opera, *Oberto*, was brought to the stage at La Scala in November 1839 and ran for multiple performances. The noted Ricordi firm published *Oberto* and, based upon his initial operatic effort, Verdi won a contract for three additional operas. He began work on his next opera, *Un Giorno di Regno*, but was interrupted when, one by one, the Verdis fell ill. A little over the course of a year, Verdi lost his son, his daughter, and his beloved wife to illness. Unfortunately, *Un Giorno* was a complete failure.

Verdi vowed never to compose another comedy and developed a fatalistic belief in inescapable destiny. Even so, the director at La Scala kept faith with Verdi, who later declared that with his next work, *Nabucco*, "my musical career really began."

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At dress rehearsals for *Nabucco* in the La Scala theater, carpenters making repairs to the house gradually stopped hammering and, seating themselves on scaffolding and ladders, listened with rapt attention to what the composer considered a lackluster chorus rendering of "Va, pensiero." At the close of the number, the workers pounded the woodwork with cries of "Bravo, bravo, viva il maestro!" The opening of *Nabucco* was a triumph. Verdi acquired immediate fame and was able to command a higher fee than any other composer of his time.

I Lombardi followed *Nabucco* and won an unprecedented victory over Austrian censors. Verdi's triumph in retaining the libretto and melodic themes the censors had hoped to ban as "religious" in nature forged the composer's lifelong reputation as an ideological hero of the Italian people. This would be the first of his many battles with censors for artistic freedom.

Over the next seven years, the composer penned ten additional operas of varied success, gradually making the transition between two distinct eras of Verdi composition. Initially captive of the "bel canto" style and heir to Donizetti's artistic throne, Verdi continually experimented to produce his own operatic genre in which melodic drama and the identifiable musical essence of character took center stage in equal measure with vocal purity and elegance.

It was an inspired stroke of boldness about which Verdi commented in explaining the innovative core of his work, *Il Trovatore*, "I think (if I'm not mistaken) that I have done well; but at any rate I have done it in the way that I felt it." In saying so, he defined his own creative hallmark. Although a musical genius, Verdi composed spontaneously from the heart. A brilliantly schooled musician, he placed emotional sensibility above intellect in all that he wrote. In the process, he created the remarkable marriage of dramatic characterization and vocal power, an indelible artistic signature.

The creation of an operatic tour de force based upon his ingenious artistic formulation assured Verdi's immortality, beginning in 1851 with *Rigoletto*, followed soon after by *Il Trovatore*, *La Traviata*, and ultimately in 1871, by *Aida*. Even without the masterpieces that followed—*Simon Boccanegra*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *La Forza del Destino*, and *Don Carlos* or his great Requiem Mass—the Maestro could have afforded to rest on his musical achievements and stand unchallenged as the premier operatic composer of any age. In fact, with the success of *Aida*, Verdi seemed to have abandoned composing altogether, producing no new works for fifteen years.

Fortunately for posterity, an electrifying libretto, *Otello*, created by poet Arrigo Boito, brought the composer out of his self-imposed retirement. The opening of *Otello* in February of 1887 attracted an international audience to Milan for a dramatic event which ended only after the citizenry had showered Verdi with gifts and applause throughout twenty curtain calls and towed his carriage to the hotel. Public festivities continued until dawn.

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In 1893, with the premiere of *Falstaff*, Verdi and his adoring audience repeated the entire sequence of events at La Scala—all in honor of a comedy he had vowed as a young man never to write. The maestro finally retreated to his country home in Sant' Agata with his second wife, singer Giuseppina Strepponi. They spent several peaceful years in retirement until her death in 1897. His wife's death left Verdi in a state of unbearable grief. He immediately fled Sant' Agata for the Grand Hotel in Milan and, after four unhappy years, Verdi died in 1901, the victim of a massive stroke.

Verdi's death left all Italy in mourning. He still is revered throughout the music world as the greatest of operatic composers and, more particularly, in Italy as a patriotic hero and champion of human rights.

STAND FOR SOMETHING: BE AN ACRONYM LIKE VERDI

Exclamations of “Viva Verdi!” were frequently heard at the close of Verdi operas during Verdi’s lifetime. While audiences certainly wished Verdi good health and a long life, however, their real intent was to mean “Viva Vittorio Emmanule Rè d'Italia,” or long live the king of Italy, Victor Emmanuel. Victor Emmanuel was not the King of Italy (he was King of Sardinia), but was a favorite among Italians for ruling a unified Italy. Verdi represented a unifying force for Italy and was a symbol of patriotism. The V.E.R.D.I acronym associated Verdi with an honored King and was used by the people to praise both Verdi and Victor Emmanuel, who together came to symbolize unification.

Now it’s time for you to think up an acronym for your name. You can either think of one for your last name, one for your first name, or one for each. When you are constructing your acronym, consider what you stand for. For example, say your name is Brett and that you are an advocate for investing in alternative fuels. In that case, the acronym B.R.E.T.T. might stand for Begin Reassessing Engineering of Turbines Today. As you can see, this activity won’t always result in a perfect slogan. But use your imagination and see what you can come up with.

My first name in acronym form is...

My first name acronym in long form means...

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My last name in acronym form is...

My last name acronym in long form means...

MACBETH SYNOPSIS

Act I

Three evil witches conspire to make Macbeth King of Scotland, and make him believe it'll happen easily. Macbeth is sceptical, but he becomes a believer when the witches' first premonition, that he's going to be Thane (a lord who's given land by the king for being a good soldier) of Cawdor (a small town in Scotland). He's just won a major, bloody battle so he's hungry for more "victories."

Lady Macbeth, tough and angry (and maybe even in on the witches' work), persuades her husband to kill King Duncan when he visits their home. Macbeth's not too sure at first, but his wife tells him not to be so weak and to just do it—which he does and they blame it on the King's drunk servants.

Act II

Now King, but paranoid about what he's done, he starts ordering the assassination of anyone who may be in line for the throne, including the King's children, his friend Banquo, and Banquo's son, Fleance. Banquo is killed, but Fleance escapes. Later that night, while Macbeth is having a big, drunken party, he sees Banquo's ghost and starts talking to it, so the guests think he's going insane. Lady Macbeth tells them to forget about it, that he's just had too much to drink.

Act III

Macbeth visits the witches again in their dark cave wanting more information. The witches give him answers wrapped in riddles that can be interpreted in several ways. He is told that Macduff, another friend, and his entire family, may be a threat; that no man, "of woman born" can hurt him; and that he is invincible until the forest trees of Birnam Wood, the area around his castle, begin to move towards him. He thinks that these mean he'll always win because everybody's born from a woman and because trees can not walk.

The witches also make Macbeth hallucinate and he sees Banquo's heirs appear, eight of them dressed as kings, walking towards him. He passes out and when he awakes he has Macduff's entire family, even the servants, wiped out. Macduff is in England, so he misses the slaughter.

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Act IV

Macbeth has not been a good king and the people of Scotland want to overthrow him. Led by King Duncan's son, Malcolm, and Macduff, the Scots camouflage themselves with branches from the trees of Burnham Wood and sneak up on Macbeth's castle.

Meanwhile, Lady Macbeth is losing her mind, feeling terribly guilty about the murders. Finally, she cracks and Macbeth is told that she's dead.

Macbeth doesn't seem to care about his wife's death too much, but he's completely upset to find out that the "trees" of Burnham Wood are moving towards the castle.

Macduff storms the castle and Macbeth challenges him to a sword fight, believing that he'll win because he's invincible. He even tells Macduff he can't be beat because Macduff was born by a woman. Macduff tells him he wasn't "born" but had to be taken out of his mother through a caesarean cut through her stomach. Macbeth panics; Macduff sees his chance and cuts off Macbeth's head. Macduff becomes king and the witches laugh in the distance—they successfully tricked the bad Macbeths.

WRITING AND DISCUSSION: CAUSE AND EFFECT

Macbeth is a tyrant and uses violent means to achieve political ends. At the end of the opera, there is a balance achieved through Macbeth's execution at the hands of Macduff, who similarly uses violent means to achieve political ends. We have many words and idioms in our language that describe this sequence of events. We can say that it is a matter of cause and effect or reciprocity; that Macbeth received his comeuppance; that Macbeth reaped what he sowed; and so on.

It is a commonly held notion that if you do something good, something good will happen to you, and that if you do something bad, something bad will happen to you.

Take a moment to consider whether this notion is true or false based on your own experiences. Then, write down on a separate piece of paper whether you think this notion is true or false, and then write down why, using examples from your own experiences to support your case. Write as much or as little as you want. When you are done, you will enter into a class discussion regarding this topic. During the class discussion, consider whether the phrase "what comes around goes around" holds true more commonly in fiction than it does in real life and why that might be the case.

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BEYOND THE STORY: CULTURE, VIOLENCE, ART AND MEANING

Macbeth is a violent story. Whether implied or explicit, murders and battles saturate the story line of the opera and the play. How “violent” a performance will be, however, varies according to decisions made by the director and others involved in the production. And in turn, those decision-makers will be influenced by the culture they live in. A director might use buckets of blood or no blood at all. A director might have a murder be quick or slowly drawn out and filled with realistic details. A director might have a murder occur off-stage accompanied by screams, and the director might do the same with battles as was the standard in Greek tragedy.

In 2005, the Frankfurt Opera staged a performance of *Macbeth* directed by Calixto Bieito, who is known to stage particularly violent and gory productions of well-known operas. Bieito’s productions very often verge on the obscene and they also regularly sell out. This performance was no different.

Bieito decided to produce a *Macbeth* with lots of blood and terrifying details. In one scene, Lady Macbeth murders Duncan “by skewing a corkscrew into his jugular, sending out vaporized clouds of blood” (Morgan).

An opera critic named Simon Morgan wrote a review on this production and did not care for the staging (i.e., the excessive violence) though he did like the music. In his review, he has some interesting things to say. Here’s a sampling of the arguments that Morgan makes:

1. Bieito’s productions are usually “a runaway success at the box office,” says Morgan, but at the same time, the violence is often overwhelming and too much to bear, causing some of the audience to leave mid-performance. Violence therefore both appeals and deters audiences.
2. Excessive violence might be sensational and attention-grabbing, but it also soon becomes “routine” and uneventful, losing its appeal.
3. When violence takes center-stage, everything else suffers: the communication of the story and the emotions felt by the characters is sacrificed, and that is a tremendous loss. “By the end of the evening,” says Morgan, “it was easy to have lost track of who had been killed by whom and to, quite frankly, not really care less.”

Keep these points in mind as we begin our next activity. You will be asked to consider your thoughts on violence in the media and Morgan’s opinions will serve as a good launching pad into formulating your own thoughts on the subject.

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Literature Cited

Morgan, Simon. “Seen and Heard International Opera Review: Verdi, *Macbeth*.” **Seen and Heard International Review: MusicWeb’s Live Opera, Concert and Recital Reviews.** September 20 2006. <http://www.musicweb-international.com/SandH/2005/Jan-Jun05/macbeth2205.htm>.

WRITING AND DISCUSSION: WHAT DRIVES VIOLENCE IN THE MEDIA?

You will be given below 3 statements that relate to the depiction of violence in things like plays, television, movies, and video games. After each statement is read by the teacher, give a moments thought to the statement and then write down your reaction in two short sentences. You can agree or disagree with the statement, justify it, or elaborate on the logic that makes the statement possible. After you have responded, a class discussion will begin. Make sure to participate using the short responses you have created.

Statement 1:

If a play or opera was originally staged with little violence—whether it premiered five years or five hundred years ago—then all productions today should be true to the original and should therefore minimize the depiction of violence. This is especially the case if the play’s script or the opera’s libretto does not emphasize the violence in stage directions.

Your response:

Statement 2:

The excessive violence that we find today in video games, movies, and television is the result of their creators, who represent a few select immoral individuals that are entirely out of synch with the rest of society. There is no wide-spread demand for the depiction of violence. Rather, that violence is force-fed to both the willing and unwilling alike.

Your response:

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Statement 3:

The contemplation of violence is valuable. Violence is a part of life and something we should understand and be able to analyze. Violent stories are therefore valuable. However, a sensationalist approach to telling a violent story negates the stories positives by overwhelming the listener and distracting him/her from the causes and implications of the violence. Since a violent story is only valuable inasmuch as it inspires the contemplation of violence, a violent story told through excessive violence is not valuable.

Your response:

CLASS SURVEY: SHOULD VIOLENCE BE APPARENT OR IMPLIED?

After Macbeth murders King Duncan, Lady Macbeth washes her hands. We could say here that symbolically, she is attempting to wash away her sins and regain her moral purity. To a certain degree, however, this is not symbolic because it represents the act itself. For whatever reason, humans tend to associate physical cleanliness with moral purity, and recent research done by behaviorists at the University of Toronto has found this connection to be scientifically supportable. Appropriately, this tendency has been named the “Macbeth effect.”

Lady Macbeth washing her hands is something we can all relate to. Lady Macbeth jabbing a corkscrew into King Duncan’s neck, on the other hand, is something that very few can relate to. Lady Macbeth washing her hands also demonstrates the ripple effects of violence, which affects not only the victim, but the perpetrator and the surrounding community.

Keeping this in mind, we will now do a class survey. You will here play the role of director and make a decision based on your own opinion and everything you’ve learned in the preceding lessons. Pretend that you will be directing Verdi’s *Macbeth* and then decide between these two options:

1. I will emphasize the meaning of violence in *Macbeth* by using lots of blood and gory details. Scenes of violence will be conveyed as realistically as possible.
2. I will emphasize the meaning of violence in *Macbeth* by paying special attention to the after-effects of violence and how the use of violence affects all the characters in the opera.

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Make your decision known to your classmates by raising your hand when your teacher conducts the class survey. Be prepared to defend your decision.