



READING 12A Evaluate how messages presented in media reflect social and cultural views in ways different from traditional texts. **12B** Evaluate the interactions of different techniques used in multilayered media. **12C** Evaluate how one issue or event is represented across various media to understand the notions of bias, audience, and purpose. **12D** Evaluate changes in formality and tone across various media for different audiences and purposes.

From Page to Screen

In 1948 one of the world's greatest filmmakers took on the work of one of the world's greatest playwrights. Orson Welles produced, directed, starred in, and adapted the screenplay for Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In this lesson, you'll view the opening scenes of Welles's expressionistic interpretation of the tragedy in order to explore how a director creates mood in a film.

The Filmmaker's Challenge

Orson Welles directed his first film, *Citizen Kane*, when he was only 25. Today it's considered by many critics to be among the best movies ever made. But by 1948, just seven years after *Citizen Kane*, Welles's reputation for being difficult and going over budget made it nearly impossible for him to get Hollywood backing.

Welles's purpose, then, was to prove his critics wrong. To this end, he made *Macbeth* on a small budget and tight schedule, using many of the "guerrilla" filmmaking tactics of today's independent directors. He shot the film in just 21 days, dressing his cast in used costumes and cobbling sets together from old Western movie sets.



Orson Welles edits *Macbeth*.

Welles was further challenged by the play itself. Shakespeare is notorious for his simple, sparse stage directions, so it is largely up to each director to determine the look and feel of a Shakespeare play or film. Welles chose to create a film with a dark, primitive tone, heavy with religious symbolism and a haunting sense of doom.

Comparing Texts: Creating Mood

Mood is the feeling or atmosphere that a work creates for the reader or viewer. The director of a play uses the sets, costumes, props, and lighting to develop this feeling. A film director uses these same elements, as well as the framing of each shot and the rhythm of the editing, to create the mood.

Before you view the clips from Welles's *Macbeth*, go back and skim Scenes 1 and 3 from Act One of the play. Think about the witches' dialogue in these scenes and the role the weird sisters play throughout the tragedy. What mood is created? How do lines such as "When the hurly-burly's done, / When the battle's lost and won," contribute to this mood?

Now consider *Macbeth's* brief opening stage direction.

Act One, Scene 1

An open place in Scotland.

[*Thunder and lightning. Enter three Witches.*]

Imagine you're a director. How would you stage or film this scene? What would your set look like? your costumes? When you view the film clips, consider how the details in Welles's adaptation establish the film's mood.

Viewing Guide

Media Smart DVD-ROM

- **Film:** *Macbeth*
- **Director:** Orson Welles
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Running Time:** 2 minutes

The two clips you'll view from *Macbeth* open the movie. They correspond to Act One, Scenes 1 and 3 of the play—the introduction to the witches, and Macbeth and Banquo's visit with the weird sisters. You may want to watch the clips more than once to subject them to close analysis.

NOW VIEW

CLOSE VIEWING: Media Analysis

1. **Compare Mood** Compare the clips you viewed with Act One, Scenes 1 and 3 from the play. How does the atmosphere Welles creates compare with that in the text?
2. **Analyze Shots** Identify two or three shots from the clips you viewed that would be impossible to re-create in a conventional stage performance. How do these shots contribute to the film's mood?
3. **Evaluate the Adaptation** How effective do you think Orson Welles was in adapting the opening of *Macbeth* to the big screen? Think about
 - the portrayal of the witches
 - the film's sets, props, and costumes
 - the types of shots Welles uses

FILM REVIEW This review of Orson Welles's film version of *Macbeth* appeared in the January 15, 1951, issue of the *New Republic*.

“BLOODY, BOLD, & RESOLUTE” ROBERT HATCH

WORD OF THE ORSON WELLES *Macbeth* has preceded it to New York and one takes a seat on the aisle, prepared for a quick escape if Glamis murders not only sleep but Shakespeare as well. The picture is by no means that bad; Welles's interpretation of the play is a perverse and limited one, but at least it is an interpretation, consistent and stated with conviction; perhaps for the screen it is even justifiable.

Taking his mood from the barbaric Holinshed chronicle rather than from the royal Elizabethan tragedy, Welles presents a *Macbeth* that looks at first glance as though it had been made in the Carlsbad Caverns by a company of Mongolian yak herders. Water seeps from every cave-like wall, and every performer is shaggy and shining with bear grease. The producer-editor has made a patchwork of Shakespeare's lines, and they are delivered with an uncouth savagery that deprives them of all their poetry and much of their sense. It is a performance in which the moral struggle—the tragedy—of *Macbeth* has been lost and violence is all.

The violence, however, is well stated; it is more than empty melodrama, having in it dark horror and a solemn recognition of the consequences of this brutish struggle. It is as

though we watched our terrible ancestors in the dawn of history tearing at one another to establish the blood lines we now proudly call our heritage.

In this atmosphere, the witches appear to advantage; so do the murderers (of whom Macbeth is now one) and so does the spectacle of Birnam Wood moving upon Dunsinane. The soliloquies fare badly, the human relationships are reduced to surface struggles, and the moments of tenderness, remorse, and honor disappear entirely. Welles as Macbeth and Dan O'Herlihy and Edgar Barrier as Macduff and Banquo are striking primitive warriors; Alan Napier, in the invented role of an early church father, seems to have just given up painting himself blue and cutting the throats of human sacrifices in oak groves. On an animal level, these principal figures are impressive and even admirable. Jeanette Nolan is a ruthless, lustful, but curiously undangerous-looking Lady Macbeth. There is not enough intelligence in her villainy.

All in all, it seems fair to say of Welles's *Macbeth* that he has lost more of the play than he has preserved, but that what he does keep he presents with power and a conviction that will make it stick in the mind.

The Influence of Lady Macbeth

Literary critic Stephen Greenblatt discusses how Lady Macbeth influences her husband to put aside his natural unwillingness to murder.

"Macbeth and Lady Macbeth act on ambition, restless desire, and a will to power normally kept in check by the pragmatic, ethical, and religious considerations to which the wavering Macbeth initially gives voice. Lady Macbeth in effect works to liberate that will to power in her husband, freeing him from his 'sickly' fears of damnation so that he can act with a ruthless blend of murderous violence and cunning. In her radically disenchanted, coolly skeptical view, the murder of the king can be undertaken without fear of guilty conscience, vengeful ghosts, or divine judgment: 'The sleeping and the dead,' she tells her shaken husband, 'are but as pictures. 'Tis the eye of childhood / That fears a painted devil.'"

Do you agree with this critic that Lady Macbeth sways her husband to commit murder? Or do you think Macbeth's own ambition would have pushed him to murder, even if Lady Macbeth had said or done nothing?

Writing to Analyze

Analyze the character of Lady Macbeth. Why does she want Macbeth to commit murder? How does she attempt to influence her husband? Is she successful in influencing him? What is the eventual outcome of her scheming?

Consider

- dialogue that reveals Lady Macbeth's motivation as well as her influence over her husband
- scenes between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth
- stage directions that add to your understanding of Lady Macbeth's character
- the resolution of the play

Extension Online

INQUIRY & RESEARCH Research a modern leader in politics, business, or religion who has fallen because of unbridled ambition. Analyze the factors that contributed to his or her downfall, and draw relevant comparisons to Macbeth. **Report** on your investigation to the class.



Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth (1885-1886), John Singer Sargent.



WRITING 15C Write an interpretation of a literary text.