Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and witchcraft (VWO)
Auteur: Jasmijn Bloemert

**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) ¹
- 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)


Bron: www.leerplaninbeeld.slo.nl
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)

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 16th and 17th 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* 

*Shakespeare*

**First Witch**

When shall we three meet again

In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

**Second Witch**

When the hurlyburly's done,

When the battle's lost and won.

**Third Witch**

That will be ere the set of sun.

Where shall we three meet again?

Will it be in thunder, lightning, or rain?

**Second Witch**

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 happen before sunset.

**First Witch**

Where should we meet?

**Second Witch**

Let's do it in the open field

**Third Witch**

We'll meet Macbeth there.

**First Witch**

I come, Graymalkin!

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

**Second Witch**

My toad, Paddock, calls me.

**Third Witch**

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

---

2 T (text approach), C (context approach), R (reader approach), L (language approach)
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.] Modern translation from No Fear Shakespeare
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 munched away at them
And munch'd, and munch'd, and munch'd:'Give me,' quoth I:  “Give me one,” I said.
Aroint thee, witch!’ the rump-fed ronyon cries. “Get away from me, witch!” the fat woman cried.
Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o' the Tiger: Her husband has sailed off to Aleppo as master of a ship called the Tiger.
But in a sieve I'll thither sail, I'll sail there in a kitchen strainer
And, like a rat without a tail, turn myself into a tailless rat
I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.
Second Witch
I'll give thee a wind.
First Witch
Thou're kind.
Third Witch
And I another.
First Witch
I myself have all the other, I already have control of all the other winds,
And the very ports they blow, along with the ports from which they blow
All the quarters that they know and every direction
I' the shipman's card. on the sailor's compass in which they can go
I will drain him dry as hay: I'll drain the life out of him
Sleep shall neither night nor day He won't catch a wink of sleep
Hang upon his pent-house lid; either at night or during the day
He shall live a man forbid: He will live as a cursed man
Weary se'nnights nine times nine For eighty-one weeks
Shall he dwindle, peak and pine: 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!

**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't 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!

*Bron: www.leerplaninbeeld.slo.nl*
BANQUO

Good sir, why do you start; and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair? I ’tis 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.

Second Witch

Not so happy, yet much happier.

Third Witch

Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none:

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.

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.

First Witch

Hail!

Second Witch

Hail!

Third Witch

Hail!

First Witch

You are lesser than Macbeth but also
greater.

Second Witch

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

Third Witch

Your descendants will be kings, even though
you will not be one. So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!

First Witch

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

slo
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)