

English 4 Honors

#### Unit 4: Knowledge Unit Project

It's often debated why literary works such as *Macbeth* by Shakespeare and *A Modest Proposal* by Jonathan Swift, published in the 17th and 18th centuries respectively, continue to have significance in the contemporary world. It's likely that their timeless themes of human emotion have contributed to this continued relevance. Their uncanny depictions of human behavior have made them as much sources of entertainment as they are necessary incentives for self-reflective introspection.

*Macbeth*, a tragedy about a tyrannical king who is seized by his rampant ambitions, is one of Shakespeare's most influential plays. Written during the reign of James I, the piece reflects the close relationship between the author and the king and it appears to be an homage to the latter's Scottish lineage. Its discussion of good and evil kingship most likely stems from Shakespeare's great passion for and dedication to his country's well-being ("Macbeth: Context" 1).

Swift's *A Modest Proposal* is a Juvenalian satire that attempts to strike back at England's colonial rule over Ireland which kept much of the population in poverty. His clever use of irony and invective demonstrates how a satirical attack can be more effective in inciting social and political change.

Among the diverse themes of both works is the powerful influence that guilt can have on one's perspective and decision making. Though *Macbeth* and *A Modest Proposal* differ in their

discussions of this emotion's purpose as well as its psychological effects, they both concur on its ability to trump other inherently evil emotions.

First, while Shakespeare describes guilt as an automatic human response of self-reflection, Swift represents this emotion as a tool to galvanize social and political action. Through the main character of Macbeth, the author demonstrates the power of introspection and the motivation it gives to correct or make up a wrong. To illustrate, one can consider Macbeth's first experience with guilt immediately after he murders King Duncan. To his wife he says, "But wherefore could not I pronounce "Amen"? / I had most need of blessing, and "Amen" / Stuck in my throat." (Shakespeare II.ii.31-33). The protagonist is describing his inability to utter the word "amen" after one of the servants in the room asked for god's blessing. Because of the evil deed he has just committed, his shame makes him believe he isn't worthy of a blessing. Further, the metaphor of the holy word being stuck in his throat represents the restraint and subduing of his innocence by Lady Macbeth. Though guilt reminds him that he must right his wrongs, it's his wife's manipulation that keeps him focused on the ultimate objective: becoming king.

On the other hand, *A Modest Proposal* weaponizes guilt to encourage those in power to find solutions to Irish poverty. Swift argues, sarcastically, that many adults would have preferred being sold for food as they "thereby [would] have avoided such a perpetual scene of misfortunes as they have since gone through by the oppression of landlords, the impossibility of paying rent," and other marginalizing laws put in place by the English government (Swift 244-245). In this way, through the use of irony and hyperbole, the author directly targets his opposition, claiming that Irish citizens would have enjoyed their life to a greater extent if they had been killed and harnessed for nutrition. The underlying theme evident in this excerpt is the ability for guilt to be

weaponized to incite social change and shock people, especially political leaders, into mitigating major human issues such as poverty. Thus, while *Macbeth* is centered on guilt as a self-directed emotion, *A Modest Proposal* demonstrates its ability to be harnessed as a tool for political dispute.

In addition, these works differ in their depiction of the psychological effects of guilt. In *Macbeth*, the severity of this emotion is illustrated by the numerous side effects experienced by the main character. For instance, after ordering the murder of Banquo and during a courtly feast, Macbeth hallucinates, seeing his former companion sat down in front of him. Because the seat is actually empty, the surrounding nobles grow worried over their king's apparent mental instability. Macbeth says, "Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold. / Thou hast no speculation in those eyes / Which thou dost glare with!" (Shakespeare III.iv.98-100). Through the use of sensory imagery, the audience is encouraged to picture the grotesque hallucination that Macbeth's guilt has manifested, further transmitting the message that this emotion wields the power to distort one's reality. Though somewhat hyperbolic, this traumatic experience serves to highlight the degree to which ambition and betrayal have stained Macbeth's innocence.

Due to the implicit nature of the theme of guilt in Swift's essay, there are no direct mentions of the effects of this emotion on its victims. Unlike Shakespeare's work, *A Modest Proposal* does not mention reality-warping side effects such as psychedelia. Instead, through the author's use of satire, he exhibits the persistent discomfort that guilt can foster. Writing about the diverse ways of consuming children, Swift says, "the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish, and seasoned with a little pepper or salt will be very good boiled on the fourth day, especially in winter." (75-76). This dehumanization is intended to evoke remorse, disgust and

uneasiness in the reader. So though they don't reach the levels of psychedelia described in *Macbeth*, the guilty discomfort felt by the English government officials still pushes them to consider the deplorable state of the Irish poor.

Though the authors make different assertions about the theme of guilt as outlined above, they both agree on the power of guilt to overcome other emotions, including those of ambition, xenophobia and greed. Perhaps the most relevant example of this theme is the change in Lady Macbeth's feelings towards the treason committed by her husband. Once a manipulative figure who is lost in her hunger for power, she soon finds herself overcome by guilt. She says, "To bed, to bed. There's knocking at the gate. / Come, come, come, come, give me your hand. / What's done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed." (Shakespeare V.i.45-48). Even the most convincing emotions of ambition and megalomania that Lady Macbeth once held appear to be absent, replaced by a guilt-induced paranoia. Moreover, repetitions of the phrases "to bed" and "come" serve to highlight her state of complete insanity and repentance. Through Lady Macbeth's radical character evolution throughout the play, the author wishes to illustrate the unmatched influence of guilt on one's notion of good and evil.

Similarly, Swift hopes his sarcastic arguments will trump the greed and xenophobia of the English government. Regarding the nutritional use of child flesh, he writes, "I grant this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children." (Swift 79-81). The author hopes guilt might subdue the avaricious behavior of the landlords, who price Irish property outrageously high. Therefore, he implicitly conveys the idea that guilt can overcome greed, making individuals reconsider their previous immoral actions and become more

considerate in the future. In this way, both the play and the essay are comparable in their descriptions of guilt potency and influence in determining one's moral compass.

The theme of guilt, although not conveyed entirely identically in *Macbeth* and *A Modest Proposal*, makes both of these works timeless pieces of literature because they deal with an emotion so central to human life. Through their contrasting discussions of its purpose and effects as well as their similar depictions of its authority over other emotions, these works invite the audience to ponder the nature of guilt and its role in our lives. Perhaps by discussing the effectiveness of guilt the authors are proposing that all people, regardless of how inhumane their actions appear to be, can differentiate good from evil. Even characters such as Lady Macbeth and English government officials, who are painted as immoral beings in their respective pieces, are deeply affected by shame and this encourages them to pursue morality. According to Shakespeare and Swift, our inherent regretful response to guilt demonstrates that all human beings are not quite as foreign to virtue as they are so often made out to be.

### Works Cited

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