

Lust for Power: The Humanistic Universality of Ambition in *Macbeth*

Regina Via G. Garcia
University of San Jose – Recoletos
Cebu City, Philippines

Abstract. Literature keeps a record of all the significant events and presents them in a variety of ways. It can either be a poem, novel, drama, or any literary form. Drama has been utilized to awaken the consciousness of the audience. One dramatist who has genuinely embodied this task is William Shakespeare. His plays have been mounted, discussed, and reimagined. These plays have transcended time as it is still relatable to society today. Specifically, *Macbeth* successfully presents the horrors of being consumed in one's ambition for power. Thus, this qualitative content analysis investigated the presentation of *Macbeth* in terms of plot, theme, conflict, and characters. The human values and actions presented were further analyzed through the study by utilizing humanism, mimesis, and affectivism. The analyzed data from the play revealed that first, through the plot, the human value of ambition is apparent, which is one of the traits of most people. Second, the life's message imitated by the play is the destruction brought on by ambition that goes unrestrained by moral limitations through the play's theme and conflict. This can be seen in the Philippines with leaders consumed with ambition to gain power. Lastly, the emotional responses aroused by the play are fear and anger through the actions and personalities of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. The same can be said with certain personalities in the Philippines who were rich rulers living lavishly using status and power during their regime. Therefore, even beyond its time, William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* reveals human values and their influence through the plot, theme, conflict, and characters.

Keywords: Affectivism, Humanism, Literature, Mimesis, William Shakespeare

Introduction

Shakespeare has been a force to be reckoned with as his masterpieces and teachings have transcended through time. Whether the topic is something so simple as an ordinary day to something to complex as love, his works have always been present to shed light and give a deeper understanding of these topics. As stated by Pesirla (2019a), Shakespeare has become a fixture to humanity that he has been subconsciously quoted. The humanism in textualities in Shakespearean texts enables one to understand the events in the present and the future.

As cited by Benabu (2011), the influence of recent textual theory on performance has liberated recent productions of Shakespearean plays to which it has become an interpretative anchor. Thus, exploring Shakespearean plays opens many interpretations to which humanism, mimesis, and affectivism can be applied. Using these theories can assist in better understanding the drama and relate it to real-life events to awaken specific societal issues and resolve them.

Rationale

Shakespeare, being considered as one of the greatest literary creators of all time, is widely celebrated. From sonnets to plays, his words have influenced not only students of literature but the people throughout the masses. The humanistic trait of ambition and the complications it poses in *Macbeth* awaken every reader from any generation at any given time. Hence, to further understand the impact of Shakespeare's work, discussing the textualities of humanism in his drama and poetry is essential to learn, understand and resolve events occurring in life.

Theoretical Background of the Study

This paper argues the play *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare reveals the complications of life brought on by ambition through the play's depiction of human values, life's message, and emotional response generated through the presentation of plot, theme, conflict, and characters.

This argument is supported by the literary critical theories of humanism, mimesis, and affectivism.

As a philosophical and literary movement, humanism started in Italy and spread throughout European countries (Davies, 1997). Freedom as man's nature and freedom in society was the main objective in the analysis of humanism. It was not seen as anti-religion due to the freedom expressed, but rather, it was seen as man's earthly existence was a portrayal of heavenly life. Tolerance was an essential feature in humanism as it gave the possibility of a peaceful co-existence. Humanists sought the need for a natural experience close to the form of ordinary language to be understandable. Overall, humanism believes that people have one life to live and should make the most of it. Furthermore, humanists strive to remind everyone of reality (Lamond, 1997).

As one of the oldest and most fundamental concepts in Western aesthetics, mimesis, has been utilized as a primary tool for analyzing literature (Gu, 2005). According to Baktir (2003), mimesis in the literary world has two applications: give meaning to the nature of literature and determine the relationship of said literature to the real world. Plato and Aristotle have utilized mimesis as a descriptor for the nature of art but have given it their respective definitions. As Pesirla (2008) has explained, Plato defines mimesis as a literary piece of which it is a copy of a copy of reality. The writer is confined with the appearance of a specific occurrence and makes copies of copies of realities which results in the product as twice removed from reality. Aristotle defines mimesis as the writer's form of imitating reality and then reshaping it into another medium.

Affectivism is also known as the reader-response theory. It mainly concerns the emotion a literary text evokes from the reader. The reader has the freedom to understand and assess the writer's work and later on interpret the work relating to one's experience (Pesirla, 2008). Thus, it analyzes literary works based on the feelings arising from the reader's reaction.

Problem Statement

This study investigates the humanizing elements in the dramaturgy of Shakespeare's "Macbeth." Specifically, it answers the following questions:

- 1) How are human values depicted in the play?
- 2) What is life's message imitated in the play?
- 3) What emotional responses are aroused by the play?

Significance of the Study

This study benefits literature academics, literature majors, and literary researchers.

Literature academics can use this study as a stepping stone for further analysis of Shakespearean drama and his poetry and sonnets. Furthermore, this paper can also be used to investigate further another drama written by a different author.

Literary majors can apply the different approaches used in this study to their analysis. This further allows them to be creative with their outputs in producing literature that reflects humanism through different textualities in different literary texts by various authors.

Literary researchers can utilize this study as a critical component to further investigate other literary forms. In addition, this elevates the production of quality scholar write-ups as it deepens an academic's scope, leading to a more mature analysis.

Scope and Limitation

The scope of the study is focused on the drama *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare. The limitations of the study are the parameters of humanism, mimesis, and affectivism.

Methodology

Methods of Research Used

This literary research uses descriptive analysis, which is qualitative content analysis. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), qualitative content analysis is a research method practice through subjectively interpreting the content through a systematic classification process. It focuses on the material as a form of communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text. It is not simply analyzing the words thoroughly to classify them; instead, it can present explicit and implicit messages. It is a data analysis technique within a rule-guided research process, and the research process is bound to common research standards (Mayring, 2000). Qualitative content analysis allows researchers to understand social reality in a subjective yet, specific manner and explore the meanings underlying messages.

Sources of Data

The qualitative data is sourced out from the textuality of the drama “Macbeth” by William Shakespeare (Shakespeare Online. Retrieved on December 1, 2019).

The monographs *Literary Critical Theories* by Angel O. Pesirla (2008), *Humanism in Shakespearean Textualities* by Angel O. Pesirla (2019b), and *Criteria in Writing a Drama* by Angel O. Pesirla (2019a).

Data Gathering Process

The data was generated in three phases; analysis of the plot, examination of the theme and conflict, and evaluation of the characters.

Humanism Analyzed

Analysis of the plot implies the development of the events of the drama from start to finish. This is further subdivided into three parts, beginning, middle, and end. The conflict is introduced in the beginning while the solving or complication of the conflict occurs in the middle, and in the end, the logical result of the climax is shown. These three components work together to produce a wholesome message of the drama. To gather the plot of the chosen drama, the play's script was read several times and analyzed based on the parameters provided by humanism.

Mimesis of Life

Mimesis refers to texts as imitations or representations of whatever they copy, whether nature, the world, realities, or other texts. To gather the data for mimetic reading, the play's script was read several times, keeping in mind the play's theme and further analyzed based on the parameters provided by mimesis. Key events presented in the play that copy the reality of life were lifted from the text and given further attention and analysis as this was the theme studied. Reality refers to the ideas perceived in the appearance of objects, which the writer uses verbally in his creative texts (qtd. Pesirla, 2019a).

Affective Critique

Affectivism deals with how the text relates to the reader. Two of the reader responses derived from the material could be moral betterment and catharsis of unpleasant emotions. These two are put into focus in the study. Each reader has the freedom to assess the impact of

the writer's work and interpret it to their own experience. To gather the data for affective reading, analysis of prominent characters in the drama in tandem with the emotions that arise from the text was conducted.

Results and Discussion

Humanism in Shakespeare's "Macbeth"

This paper argues that *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare reflects the value and implication of ambition through the lens of humanism. This is supported by the evidence presented in the plot.

The play starts with Macbeth and Banquo encountering three witches who predict Macbeth will become a King of Scotland, and Banquo will also produce a line of Scottish kings, although Banquo himself will never become kings. This news is later delivered to Lady Macbeth, who then crafts a plan for Macbeth to become King as soon as possible. Through the course of events, Macbeth becomes King but also mad and murderous, and Lady Macbeth becomes crazy. Eventually, Macbeth dies, and Banquo's offspring becomes King thus, making the prophecy concrete and factual. The plot makes the reader see how certain event's choices in life significantly affect their future. One should be careful about their choices because, as a human, there are tendencies when desire and morality become blurred.

As mentioned by Abad (2017), Shakespeare has been compelling because it continues to address the unique interests, concerns, and perceptions of theatre practitioners and the audience in society. Hence, it allows one to see the human characteristics from the play's plot and the theme and characters. The plot poses situations and predicaments that force the characters to evolve and become who they should be, which becomes a reflection of the people from the past and present. As a reflection of the Philippines' history and present predicament, there have been situations where country leaders have succumbed to the lust for power. Competition and greed become primary motivations to achieve such feats. Such example of this situation is the Martial Law and other injustices that occurred in the country. The Philippines has experienced the tyranny of abusive leaders gaining money and power while the masses suffered for a while. This is a reflection that can be derived from the play as the constituents of Macbeth come under his rule as he continues his abuses and murders to keep his power. He had no qualms about taking life only after he saw the gravity of his actions.

Therefore, it is proved that *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare reflects the value and implication of ambition through the lens of humanism as shown in the play's plot.

As explained, Shakespeare's humanism shows that the key to all sensible action was the knowledge of self and the human condition (qtd. Wells, 2005). Thus, this adds to the plot of *Macbeth* as the characters are forced to know themselves due to their predicaments. Furthermore, much like *Macbeth* being discussed in this study, Shakespeare's tragedies give a dramatic presentation through the matrix of humanism (Basha, 2017). *Macbeth* also portrays important concepts of humanism as it adheres to the principles of earlier Renaissance humanists, the utter impossibility to know the inward self (Martínez, 2010). In addition, as explained by Raspa (2016), moral philosophy concerns the practical expression of humanism in the streets of Europe, and choosing Shakespeare's plays portrays as such as it is a creative force as a representation of daily life.

A Mimetic Reading of Shakespeare's "Macbeth"

This paper argues that William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* reveals the reflection of a life that destruction is brought on when ambition goes unrestrained by moral limitations through the discussion of theme and conflict. The literary theory of mimesis supports this argument.

The theme is a message, comment, or statement about life (qtd. in Pesirla, 2019a). It serves a purpose where is to entertain or comment on the human condition in some manner. It is established through the contribution of details, symbols, and other elements. The theme is the conflict that pushes the plot forward, and it can either be man versus man, man versus nature, God or society, and man versus self. Mimesis is utilized in this study as it considers the literary text as an imitation, or a copy of nature or some other text. Shakespearean drama is regarded as a presentation of life's timeless realities (qtd. Pesirla, 2019b).

In Macbeth, it is a conflict mostly between man vs. self. This is due to Macbeth's ambition for power. In the beginning, he is hesitant to kill the King even though he wants power. He has the desire to become King but doesn't deem it necessary to kill. This is shown in the lines below as uttered by Macbeth in Act 1, Scene 7 of the play.

*I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on th'other*

It is reflected how he is unwilling to pursue the plan to kill King Duncan, and he knows that his ambition is leading him down a dangerous path. It is Lady Macbeth who convinces him to do the deed to acquire the position as King. He kills more people to secure his position along the way, and eventually, people turn against him. As a reflection of life, the reader is made to see how they can be their enemy leading them to their destruction. It also presents the harsh reality of becoming a pushover as his wife controls Macbeth by mocking his masculinity. Since the Philippines is a patriarchal society, most men tend to bruise their ego when a woman mocks their masculinity. This triggers them to be even more aggressive about showing their bravado and prove the woman wrong.

The theme of unchecked ambition leading to one's demise is well highlighted in the play. Macbeth, again, doesn't want to commit evil but does have the desire to become King. His moral limitations are shut when Lady Macbeth pushes him to commit killings to become King as she speaks the lines below from Act 1 Scene 5.

*Thou wouldst be great
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend.*

She reflects on her husband's character as she knows that Macbeth can achieve his dreams, but she thinks he is unwilling to be brutal to accomplish those. She has lesser considerations for morals when it comes to her determination as he urges his husband to be strong after the murder. However, these two characters' lack of moral constraints leads them to their demise. As Macbeth's ambition to become King and Lady Macbeth's ambition to secure that position arises, they become lost and drunk with the thought. They start to forget that they are humans, also vulnerable to flaws and power. The reader is made to see how one's ambition, when it is unchecked, and one lacks the good moral values to control it, spirals out of control and, worse, leads to their demise.

Therefore, it is proved that Macbeth by William Shakespeare reveals the mimesis of life that destruction is brought on when ambition goes unrestrained by moral limitations, supported by the evidence presented in the theme and conflict.

Mimesis has been considered as an imitation through artistic creation, and that specific texts are representative of this philosophy, and that art imitates life as it is (Mete, 2018). As concluded by Dimatteo (2009) in his study regarding mimesis, the play's authors hold a mirror to reflect the motives and consequences of a society in a state of distress or triumph. This further sheds light on how one's desire can lead to their undoing as cited by Long-Kish (2019) that according to Girard's theory, Shakespeare purposefully wrote his plays with mimetic desire in mind because human nature craving something that someone else wants. Aside from drama,

mimesis has also appeared in Shakespeare's sonnets, which delves into an in-depth analysis of the language to show human activities (Tundag-Bustos, 2016).

An Affective Reading of Shakespeare's "Macbeth"

This paper argues that William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* will give the reader-response feeling of fear and anger through the presentation of characters. The literary theory of affectivism supports this argument.

Whether a human being or not, developing a credible character is essential for the literary text to be believable (qtd. Pesirla, 2019a), their behavior must show duality. They are motivated to endure transformation revealed through being talked about by other characters, speech, and actions, or speaking directly to who they are. These characters serve as the reader's medium as they relate to their experiences and interactions. In this study, the two leading characters of *Macbeth*, namely Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, are closely analyzed.

Macbeth's first impression, through a wounded captain's account on the battlefield, is that he is brave and a capable soldier. However, this changes once he meets the witches and interacts with them. It is then realized that although he is courageous, he has an all-consuming ambition coupled with self-doubt. These qualities are one of the factors that push Macbeth to his undoing. Before killing King Duncan, he is worried and almost resists continuing with the plan. However, Lady Macbeth pushes him to continue. After the deed, Macbeth is somewhat alone to handle the aftermath as he panics and kills other people to cover up his crime, and Lady Macbeth starts to spiral into madness. His attitude fluctuates as he is plagued with morality, feeling guilt from committing murders and then being plagued with paranoia as he plots murders to secure his position. These constant back and forth reflect the tension within the play. Through these events and characterization, the reader has presented the terrible effects of ambition, paranoia, and guilt on a man who doesn't have the strength of character. It slowly consumes them, leading to their destruction. In terms of fear, the all-consuming ambition presented by Macbeth strikes fear as the effects of what happened after the murder become uncontrollable, and the future becomes uncertain. In terms of anger, one can be angry due to how easily Macbeth is influenced by the people around him, which leads him to do compromising acts.

Lady Macbeth is one of the famous and frightening female characters created by Shakespeare. Through the plotting of King Duncan's murder, her first impression is that she is more potent, crueler, and more ambitious than her husband. She is fully aware and capable of this and knows that she will have to push her husband to kill. At one point, she wishes that she were a man to do the deed herself. She manipulates her husband effectively, overruling all his objections. When he hesitates to commit murder, she repeatedly questions his masculinity until he feels he needs to kill to prove himself. However, she slowly descends into madness, just as how ambition has affected her more than Macbeth. She has also been plagued with guilt even more afterward. By the end of the play, she is reduced to sleepwalking in the castle and desperately trying to wash away an invisible bloodstain. Eventually, she kills herself, which signifies her inability to deal with the crimes committed. These events also incite the feeling of fear and anger in the reader. In terms of fear, the reader becomes fearful of how one's focus on attaining a goal and willingness to do anything to achieve it can be toxic and brings about the ugly side of a person. In terms of anger, how Lady Macbeth handled the situation, being the one to push her husband and questioning his manhood, is a low blow to push her husband to kill. She was willing to demean her husband to get what she wants.

Therefore, it is proved that *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare will give the reader-response feeling of fear and anger through the presentation of characters supported by the theory of affectivism.

Even though a literary text isn't written in the present, it can still invoke feelings, as described by Nafisah's (2014) study, which stated that the students' time might be different. Still, through the reader's response theory, it develops their interpretative abilities. In support of this claim, Salami's (2018) study states that the text involves the reader forming their understanding and interpretation. Another example with the utilization of the characters from *Macbeth* is found in Bell's (2017) study. He concluded that Shakespeare uses narrative apathy for the characters in *Macbeth* through writing techniques that reveal each character's true flaws. Furthermore, Khan's (2012) analysis of how characters presented affect people is given focus, where "*Macbeth*" was put in focus, which concluded that there are parallels with real-life cases bringing out the consequences of unethical leadership.

Synthesis, Conclusion, and Recommendations

This presents the synthesis, draws conclusions, and suggests recommendations for further study. A summary of the elements of the study, along with the significant results, is then described.

The following synthesizes the essence of the multi-critiques of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

A. Findings

- 1) The human value of ambition is portrayed through the play's humanistic presentation, which relates to the country's past and present situations.
- 2) The play imitates life's message: destruction brought on by ambition that goes unrestrained by moral limitations.
- 3) The emotional response aroused by the play is fear and anger.

B. Conclusion

Based on the findings, it has been concluded that the play *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare reveals the humanistic values and textualities behind the plot, theme, conflict and characters.

C. Recommendations

- 1) This study can be used as a model for creative writing and reflection activities.
- 2) Another drama or another type of text, such as Shakespeare's sonnets, can be analyzed using the different approaches utilized in this study.
- 3) Research on different affective analysis can be compared using various dramas of William Shakespeare.

D. Further Recommendations

- 1) Another drama by another dramatist can be used as the source text for another study using humanistic textualities.
- 2) A poetic text can be used as the source text for the study of humanism.
- 3) Study about selected literary texts from a specific author can utilize a different type of humanism.
- 4) The universality of humanistic textualities as a lens for analysis can be applied to short stories compared to dramas.
- 5) A different literary theory, such as effectivism, can be applied to study the chosen drama.

References

- Abad, R. G. (2017). *Shakespeare as Cultural Capital: Its Rise, Fall, and Renaissance in Philippine Elite Education*. Ateneo de Manila University.
- Baktir, H. (2003). The Concept of Imitation in Plato and Aristotle. *ResearchGate*, pp. 167-179. Retrieved December 1, 2019, from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267416112>

- Basha, S.M. (2017). Shakespeare and The Matrix of Humanism. *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature - JOELL*, 4(3), 35-38.
- Bell, B. (2017). *Rooting for the 'Bad Guy': Narrative Empathy in Shakespeare's Macbeth*. Retrieved December 21, 2019, from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/b2a6/c8e23985b730eaba2470d01cd8a87148440b.pdf>.
- Benabu, J. M. (2011). *Shakespeare's Openings in Action: A study of Four Plays from the Period 1591 – c. 1602*. A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Graduate Centre for Study of Drama University of Toronto.
- Davies, T. (1997). *Humanism*. London, Routledge.
- Dimatteo, A. (2009). The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama. *College Literature*, 36(1).
- Gu, M.D. (2005). Is Mimetic Theory in Literature and Art Universal? *Poetry Today*, 26(3), 459-498.
- Hsieh, H.-F. & Shannon, S. (2005). Three Approaches to Qualitative Analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277-1288. DOI: 10.1177/1049732305276687.
- Khan, S. (2012). The Dynamics of Good and Evil in Leadership: A Study of Shakespeare's Macbeth and Kant's Religion within Boundaries of Mere Reason. *International Research Journal of Business Studies*, 5(1), 1-16.
- Lamond, C. (1997). *The Philosophy of Humanism*. New York City, Humanist Press.
- Long-Kish, S. M. (2019). Shakespeare's Use of Mimetic Desire: Its Realistic Application. *Academia*. Retrieved December 20, 2019, from https://www.academia.edu/31150234/Shakespeares_Use_of_Mimetic_Desire_Its_Realistic_Application
- Martínez, Z.L. (2010). *Macbeth* and the Passions' "Proper Stuff". *Sederi*, pp. 71-101.
- Mayring, P. (2000). Qualitative Content Analysis. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(2), art. 20.
- Mete, B. (2018). *Mimetic Traditional and the Critical Theory* (pp. 216-224). Retrieved December 1, 2019, from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/2eed/a19a866049ab5d633f8a32fc94b7454755e2.pdf>
- Nafisah, N. (2014). Using Reader Response Approach to Get Engaged in English Texts of the Past. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 4(1), 156-166.
- Nimavat, S. (2016). Renaissance Humanism in Shakespeare's Plays. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, 3(3), 47-49.
- Pesirla, A.O. (2019a). *Criteria in Writing a Drama*. Cebu City, University of San Jose – Recoletos, p. 1.
- Pesirla, A.O. (2019b). *Humanism in Shakespearean Textualities*. Cebu City, University of San Jose – Recoletos, pp. 1-5.
- Pesirla, A.O. (2008). *Literary Critical Theories*. Cebu City, Cebu Normal University, pp. 1-10.
- Raspa, A. (2016). Shakespeare, the Critics, and Humanism. In *Shakespeare the Renaissance Humanist* (pp. 1-27). New York: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137580160_1
- Salami, A. (2018). The Aesthetic Response: The Reader in *Macbeth*. *Folia linguistica et litteraria*, 12, 175-191.
- Tundag-Bustos, R. (2016). Mimesis in William Shakespeare's Sonnets. *International Journal of Culture and History*, 2(3), 113-116. DOI: 10.18178/ijch.2016.2.3.048.
- Wells, R.H. (2005). *Shakespeare's Humanism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.