***Macbeth* – Final Discussion Questions**

Consider the following questions with your small group. Take notes on your group members’ thoughts and prepare for a class discussion on these topics.

**Unambiguous Evil**

1. What villainous intricacies exist at the heart of the Thane of Glamis/Thane of Cawdor/King of Scotland? Why does he commit regicide and become the usurper King of Scotland?
2. According to *A Preface to Shakespeare’s Tragedies*:

*The killings that Macbeth carries out, either directly or indirectly, have no ambiguity about them. He is under no compulsion or misapprehension as he murders, or orders the murders of Duncan, Banquo, and Lady Macduff and her children. He may feel guilt, terror, despair, and even occasional remorse, but we are never asked to see any of them as justifiable homicide. They are acts of unambiguous evil.* (Mangan 189)

Yet, the killings and the killer are not so easily dismissed. The more wretched he becomes, the more quickly critical readers of *Macbeth* become drawn to him. We struggle to ascertain how and why he becomes the nihilistic monster into which he morphs by Act V; consequently, do we feel an emotional disengagement from this fiendlike hero-villain?

1. When we are first introduced to Macbeth, he is the archetypal hero, the man who takes on entire armies and slices through enemies “from the nave to th’ chops” (I. ii. 24). His exploits in battle are so impressive that, based on the laws of Scottish tanistry (look it up!), he seems to be the logical replacement for King Duncan.

Why does this all change? Why does Macbeth choose to break the ancient warrior codes to become the usurper king? How can a patriot, with such loyalty to his country, transform into a murderous and traitorous beast?

1. Can we lay the blame for Macbeth’s actions at the feet of the Weird Sisters or Lady Macbeth? Is this Macbeth’s fault or not?

***Macbeth*: A Play of Choices**

1. Leading up to the fateful evening at Inverness, when he hosts his kinsman, lord, and special guest, King Duncan, Macbeth is still uncertain about which path to choose. Nevertheless…

In what ways is The Scottish Play a “play of choices”?

**Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Macbeth**

1. Aristotle’s term hamartia is very apt to the discussion of any tragic hero, but specifically to Macbeth. The hero’s hamartia, which is often brought about by his hubris, or excessive pride, leads to peripeteia, or a sudden reversal of fortune. At the conclusion of the tragedy, Aristotle would argue that there needs to be some moment of anagnorisis or recognition by the tragic hero of his faults. The tragic hero’s fate arouses pity and fear, and the conclusion of the tale suggests some catharsis or spiritual cleansing for the character.

Does the character of Macbeth fit this pre-established template set forth by Aristotle? Consider the fact that Macbeth’s integrity is tempted by a number of vices. Does he ever reach catharsis?

1. Now that you’ve decided for yourselves whether Macbeth fits Aristotle’s definition of the tragic hero, consider the following criticism. Explain whether you agree or disagree.

*The tradition of the drama from the days of Aristotle is that the spectator must feel the moral companionship for the hero, else the tragic emotions, pity and fear, cannot affect him. The history of the stage proves that Aristotle’s analysis is inadequate. To the strict follower of Aristotle, a tragic hero must be an enigma. No one can pity the man who loves evil for its own sake, not can such a one cause us to fear retribution for our own acts. Macbeth may be a villain, and yet a good tragic hero.* (Paddleford 236-237)

**Descending Into the Abyss of Villainy**

1. Macbeth’s humanness resonates throughout the play, in all that he does. The problem with his character, however, and the reason that actors, scholars, audiences, and readers feel very distant from him, is that by the conclusion of Act II, scene ii, King Duncan is dead and the web of lies and deceit begins to be spun. The remaining acts of *Macbeth* underscore Macbeth’s villainy, not his humanity, and the paradox of his character takes root in his malicious choices and flawed decision making.

Is it possible to examine *Macbeth*, the play and the protagonist, and not merely dismiss this man as a murdering maniac? Are his complexities the result of decisions enacted by a person who makes a series of bad choices?

1. Macbeth’s nature is to act first and think later, if at all. If he were more of a thinker, and less of a doer, would this play end differently? Is his lack of thought a reason for his downfall?

**The Dichotomy of Human Nature and Villainy**

1. Some believe that Macbeth is a very difficult character with which to relate. As Peter Saccio states in his lecture entitled “Macbeth: Fair is Foul”

*Macbeth is a bad man who is ultimately destroyed by better men, as his wife is tortured and driven to death by her own guilt. Their behavior appears to be unnatural both in the sense of being wicked and in the sense of being foreign to them. Evil is something alien and perverse.*

In evaluating Macbeth’s character is there anything relatable about him? Ambition is a common human characteristic, isn’t it? What happens to this war hero that takes him so far from us?