Macbeth's Decision

The decision-making process can often be long and mentally taxing. Macbeth in Shakespeare's Macbeth goes down that same path, but at a much higher risk than most, for he must decide whether to murder his King and take the crown or not. The song "Sink or Swim" by Tyrone Wells influences our understanding of Macbeth's indecisive behaviors in Shakespeare's Macbeth by expressing the journey of decision-making, starting with the weighing of options, encouragement, and finally the decision, wrought with fear of the outcome throughout the entire process.

The first two stanzas, or verses, of "Sink or Swim" really exemplify Macbeth's indecisiveness as he weighs his options. With lines such as, "Trying to figure out what to do" (3), it is fairly obvious that the persona in the song is trying to make a choice. Similarly, Macbeth is faced with the decision or whether or not to kill Duncan, the King of Scotland. But, as Wells puts it, Macbeth is, "Caught in the middle of a cross-fire" (1) and is torn between two sides of his own debate. One side tells him to kill and become King, evident when he requests, "Stars, hide your fires; / Let not light see my black and deep desires" (1.4.57-58). His black desires are his urges to murder Duncan, so he pleads with the stars to not allow those desires to be made evident in the "light," public view. At the same time, Macbeth expresses a certain loyalty to the King, knowing that, "First, as I am his kinsman and his subject:/ Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,/ Who should against his murderer shut the door,/ Not bear the knife myself" (1.7.12-16).

King Duncan has been nothing but good to Macbeth, creating a conflict of interest and making it much more difficult for Macbeth to follow through with his "desires." That conflict is only increased by the fact that Macbeth realizes the way to getting what he wants isn't morally sound. If he didn't recognize this, he wouldn't be asking the stars to hide his cravings from sight.

The encouragement for Macbeth's decision-making comes from his wife, Lady Macbeth. She tells him to "screw your courage to the sticking place/ and we'll not fail" (1.7.70-71). She's completely fed up with all the thinking and weighing her husband has been up to, and basically attacks his bravery and his manhood to achieve the outcome she wants. It is a fool-proof plan, for her husband is "Hearing the song in your (Lady Macbeth's) laughter" (13), as Wells put it, and feels helpless because "No one else has done this to me" (15). All the pressure and encouragement Macbeth is receiving from Lady Macbeth helps him to make his decision. Whether it's what he would have chosen on his own is uncertain. It seems that much of it is fueled by peer pressure.

Finally, Macbeth's mind is made up by the fourth verse of "Sink or Swim." He decides that "it is done. The bell invites me" (2.1.75). He no longer thinks or weighs options, he simply acts. Maybe he acts quickly so that he won't have time to think or second guess himself, but that's not certain. Wells' advice for this part of the decision-making process is to "Take a deep breath" (21) now that there's "No more time left"(22). The time is up for Macbeth when his wife tolls the bell, and consequently, he acts.

"Sink or Swim's" refrains reflect the fear that the plan to kill Duncan could succeed or fail. This is not just in the literal sense of will the deed succeed, but if it does, will they get away with it and be able to live peacefully as rulers. Each refrain is exactly the same, asking if we're, "going down or will we fly" (8), but each one represents a different aspect of uncertainty or risk. The first refrain shows Lady Macbeth's excitement about the prophecy pertaining to her husband, but also her fear that the plan will fall through due to her husband's nature, "too full o’th’ milk of human kindness” (1.5.17) to carry it out. The second refrain illustrates Macbeth's apprehension of failure and also the finality of the whole situation. He asks Lady Macbeth, "And if we should fail--" (1.7.78), but is promptly cut off by his wife. Through this statement, Macbeth's fear of failure, or "sinking," is made prominent. Whenever trying a new idea or plan, there is always the possibility of failure, but not usually at such high risks. Macbeth also recognizes the huge finality of this plan, and that "this blow / might be the be-all and the end-all" (1.7.4-5). Once he's murdered Duncan, nothing done may be undone, making his decision only weighted further. The last refrain signifies the Macbeth's continuing fear. Even though the act has been successfully committed, they are both still anxious about their new positions. Macbeth claims, “To be thus is nothing / But to be safely thus” (3.1.52-53), showing great insight on the idea the only true way to be king is safely, and he knows he's far from that. He is unsettled that even though he is "flying" right now from a successful execution of the plan, Macbeth understands that at any time he could become a "shipwreck on the shore" (27). Lady Macbeth parallels her own husband's words and thoughts a little later saying, "Where our desire is got without content" (3.2.7). She struggles with the idea that although they achieved their goal, they achieved it without joy, and will not ever come to feeling a complete happiness because of the knowledge of their own actions. The guilt of their successful plan controls their contentment in life.

Tyrone Wells' "Sink or Swim" aids our understanding of Macbeth's indecision in Shakespeare's Macbeth through illustration of the path of decision-making: weighing options, encouragement, and decision, with lots of fear along the way.
Macbeth Project Explanation

As a child I can remember being extremely jealous of my brother’s artistic abilities. That feeling still holds today because I cannot fathom how my brother holds the talent it takes to be an example on Mr. Kniffen’s painting slideshow. Somehow I found the courage to paint for English, knowing the failure of living up to my brother’s talents. Nonetheless, I finished and as it may be lesser quality than a real artist, I believe my painting does a fine job expressing themes of Macbeth. Shakespeare’s tragedy consistently holds many underlining themes during the play. However, I tried to narrow his topics into one major part of Macbeth. I focused on the part of the play before Duncan’s death. More specifically, my painting was based off of two quotes that stood out to me. The first is “Look like th’ innocent/ flower, / But the serpent under’t” (Shakespeare 1.6.76-78). The second quote is “Stars, hide your fire: / let not see my dark and deepest desires.” (Shakespeare 1.4.57-58)

My painting may look simple, but I carefully thought it through. The first thing I want to discuss is the position of everything. I tried to separate my themes carefully, even though it might look like I did not. During the play Macbeth, is contemplating whether he should follow through with his plan. Lady Macbeth’s persuasion really affects his thinking and that’s what I tried to imitate. I divided his good thoughts from bad. For example, flowers are on top and the serpent is underneath. I put a mask in the middle because acting normal was what he was mainly thinking about the day before the murder. Whether he kills or not, it does not matter, he still has to act; that way he leaves both options open. If he did not wear his “mask” Duncan could have found out and everything that Macbeth wanted would be lost.

The flowers in my painting probably have the least meaning, yet they are still very important. For one, they symbolize half of the first quote. Another quality the flowers give is a feeling of balance to painting, which I believe makes a painting better. Flowers stand for love, passion and purity. Flowers are a good thing and it shows that Macbeth is not all bad and still contains some morals. The bright colors symbolize his good side. They are bright colors because at this point he has not done anything wrong and could continue to live as a good person.

In order to balance out the flowers, I tried to paint white dots to resemble stars in the night sky. They are important because I they emphasize the “stars hide your fires” theme which is very important to the story of Macbeth. Once he has thought long and hard about killing Duncan he begins to think about all the things that could go wrong. His saying represents his thoughts and wishes about the perfection of Duncan’s murder. I put the stars there for one good reason. The first is that it represents Macbeth’s thoughts about murdering Duncan. It is his future thoughts, almost as if he wishes and plans for the best. If you look closely you can tell that I placed the stars in a position that looks like the dagger. The point is on the right and the hilt is on the left, keep in mind that the dagger does not use every star I painted. The dagger in this form is supposed to represent his future actions and whether they can be committed correctly and if he will get away with them. The snake is probably the most prominent feature of my painting. The snake is supposed to represent the “snake under’n” obviously. However, the snake means more than that. My primary goal was for the snake to be Macbeth’s biggest problems. It is supposed to represent the pressure he is receiving and how it takes a toll on him. During the play Lady Macbeth pressures and persuades Macbeth into murdering Duncan. Nevertheless, Macbeth holds the will power to commit the crime, not his wife. The choice between good and evil is a hard one, and it can mess people’s minds. That is why the snake is crawling through the mask, because the problem is always there, it can just bend into different shapes. For example, if Macbeth does not kill Duncan, the snake or his problems do not disappear, he still has to cope with the guilt from the upset wife. On the other hand, if he does kill Duncan, he has to deal with guilt form immoral actions and being untrustworthy. The snake represents the bad part of Macbeth’s conscious. The reason it is the most prominent feature in my painting is because Macbeth’s conscious begins to lean to the “bad side” of his mind and it shows that his mind is not balanced and that he is going to commit a murder.

I also felt that the allusion to the story of Adam of Eve was very significant to Macbeth. My snake emphasizes that theme. The snake is important because it is a physical representation of the temptation that these people had to deal with.

Moving on, the mask is the last feature to notice in my painting. There first thing I want to point out is the contrast between a couple of things. The first of them is the opposite colors between the white and the black background. The next thing is that is that it is a comedy mask, not a tragedy mask, like it should be. I did this purposely so I could imitate the mask that keeps the people from seeing Macbeth’s dark and deepest desires. In order to execute the crime right, Macbeth must act like nothing is going on so Duncan does not suspect anything. I choose a comedy mask, because that is exactly the kind of face Macbeth must show to Duncan. If he were to wear a tragedy mask, Duncan would become suspicious. I believe that my mask emphasizes a theme that Shakespeare was trying to create. I think Shakespeare wanted the reader to understand that appearances are not always the whole story. It is just like the old saying “You can’t judge a book by its cover”. If Duncan would have looked behind the “mask” he could have seen it coming.

Overall, all of my elements work together to produce one big meaning. I wanted to get across a physical appearance of Macbeth’s inner feelings and thoughts, and I believe I did. However, now that I identified the little parts, it is time to put it all together. Shakespeare wanted the reader to understand that human mind is complex and that consciousness is not all bad or all good. He wanted us to know that people do struggle, and sometimes a person will lose the battle, just like Macbeth. He also wanted us to recognize that the appearance of something does not tell the whole truth, and if it did there would be lots of problems in the world. The great chain of being would forever be broken. My talents my not have succeeded my brother’s; however, I believe that my painting has been successful with being a vehicle to express myself and the themes of Shakespeare.
Macbeth Unmasked

For the Macbeth Creative Project, I did Option One, videotaping a scene, with Student #1 and Student #2. We thought that acting out a scene would be the best way to understand the play because it required us to become the characters. The scene selected was Act One, Scene Three, which sets up a lot of details that have great affects later on in Macbeth. Rather than the environment, we focused more on the portrayal of the characters while filming. Our reenactment of William Shakespeare’s tragedy, Macbeth, shows how the use of masks illustrates the prominence of hidden truths in the play.

Throughout Macbeth, nothing is what it seems because the characters often hide the truth. In the opening act, the three Witches chant, “Fair is foul, and foul is fair/ Hover through the fog and filthy air” (Shakespeare I.1.12-13) to bring emphasis to the use of deception in the play. Masks are meant to cover up someone’s actual face, which is good physical representation of how the characters in Macbeth deceive others to hide their true intentions.

The nobles’ mask designs and structures were first planned because they don’t undergo drastic character change during the play. Their masks only cover part of their faces because they both hide and speak the truth. When Banquo says, “…when we have our naked frailties hid,/ That suffer in exposure, let us meet/ And question this most bloody piece of work” (II.iii.148-150) in reaction to the murder of King Duncan, he knows that it is shocking, but that it is also important to put on a strong “face” to move forward. By suggesting that the nobles hide their emotions, he outwardly displays his true feelings, and so Banquo wears a mask that covers only part of his face. His mask is also decorated with white sequins around the eyes which represent his ability to see the truth. This makes “[Macbeth’s] fears in Banquo/ Stick deep…” (III.i.53-54) because the mask he wears to hide his true nature is futile against Banquo, who knows the prophecy and could threaten Macbeth’s position as king. The other nobles’ masks are similar in structure to Banquo’s mask. However, they are just decorated with gray to show that they are minor characters and there is also purple to represent that they are of nobility.

Macbeth is the only noble with a full face mask because of his need to hide the truth about himself. Macbeth does what he wants because he can hide his true dark self behind a “mask”. He begins to hide his thoughts when he tells Banquo, “…let us speak/ Our free hearts each to other” (I.iii.172-173) about the prophecy told by the witches, but never does once he begins his scheme to murder the king of Scotland. From then on, he hides his true intentions constantly. Macbeth becomes reliant on his mask and believes “False face must hide what the false heart doth know” (I.v.94-96) because he understands that his true desires would not be accepted by the other nobles. Therefore, he hides “what the false heart doth know” by acting fair but uses a large mask to hide all of his foul doings.

Although Macbeth hides himself, the design of his mask is meant to explain his true character. His mask has more detail than the other masks because he made the greatest transformation throughout Shakespeare’s play. Macbeth’s mask is colored in shades of red, which represent the blood that Macbeth spilled in order to achieve his goals. When he cries out, “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood/ Clean from my hand?” (II.ii.78-79), the bloody color of the mask responds to his question with “no” because he will never forget his actions. The mask is also designed to go from a bright red to a dark, deep red because he “[is] in blood/Stepped in so far” (III.iv.168-169) to succeed in becoming king of Scotland. While filming, the brighter part of the mask faced the camera most of the time because it was early on in the play. However, student #2 turned towards the camera during the lines where Macbeth speaks to himself, showing his full mask and the eventual change that he will go through. The swirls that overlay the red base also depict how Macbeth continues to wear his façade later on, but it obviously cannot hide the whole truth.

The three Witches wore full face masks because it is very difficult for the other characters within the play to completely understand them. It is clear that the Witches are some of the less reliable characters when Banquo reasons that “The instruments of darkness tell us truths,/ Win us with honest trifles, to betray’st/ In deepest consequence. —” (I.3.136-138).Banquo believes that the Witches bring more misfortune than fortune in their prophecies, which reinforces the idea that “fair is foul, and foul is fair”. No one really knows what the Witches truly mean because their “masks” hide the truth. This leaves the other characters to interpret the prophecies however they see fit. The design of the Witches’ masks was also carefully planned because of their frequent use of equivocation when they say their prophecies. The eyes of the Witches’ masks are lined with white because they see the truth. However, they are not always decisive when telling their prophecies, which is why the lips of the masks are gray. This highlights the idea of equivocation because what they say can be taken in many ways.

The masks represent the importance of deception within Macbeth, but they also helped reveal the true character of the characters. The masks, like much of the play, portray two ideas that contradict each other. By understanding how the opposites of the masks and the opposites in Macbeth coexist, there’s a realization there is a balance. To have order, there must be a balance.