

Lady Macbeth and Claire Underwood: Power as bridging theme

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“Am I really the sort of enemy you want to make?” —Claire Underwood, *House of Cards*

“The raven himself is hoarse/That croaks the fateful entrance of Duncan/Under my battlements.”
—Lady Macbeth, *Macbeth*

Literacy teachers know that adolescent attention is at best an ephemeral beast and that opening lessons and units of study requires connecting what students know and like with what they need to understand—and perhaps can learn to like. Shakespeare remains for many students the most difficult reading they experience in their literature class; however, “[s]tudents can be introduced to the topic through engaging with familiar media forms and popular culture materials such as song, magazine or newspaper articles, videos/DVDs, trading cards or video games” (Sheridan-Thomas, 2008, p.169). Bridging, by making intertextual connections, is one way to engage readers and allow them to take knowledge of a work of popular culture such as the television program *House of Cards* and use it as a way into a play such as *Macbeth*. The female protagonist, Claire Underwood in the *House of Cards* and Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, are in search of power, both on their own and in league with their husbands. This series of lessons illustrates how an examination of Claire Underwood’s character can introduce students to issues of power within *Macbeth*.

Netflix’s hugely popular series *House of Cards* features Kevin Spacey as Frank Underwood and Robin Wright as Claire Underwood. Together they are the ultimate fictional power couple in modern day Washington, DC. The first two seasons saw Frank Underwood become U.S. Vice President and then President while Claire as a Capitol Hill lobbyist maneuvered her supposedly nongovernmental organization the Clean Water Initiative to become a major player in Washington power politics. In season three, the Underwoods in the White House continue their search for ever more power and influence at any cost, including that of their marriage.

While most of the attention in the popular media is on the character of Frank Underwood (drawing comparisons to Shakespeare’s characters Richard III, Iago, and Macbeth), Claire Underwood matches him in desire for power. She is, in addition, more mysterious. While Frank breaks the fourth wall and speaks directly to the audience (as do many Shakespearean characters, including Macbeth and Lady Macbeth), Claire does not. What is she thinking? We must rely on her interactions with other characters and her actions. In the end however she offers a fascinating introduction for today’s high school seniors into the mind of a modern woman in search of power and a bridge to *Macbeth*.

Teaching Approach

Teachers have been frequently enjoined to step away from the ‘sage on the stage’ and become a ‘guide on the side’, allowing students to step forward with their own background knowledge. However, such behavior is challenging when dealing with difficult classical literature; indeed scholars are now calling for a combination of ‘sage’ and ‘guide’ behaviours to avoid the problems of abrogating real teacher guidance (Kirschner, Sweller & Clark, 2006). McWilliams (2014) calls this role ‘meddler in the middle’; one who discovers approaches that demand students take active roles in building their knowledge while still taking the teacher role of expert.

Knowledge about a play such as, in this case, *Macbeth* is usually held only by the teacher. S/he knows the answers usually from experiences in university classes and students are too often reduced to listening passively, taking notes from presentation slides and answering literal level questions such as ‘who killed King Duncan?’ By introducing a contemporary television program as a bridge text, the teacher is on a more equal footing with the students. As Xu (2005) reports her teacher participant Jan saying of the use of *Survivor: Africa* to bridge to *Speak* (Anderson, 1999) in her classroom, “the opportunities for exploration and discovery [of the show were] spontaneous and equal” (as cited in Xu, 2008, p. 47). However, teachers must still seek to involve students in accessing appropriate background knowledge to prepare them for a successful experience with *Macbeth*.

A Series of Lessons

Lesson 1. Teachers engage students in writing and talking about power in their own lives and in current news, movie or sports events. First ask students to brainstorm their associations with the term ‘power’ (e.g., control, force, in-charge, authority, President, King, CEO, corruption). Then direct students to do a free write (i.e. quiet, continuous individual composition) of ten minutes about a time when they felt either powerful or powerless. They could then pair with another student to share their ideas and look for commonalities (e.g. feelings of frustration). Lesson 2. Review ideas from lesson 1. Then, as a whole class activity, brainstorm a list of powerful historical or contemporary women in political contexts. Allow access to computers for brief searches of 20-30 minutes, followed by a description of what they believe makes their choice

'powerful' in a paragraph. Online searches on contemporary and historical figures in politics Hillary Rodham Clinton and Elizabeth I will make effective beginning points. Hillary Clinton's role as Secretary of State (and now presidential candidate) will provide valuable conversations about her contemporary role as powerful woman. Elizabeth I was in power for much of Shakespeare's writing career and was of course a formidable ruler, one whom Shakespeare would have known by her actions. Allow students to research other powerful political women figures (such as Indira Gandhi, Aung San Suu Kyi, Margaret Thatcher, Angela Merkel, Cleopatra, Isabel Peron) choosing two or three instances where their use of power was revealed. Point out use of power directly and indirectly (i.e. through influencing others with more power), evidence of power used for positive (e.g. to better the lives of citizens) and negative purposes (e.g. for personal gain), use of drastic measures (e.g. starting a war, killing an opponent) or diplomacy to gain power.

Lesson 3. For students who may not have watched *House of Cards*, direct students to read summaries of all episodes that can be found on sites such as *Wikipedia* (wikipedia.org) or *The Guardian* (theguardian.com). (A word of caution: some events in *House of Cards* are extremely graphic, both violent and sexual in nature. Teachers will want to consider the maturity of students and community sensitivities, and choose excerpts carefully.)

At this point in this introductory series of lessons, teachers can show an instance involving Claire, who does not herself wield physical power but certainly fantasizes about its use. For example, in conversation with Frank over the menu for a dinner party with the President and First Lady in (Season 2) Claire says: "What should we serve the Walkers?" When Frank replies "Cyanide", she says: "I'm saving that for dessert. What about a main course?" The teacher might then model asking questions saying "I wonder why Claire wants to get rid of the Walkers?" or "I wonder how Claire wants Frank to get rid of the Walkers?" and invite students to record one or more questions of their own that they might then share with a partner. Direct students to begin a list of Claire's personality traits based on their own answers to questions. For example: "Claire must be easily frustrated. She wants power but she has to wait for Frank to act. Her words show she is ruthless."

Claire continues to taunt Frank about waiting to get rid of the President: "Trying's not enough Francis. I've done what I had to do. Now you do what you have to do. Seduce him. Give him your heart" (Season 2). The teacher might ask "I wonder why Claire uses the word 'seduce'?" "I wonder how Claire will convince Frank to act against President Walker?" Repeat as above asking students to create their own questions.

Connections to *Macbeth*: Both Claire and Lady Macbeth seek access to the physical power which is traditionally associated with men. Chamberlain (2005) observes that "[i]n the world of *Macbeth*, masculine power is expressed through the use of physical force" (p. 79). *Macbeth* is a warrior who comes directly from the battle field as the play opens. And it is he who kills Duncan, the King, with a dagger under cover of night. During classes

on *Macbeth* it is very likely that students will spontaneously see connects with Claire Underwood. If not, the teacher might draw attention to Lady Macbeth who likewise berates her hesitant husband: "But screw your courage to the sticking-place,/And we'll not fail." (Act I, Scene 7).

Secondly, Lady Macbeth like Claire Underwood also fantasizes about committing violent acts. As she anticipates King Duncan arriving she says: "Come, you spirits/That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,/And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full/Of direst cruelty!" (Act I, Scene 5), even imagining that she might herself have killed Duncan: "Had he not resembled/My father as he slept, I had done't." (Act II, Scene 2). Instead of course she pushes Macbeth to do the deed, as Claire does with Frank (see also Pomeroy, 2014).

Lesson 4. Review what students now think they know about Claire's personality and desire for power. Also draw their attention to question starters of "I wonder why..." and "I wonder how...". Then show a clip of Claire as she threatens to cut off the health insurance of Gillian, a pregnant former employee of *Clean Water Initiative*, to make Gillian drop a wrongful dismissal suit against Claire. When Gillian protests, Claire says "I'm willing to let your child wither and die inside you if that's what's required" (Season 2). Without modelling, ask students to create questions and write each one on a large sheet of flip chart paper or on classroom SmartBoard, if available. Then review range of questions with the whole class, and have students add to their own impressions of Claire and her desire for power on their personality sheets.

Connections to *Macbeth*: Draw student attention to scene where Lady Macbeth says to Macbeth: "I have given suck, and know/How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:/I would, while it was smiling in my face,/Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,/And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you/Have done to this." (Act I, Scene 7). Lady Macbeth's desire for power in her denial of so-called feminine traits such as maternal feelings (Chamberlain, 2005) here extends to infanticide.

Final Projects

This series of lessons focused on Claire Underwood can be concluded in a number of ways; for example, comparing Claire's search for and use of power with that of a contemporary female politician in essay form or in a multimedia PowerPoint presentation. Students may also answer one of their earlier questions about Claire in video documentary form (see for example readwritethink.org for lessons on creating videos), imagining themselves as an investigative reporter and Claire as an actual First Lady. Allow students to suggest other ways they can demonstrate their learning.

Now, the teacher can move on to *Macbeth* and more discussions of power with students who are ready to cross the bridge from the popular to classical! ■

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