

Question 4

Discuss the representation of masculinity or femininity and response to these representations by a particular audience.

Literature's ability to convey a representation of gender roles and their part in the correct functioning of a society has characterised the work of famous canonical writers through time, and the continued prevalence of the social construct of gender in today's society, encourages a modern, 21st century audience to review and reflect of the representations of gender presented through literary texts over time. British playwright, William Shakespeare's Macbeth (1606), originally performed over 500 hundred years before the birth of its modern audience, offers an insight into historical gender roles, masculinity and femininity, which have formed the cornerstone of those Western audiences still conform to today. By employing a gendered reading practice, a contemporary reader can interrogate and critically respond to the gender roles represented in the text. The notable characterisation of Lady Macbeth through her violent soliloquies and religious allusions to the Adam and Eve creation story, shock modern audiences, who sympathise with her constrained gender role, but are repulsed by her murderous intentions. Furthermore, Lord Macbeth suffers the scorn of a modern audience who deem his attempts to consolidate his masculinity through tyranny and murder, and the symbolism of blood, as an exaggerated caricature of what is defined to be a man. His eventual death is a catharsis for both a modern and historical audience who perceive his actions as fatally flawed, but motivated by his misconception that he would be more of a man in doing them. Finally, audiences find some salvation in the one-dimensional masculinity of Banquo whose dialogue and the stage directions employed at his death reveal that he remains true to the pinnacle of masculine identity typified in Elizabethan/Jacobean society: loyalty and duty. Overall, modern audiences, whose own gender roles still dictate their own identity and thus, their society, appreciate how a persons' gender can inform their personality. However, through a gendered reading and by reflecting on the representations of masculinity and femininity in William Shakespeare's Macbeth, 21st century audiences can recognise the futility of categorising a persons' personality through their gender roles alone, as these often do not, and should not, reflect their behaviour.

Question 3

Explain how the dramatization of one or two character's inner life creates tension and conveys specific ideas.

The purpose of soliloquies and asides within the drama genre enable playwrights to explore the inner world of characters. Dramatized through the medium of theatre, plays must reach out to and enthrall an audience, all the way from the stalls to the heavens. William Shakespeare's tragedy Macbeth (1606) creates tension between characters and themselves, as well as their environment and other characters, through the employment of verbal dramatic conventions. Macbeth's inner struggle as he contemplates the potential for him to ascend the throne of Scotland reveals his internal conflict and develops his characterisation as one easily swayed by temptation. Furthermore, his wife, Lady Macbeth, is similarly characterised through soliloquies laden with dark and violent imagery. Her infamous conflict between herself and Macbeth's own moral beliefs conveys the idea that women are capable of great cruelty, and their words can cut deep into a man's psyche, leading to the eventual madness of both parties. Finally, Lady MacDuff's heart-wrenching soliloquy spoken moments before the death of all her children, and herself, as she pleads her innocence, further communicates the horror and tyranny of a king upon a throne he has no claim to. Although a subplot to the overall tragic tale, her death, and that of her son, effectively communicate the senselessness of a king given over to superstition, fear and deception. Overall, the dramatization of the characters' inner lives reveals the true cost of Macbeth's ascent to the throne: his morality, Lady Macbeth's mind and Lady MacDuff's life; the play operates in this manner to achieve that moment of catharsis, whereby the natural order of things is restored and the innocence of the land and its people can live in peace, and its audience can leave, feeling satisfied justice has been done.