



A WEEK WITH A PLAY



Study Guide

Written by Sarah Meservy & Melissa Leilani Larson
Reviewed by Aliyah Bacca

A WEEK WITH A PLAY

BITTER LEMON

by
Melissa Leilani Larson

What if Lady Macduff finally had her say beyond her 19 lines in The Scottish Play?

Finlay Macbeth has done Lady Helen Macduff a terrible wrong. Now they are trapped, alone together, in a purgatorial waiting room.

Sometimes the only escape is forgiving the unforgivable.

This riff on Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a life-after-death journey through the strange, the empty, and everything in-between.



THE PLAYWRIGHT

You will have the opportunity to meet Melissa Leilani Larson and ask her about her experience writing *Bitter Lemon*.

Mel is a mixed-race Filipino American writer based in Salt Lake City. Her award-winning work has been seen on five continents including six world premieres at Plan-B Theatre. She holds a BA in English from BYU and an MFA from the Iowa Playwrights Workshop.

MACBETH

Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most popular tragedies. Theatre tradition holds that it is unlucky to say the title, so it is often referred to as *The Scottish Play*. While it isn't essential to have read or seen *Macbeth*, being familiar with the plot and characters will better help you connect with *Bitter Lemon*. Read the synopsis below or [watch a video summary of the play](#).



Synopsis

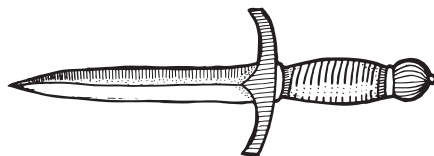
Three witches tell Macbeth (a general in the Scottish army) that he will be king. Eager for power, he and his wife move things along by murdering King Duncan. Duncan's sons flee to England and Ireland, and Macbeth is crowned king.

Macbeth sends murderers after anyone who poses a threat to his reign beginning with his friend Banquo and his son Fleance (Banquo dies, Fleance escapes).

Macbeth returns to the witches looking for reassurance that he will be able to stay in power. They tell him to beware of Macduff, that no one "of woman born" can harm him, and that he will be undefeated until the Great Birnam Wood (a Scottish forest) comes up to his castle.

At Macduff's home, Lady Macduff is complaining about her husband abandoning his family to flee to England. Assassins from Macbeth arrive and kill her children first, then her. When Macduff hears that Lady Macduff and his children have been murdered, he vows revenge and joins Prince Malcolm (Duncan's son) who returns to Scotland with an army. The soldiers cut branches from Birnam Wood to use as camouflage as they attack the castle.

During the battle, Macbeth brags that no one born of a woman can kill him. Macduff announces that he was removed from his mother's womb via c-section and kills Macbeth. We learn that Lady Macbeth died by suicide, unable to handle her guilt.



Dive deeper with Utah Shakespeare Festival's [Macbeth study guide](#)

FANFICTION



Discussion Questions:

- What is the difference between re-telling stories, fanfiction, and plagiarism?
- Do you think *Bitter Lemon* is fanfiction? Why or why not?

For as long as humans have been writing, we have been re-writing or adding onto others' stories. With the rise of the internet, the modern phenomenon of fanfiction has become widespread. Fanfiction is when a fan of a work or series (usually an amateur writing for their own amusement or to share with other fans) uses the work's characters and setting to write their own story.

In her book *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World*, Anne Jamison writes, “Fanfiction is an old story. Literally, of course: fanfiction takes someone else's old story and, arguably, makes it new, or makes it over, or just simply makes more of it, because the fan writer loves the story so much they want it to keep going. But fanfiction is also an old story in that people have been doing this since the Dawn of Time. Reworking an existing story, telling tales of heroes already known to be heroic, was the model of authorship until very recently.”

It is in human nature to tell and retell stories. Many of the oldest surviving folktales, songs, and poems were preserved through oral tradition—passed down through the generations through telling and retelling. According to John Dean, Professor of American Studies and Cultural History at the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, “Tales evolve, and one generation adjusts the stories of the past to the present time and to its modern needs and ways of storytelling.”

Macbeth is an example of this! If not fanfiction, it is at least historical fiction as there was an actual Scottish king called Macbeth in the 11th century.

Shakespeare based his play on events recounted in *The Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande* by Raphael Holinshed which, in turn, was based on *Scotorum Historiae* by Hector Boece. Shakespeare's version of the story differs in many ways from Holinshed's. For example, he transformed the three fairies into witches—sinister and ugly hags instead of beautiful nymphs. The witchcraft they perform comes directly from [Daemonologie by King James I](#).



NOT-A-FAN FICTION

by Melissa Leilani Larson

Discussion Questions:

- Why did Larson choose to write a play about these characters?
- If you wrote a play about a character you hate, who would you choose?



I have never loved *Macbeth*. Can I say that aloud, as a theatre person? Is it allowed? Too late, Mel. Too late.

I can appreciate the writing, sure, but the characters are not my favorite. Lord and Lady Macbeth are horrible people. Sure, they get what's coming to them (sorry, #spoilers) but you have to wait through all their scheming and murdering before their comeuppance or deserved fate finally arrives.

I have always wondered why *Macbeth* is labeled a tragedy. Is it tragic? I mean, sure, Macbeth is overwhelmed by his ambition. But he is a villain; don't we want him to be defeated by someone less terrible? Audiences, though, seem to love a good anti-hero—a troubled protagonist who does terrible things yet asks us to empathize with their humanity.

Does *Bitter Lemon* count as fan fiction? It's an interesting question. A lot of fan fiction comes from a place of love. We get attached to characters we care about, and we want to see more stories about them.

The problem is that I'm not really a fan of the character Macbeth. But here I am, writing a play about him that some might call fan fiction. Is it fan fiction if you're not a fan? Is there such a thing as enemy fiction?

Macbeth makes me angry. I disagree with his actions and his motives. I don't want him to succeed. Those feelings led me to write a play in which Macbeth has to face his crimes and can't escape them.

So yes—I guess *Bitter Lemon* counts as enemy fiction!

The Scottish Play (see, I am a theatre person) is loosely based in history. And as is often the case when it comes to major historical figures, I'm much more interested in the smaller, lesser known folk who litter the background.

Lady Macduff is one such character. She speaks a total of 19 times in the play. That's it. But unlike Macbeth, she has my total sympathy. Why? Despite her stage time being severely limited, Shakespeare gives Lady Macduff fire. She is angry at

her husband for leaving her behind, she is angry at Macbeth for causing her husband to flee, and she is desperate to protect her children. Her single scene is packed with energy and tension, and it would be correctly labeled a tragedy. If you did not believe Macbeth was horrible before, you will after Lady Macduff leaves the stage.

I have always wondered—what would happen if Lady Macduff had her say?

CHARACTER ORIGINS

Melissa Leilani Larson is far from the first person to write about characters created by someone else. Choose a name from the list below to look up. Where and when did the character first appear? Then see how many works they appear in across all kinds of media. Consider literature, art, comic books, tv, movies, theatre, radio, and video games.

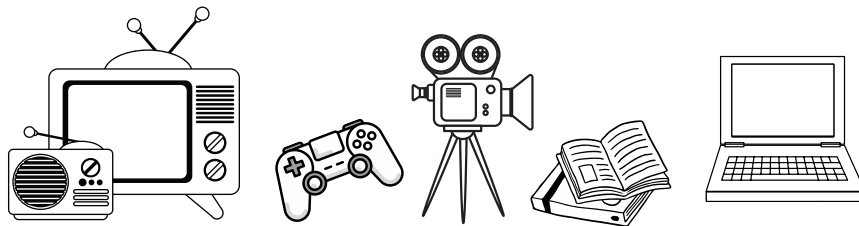


Teacher Tip: Make this activity a competition. Give students a time limit for research and see who can come up with the longest list of examples for their chosen character.

Aladdin
Anansi
Cthulhu
Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde
Dracula
Dybbuk

Frankenstein
Gilgamesh
La Llorona
Loki
Mary Poppins
Māui

Medusa
Hua Mulan
Nancy Drew
Robin Hood
Tarzan
Wednesday Addams



“There is no such thing as a new idea. It is impossible. We simply take a lot of old ideas and put them into a sort of mental kaleidoscope. We give them a turn and they make new and curious combinations. We keep on turning and making new combinations indefinitely; but they are the same old pieces of colored glass that have been in use through all the ages.”

-Mark Twain, celebrated 19th century American writer

WITCHCRAFT THROUGH THE AGES



Discussion Questions:

- Why did Shakespeare choose to include witches in *Macbeth*?
- How and why does Larson push back against that choice in *Bitter Lemon*?

In 1603, Elizabeth I (the Queen of England) died without any children to inherit her crown. The next in line for the throne was her cousin James, the King of Scotland. Not everyone welcomed the new king: in 1605, a group of extremists plotted to assassinate him. Their plan was discovered and they were executed, but James remained paranoid of conspiracies against him.

And as far as he was concerned, this wasn't the first attempt on his life. In 1589 he had sailed to Copenhagen to marry Princess Anne of Denmark. On their voyage back to Scotland the weather was so dangerous that they had to take a detour to Norway to wait out the storms. James believed that witches had used magic to cause the storms hoping to kill him and his bride. Women in both Scotland and Denmark were arrested and tortured into confessing to the crime. This led to James publishing a book about witchcraft in 1597.

So is it any surprise that when Shakespeare's company performed a new play for the court in 1606, it was a play set in Scotland about how you shouldn't murder the king? And that *Macbeth* is beguiled into killing the king by three witches?



Where did James get his ideas about witches? One very influential source was a book published in 1486 by a member of the Spanish Inquisition. *Malleus Maleficarum* or *Witches' Hammer* became very popular throughout Europe and the Americas. The book's central message was that witches were everywhere secretly doing the bidding of the devil, and should be tortured until they confessed before being executed.

Despite what popular media might have you believe, torture doesn't make people tell the truth. Instead, victims will say

whatever their accusers want to hear whether it's true or not. Furthermore, journalist [Julian Goodare](#) notes that "Sleep deprivation was the most common method of torture. After about three days without sleep, not only would a suspect

lose the ability to resist their questioners, but they would also start to hallucinate, leading to many confessions that included exotic details like sailing in sieves. These are not sober accounts of real activities; they are fantasies concocted by confused, despairing, and terrified people, searching desperately for the answers that would satisfy their interrogators.”

This happened not just in Europe but throughout the world. Christian colonizers in the Americas villainized the traditional rites and religious practices of Indigenous, African, and Caribbean people, using accusations of witchcraft and devil worship as justification for oppressing, imprisoning, and killing people of color.

Suffragette Matilda Joslyn Gage wrote that the persecution of witches had more to do with repressing women than it did with fighting evil. In her 1893 book *Women, Church and State* she explained that the original meaning of witch was "wise woman." Historically, the poorer classes often relied on women with extensive knowledge of herbs who acted as healers for their communities. These healers became targets of religious leaders who decreed that any woman who healed others without having a formal medical education was a witch and should be put to death. According to Gage:

"Death by torture was the method of the church for the repression of woman's intellect, knowledge being held as evil and dangerous in her hands. Ignorance was regarded as an especial virtue in women, and fear held her in this condition. Few women dared be wise, after thousands of their sex had gone to death by drowning or burning because of their knowledge.



As knowledge has ever been power, the church feared its use in woman's hands, and leveled its deadliest blows at her."

Journalist Madeline Miller, in her article [*From Circe to Clinton: why powerful women are cast as witches*](#), writes that while vulnerable women—elderly, poor, widowed or unmarried, foreigners or ethnic minorities—were often accused of witchcraft, so too were women with political power.

“Joan of Arc led the French to victory against the English and was renowned in France for her purity, cleverness and faith in her “voices.” When the English leadership couldn’t beat her, they undermined her,

crediting her success to demonic means, since, of course, a young woman could never perform such wonders on her own. When she was captured, they tried her for witchcraft, citing as partial proof of her unnaturalness the tremendous bravery she showed in battle, and her ability to outwit her examiners in debate.”

Miller goes on to note how modern political leaders like Hillary Clinton and Nancy Pelosi (among many others) have all been called witches.

Accusations of witchcraft leading to violence and murder remains a problem today in countries around the world. Experts agree that poverty exacerbates the phenomenon as people look for scapegoats for their misfortune. [In India](#), more than 2,500 people were killed after being accused of witchcraft between 2000 and 2016. A 2022 report from African Child Policy Forum references several studies including one that found “witchcraft-fuelled abuse is endemic in Ghana, and the worst victims are children and older women of low socio-economic background.” A study from the Democratic Republic of the Congo reported that thousands of children are left homeless after being accused of witchcraft. In response to data suggesting that the number of victims is increasing, with cases becoming more violent, and the practices spreading, the United Nations adopted a resolution in 2021 to eliminate harmful practices related to witchcraft.

FICTIONAL WITCHES

Divide into teams and set a timer for 3 minutes. See which team can brainstorm the most examples of witches in folklore, literature, and media.

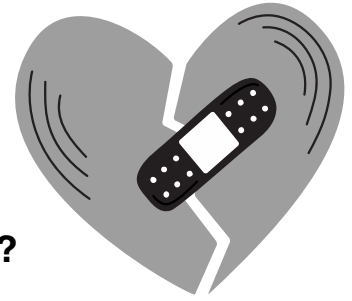


Agree on clear rules before you begin. For example, does the entire Harry Potter franchise count as only one example or could a team list every book and movie individually for more points?

After the three minutes is up, compare the lists. Discuss the differences between the various witches you thought of. For example, how much does [Marvel's Scarlet Witch](#) resemble the witches from *Macbeth*? How is Eiko Kadono's [Kiki](#) different from Nnedi Okorafor's [Sunny](#)?

Did any examples prompt debate? Is [La Llorona](#) of Latin American folklore a witch? What about Roald Dahl's [Matilda](#)? What exactly separates a witch from other magical beings?

FORGIVENESS



Discussion Questions:

- Do you think Finlay's apology is sincere?
- Would you accept it and forgive him if you were Helen?
- What does she mean by "I'm not strong enough?"
- Why do you think the play is titled *Bitter Lemon*?

When someone hurts us, it's natural to want to hurt them back. To forgive is to let go of anger and refuse to retaliate. Matthew Ichihashi Potts in his book *Forgiveness: An Alternative Account*, argues that the idea that getting revenge will fix the situation is a fallacy. Nothing done in the future can "undo, restore, or erase the past." He describes forgiveness as a way to accept and mourn the past while finding a way to move forward.

There's a balance to be struck, however, between forgiveness and accountability. When we don't hold someone accountable for what they've done wrong, especially someone in a position of power, we enable them to continue to cause harm and allow others to follow their bad example. Helen isn't being asked to deny, ignore, or hide what Finlay has done. If she does choose to forgive him, she won't be endorsing her own murder, nor allowing Finlay to murder more victims.

But if forgiveness can't change the past, what difference does it make whether we forgive someone or not? Perhaps the biggest difference is to the forgiver. "Resentment, wrote Bert Ghezzi, "is like a poison we carry around inside us with the hope that when we get the chance we can deposit it where it will harm another who has injured us. The fact is that we carry this poison at extreme risk to ourselves."

In her New York Times article *What Can Literature Teach Us About Forgiveness?*, Ayana Mathis uses *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker as an example. She describes the protagonist's process of forgiveness as a renewal in which "the people who have hurt her are dethroned and diminished." Forgiveness, Mathis explains, creates "a livable future, one that acknowledges the wrongs of the past so that it can move beyond them. [...] transformation accompanies forgiveness, and grace liberates the future from the past."



COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Choose a version of *Macbeth* to read, watch, or listen to. Then compare and contrast the characters and story to *Bitter Lemon*.

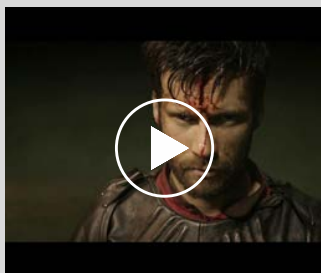
Use the Venn diagram on the next page to organize your thoughts before discussing these questions with your classmates:

1. **What details about the characters, plot, or setting did playwright Melissa Leilani Larson take directly from Shakespeare's play?**
2. **What details are unique to Larson's work?**
3. **How do these differences impact the story, and what do they reflect about the eras in which each work was written?**

Extend the activity by choosing another version of *Macbeth* to add to your analysis. Options include:



[Weber State University 2007 stage production of *Macbeth*](#) (1h 31m)



[2018 Movie of *Macbeth*](#) (1h 58m)



[1971 Movie of *Macbeth*](#) (1h 22m)

Macbeth by William Shakespeare

Bitter Lemon by Melissa Leilani Larson