

The Great Debate: Using debate and discussion tools to analyze soliloquy

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This exercise, also called “Angel/Devil,” is a TFANA favorite, and can be used in many different plays and speeches to highlight character choices, and engage students in debating the moral and ethical issues of the play.

We’re providing Macbeth’s monologue from Act 1 Scene 3 as an example; but the exercise can be used with any speech or monologue where a character is working out a problem, or trying to decide what to do. (Other great options include Macbeth’s speech in Act 1 scene 7, “When ‘tis done, ‘twere well it were done quickly”, and Isabella’s speech in Act 2 scene 4 of MEASURE FOR MEASURE, “To whom should I complain?”)

Use this exercise to:

- Engage with the moral/ethical dilemmas of the play
- Spark class discussion about the play’s issues, themes and conflict
- Analyze a character’s monologue or soliloquy (a monologue spoken alone onstage, usually directed toward the audience)

Preparing for the exercise:

- Identify a character who has a difficult moral dilemma or choice to make. Read a speech or scene where the dilemma is particularly charged. (We recommend a speech.)
- Discuss the different sides and points of view for the character, both for the characters and for the students themselves, setting up the opposing sides of a ‘debate’ of the issue.

The great problem in Macbeth’s speech below is: Should he believe what these witches told him? Is magic real? Or is it just superstition, and everything that’s happening is just coincidence?

- Help students make contemporary and personal connections to the problem.

Possible connections and conversations for Macbeth’s speech below: Has anyone ever had a supernatural, magical, or unexplained experience? Ever had a fortune telling that came true? Should we believe in things that we can’t understand, or should we only rely on what we can observe clearly? Etc.



Playing the game:

- Choose one student to play the character. Have them stand in the middle of the room.

NOTE: For this exercise, the 'character' won't actually have to do any talking - it's a great opportunity for engaged but shy students.

- Choose two volunteers (or two groups) to argue the opposing sides. Place them on opposite sides of the room. The opposing teams might represent different characters in the play; or they might simply represent the two sides of the character's mind or conscience - the 'angel' and 'devil' on opposing shoulders.
- Ask the full class to list possible talking points for both sides.
- Allow both sides to debate the issue, giving each side one minute at a time to talk.
- As the debate happens, the 'character' standing in the center of the room should walk back and forth between the two sides, always moving closer to the side that is 'winning' them over at any given moment.

Variation: Play the game using the words of the actual speech or scene. Bring a speaker up into the space and have them speak through the text as they stand in the center. In this variation, instead of speaking their own arguments, the opposing 'angel'/'devil' sides should repeat the words or phrases from the speech that they believe support their point of view.



MACBETH Act 1, scene 3

From [MIT Shakespeare online](#)

Macbeth has just heard the prophecy from the three witches that he would become Thane of Cawdor, then King. He scoffed at their words and thought it was impossible. But moments later, his fellow soldiers Ross and Duncan arrive and say that the prior Thane of Cawdor was just killed in battle, and he - Macbeth! - has been awarded the title.

This is his response to the news, which he delivers as a private 'aside' to the audience.

MACBETH (*Aside*)

Two truths are told,
As happy prologues to the swelling act
Of the imperial theme.--
This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill, cannot be good: if ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor:
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings:
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not.

