Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title:
Ahimsa as an Alternative to *Macbeth’s* Violence

Lesson By:
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Grade Level/Subject Areas:
Grade 11 Accelerated/Enriched-British Literature
(Can be adapted for any high school grade)

Duration of Lesson:
47 minutes per period, 3 days

Content Standards:
Massachusetts Common Core State Standards for ELA Grades 9-10
Reading: 7. Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)

Writing: 3.b-Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters

Lesson Abstract:
This lesson asks students to look at Mohandas K. Gandhi’s principle of ahimsa in the context of his life and consider how these principles could be applied as an alternative ending to William Shakespeare’s tragedy, *Macbeth*. After examining Gandhi’s practice of ahimsa through his writings, fasts, and marches, students will apply these concepts in creative ways to envision a resolution to the play that invites the audience to not only sympathize, but celebrate with the characters as they strive to achieve justice.

Guiding Questions:
1) What is principle of Ahimsa and how does Mohandas K. Gandhi practice this concept as a means to an end?

2) How can the principle of Ahimsa apply to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*? It is possible to respond to violence with nonviolence?

Content Essay:
Introduction:
Like many of William Shakespeare’s tragedies, *Macbeth* is saturated with violent images and actions. From the premeditated murder of King Duncan to Macbeth’s beheading, the play conveys themes of authority and ambition through the use of brutal aggression. Before analyzing whether or not an alternative ended could work effectively for Shakespeare’s masterpiece, it will be help to first examine Gandhi’s philosophy on nonviolence, also known as
ahimsa. After establishing nonviolence as a viable form of resistance, the opportunities for alternative endings to *Macbeth* will be discussed.

**Gandhi’s Nonviolent Philosophy—Ahimsa**

Mohandas K. Gandhi is most known as the twentieth century’s nonviolent revolutionary of India. Ahimsa, or nonviolence, is an alternative to violence, but it goes beyond merely the lack of violence. With the absence of violence there is room for love, compassion, and unity. It provides a perspective not only on the way in which people can approach a conflict, but also a manner in which people can live their lives. In fact, Gandhi moves from calling nonviolence passive resistance, to coining the term satyagraha, which means “holding onto truth” (Sethia 47). Additionally, Gandhi asserts that satyagraha functions on the “law of love” (47). Indeed, it is the law of love that is stronger than the law of hatred that flows from violence. This concept encompasses the way Gandhi strove for social change.

The basis for nonviolent action contradicts the Machiavellian approach that says “the ends justify the means.” Gandhi inverts that phrase to insist that the ends must be met with just means and that the means are more important than the end. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi explicitly tells the reader that “what they have obtained is an exact result of the means they adopted” (Gandhi 80). Indeed, the means are the ends. Therefore violent actions will produce violent results. This concept insists on passive resistance as the proper means to achieve a peaceful end; for Gandhi the end was India’s independence. Gandhi provides many examples of how the means one takes produces a different effect. Describing a thief stealing from someone, Gandhi states that how that person responds will dramatically affect the outcome. Rather than responding violently and angrily, if one responds lovingly, with ahimsa, it may be possible to transform the thief’s heart, helping him reform his way of life. Gandhi concluded by saying, “the force of love and pity is infinitely greater than the force of arms. There is harm in the exercise of brute force, never in that of pity” (82). Here Gandhi not only promotes nonviolence, but lifts it above brute force.

Some many argue, as the reader does in Gandhi’s prominent work, *Hind Swaraj*, that human beings are a naturally violent species. As students of history, it may be that our impression is formed by the countless accounts of war and combat which litter the history books. Gandhi explains to the reader that if human history was only filled with war and strife, the human race would not be in existence today, “if this were all that had happened in the world, it would have been ended long ago. If the story of the universe had commenced with wars, not a man would have been found alive today…the fact that there are so many men still alive in the world shows that it is based not on the force of arms but on the force of truth or love” (87). It is true that history remembers the violence but forgets the eras of peace. Gandhi promotes nonviolence, not just as an alternative, but as a stronger force to combat injustice. In fact, Gandhi maintains an optimistic view of the future in spite of the horrendous injustices that exist in history. According to Gandhi, the human species is moving in a direction that faces ahimsa as its destination. Contrary to the propagation of atomic weapons and the perpetuation of war in the world, Gandhi states, “man has been steadily progressing towards ahimsa. Our remote ancestors were cannibals. Then came a time when they were fed up with cannibalism and they began to live on chase. Next came a stage when man was ashamed of leading the life of a wandering hunter. He therefore took to agriculture and depended principally on mother earth for his food…” (AMAB). Though history may repeat itself in various forms, Gandhi remains optimistic that human development is advancing to be more nonviolent. The mentality surrounding
nonviolence is a hindrance to its acceptance; rather than considering it an action of the weak, Gandhi presents it as the will of the strong.

Many may consider passive resistance to be the action of those who are too afraid to fight for fear of losing their lives, but Gandhi argues that nonviolence requires great courage and is the sign of a person who is willing to stand for his or her beliefs regardless of the consequences. “Passive resistance, that is, soul-force, is matchless. It is superior to the force of arms. How, then, can it be considered only a weapon of the weak? Physical-force men are strangers to the courage that is requisite in a passive resister” (Gandhi 91). Indeed, the choice between and violence and accepting the results of acting out of ahimsa, differentiates the courageous from the coward. It is easier to destroy one’s enemy than to transform him or her. The quote that is most often attributed to Gandhi, “Be the change you wish to see in the world” is fitting because he did live out his message in his actions and mission to achieve social change.

**Examples of Ahimsa from Gandhi’s Life**

Gandhi’s life mirrored the philosophy he preached. Beginning with his time in South Africa Gandhi began practicing nonviolent methods of achieving his goals. Through writing Gandhi spread knowledge of injustice while also encouraging fellow Indians to realize their own swaraj (self-rule).

**Writing:** It is not an original concept, but one that Gandhi used frequently and effectively is the use of writing. Words have captivated audiences, voiced horrendous decrees, and given breath to the rights of freedom and liberty throughout centuries. In 1903 Gandhi created the *Indian Opinion*, which was a weekly newspaper. The newspaper had two initiatives, “first, it aimed at cultivating a sense of responsibility among the Indians while asserting their rights in South Africa. Gandhi wanted the Indian community to understand that one is not worth of rights without fulfilling one’s responsibility. Second, the paper was aimed at educating the whites in South African about the problems that Indians suffered there” (Sethia 42). This nonviolent method of communicating educated the masses of the plight that Indians faced and encouraged them to action. Gandhi continued to write throughout his life in many different forms, including letters and even his own autobiography. When in jail, it provided him with an outlet to his followers and today it sheds light on the pathway to peace. His texts were his “weapon” throughout his journey toward an independent India.

**Fasting:** Gandhi used fasting as a means of nonviolence action throughout his life. For Gandhi, fasting served two evident purposes. On one hand it was a way for him to repent for wrongs that he believed he committed or put into action. On the other hand, it was a means by which he brought awareness to a cause or concern that he was promoting. During his life he participated in seventeen fasts as a means of satyagraha (152). These fasts were opportunities for others to witness the dedication Gandhi had to his principle of ahimsa as well as to his ideals. For example, Gandhi saw injustice in the way untouchables were treated in Hindu societies. In 1932 Gandhi fasted to protest the institution of separate electorates for the untouchable caste. In six days Gandhi’s fast produced results, “while Gandhi was fasting in prison, negotiations took place in and outside the prison, decisions were made at different places, including overseas, and the matter was resolved by a compromise” (121). More than achieving the ends through just means, fasts proved a valuable principle for it shed light on peoples’ desire for peace over violence. “The positive response to the fasts suggest that people’s desire for peace and friendship
transcends their violent and divisive behavior and that the power of satyagraha can be used to awake good in people when the more negative forces appear to be taking over” (154). Fasting is yet another example of the effective nature that ahimsa has over himsa.

Marching: Though it may be considered a common technique in contemporary societies, marching for a cause is quite a profound and powerful means of nonviolent action. In order to garner attention and to practice civil disobedience, Gandhi marched hundreds of miles in order to defy unjust laws. The most famous is his Salt March of 1930. Considering salt to be an indispensable condiment of the lower classes, it was exploitative to put a tax on it. Beginning on March 12th Gandhi and several of his followers began marching the 241 miles to Dandi, which took twenty-four days (113). Taking his time and allowing others to follow him, he attracted the media attention of the world. Once he picked up the salt he had violated the law and the viceroy, Irwin, had committed to arresting him, not wanted to allow illegal acts to go without consequence. However, in February of the following year, Gandhi and Irwin reached a satisfactory compromise. The significance of the salt march was great, according to Sethia: “to the Indians at large, it demonstrated the power of nonviolent civil disobedience and infused in them a greater sense of pride and confidence in seeking swaraj. To those who had participated in the movement and had gone through the training in the discipline necessary for nonviolence and civil disobedience, the salt satyagraha and ensuing imprisonment enabled them to discover within themselves unknown reserves of soul-force and reinforced among them a sense of fearlessness. (115)

The world witnessed the commitment and dedication not only of Gandhi, but the thousands of followers who were committed to nonviolence. This simple gesture of picking up salt and defying an unjust law had consequences far beyond the beach of Dandi.

Mohandas Gandhi practiced his principles and provided an example for those seeking justice. His commitment to ahimsa and self-sacrifice are what contributed to him being considered a Mahatma. These few examples are merely a lens by which we can see alternatives to violence in contemporary society as well as a lens by which we can view the past. Looking at literature, knowing that violence is not the only way to achieve an ends, allows readers to consider and ponder the way in which classic tales could have been different.

Violence in Macbeth and opportunities for Ahimsa

High school students have read Shakespeare’s tragedy, Macbeth for decades, breathing life to the violence on the page as they reenact the series of murders. Derek Cohen opens his article, “Macbeth’s Rites of Violence” by stating this obvious fact, “Violence is the heart and soul of Macbeth. It permeates the action and the narrative; it clings to the characters; it infects and controls the imagination of each of the personae. There is no respite, no real relief from violence in any tiny nook or large landscape of the drama” (Cohen). Indeed there are few scenes that do not foreshadow, recount, or demonstrate extreme brutality. But are there instances where an alternative could have been acted upon? Where students would rewrite the play to incorporate nonviolent options?

Contrary to the beliefs of Mohandas K. Gandhi, Macbeth opens with the celebration of violence as an act of justice. In scene two of act one, the sergeant reports to King Duncan the news of Macbeth’s actions which include the murder of Macdonwald. Describing Macbeth’s actions, he states:
For brave Macbeth--well he deserves that name--
Disdaining fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
    Which smoked with bloody execution,
Like valour's minion carved out his passage
    Till he faced the slave;
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
    Till he unseam'd him from the nave to the chops,
And fix'd his head upon our battlements. (I.ii.18-25)

Not only are the actions of Macbeth celebrated, but he is described as being “brave,” a direct contradiction to the way in which Gandhi describes brute force. Shakespeare uses powerful imagery to convey the intense nature of the violence Macbeth imposed on his enemy stating that Macbeth tore open his enemy from the umbilicus to the mouth. Macbeth’s violent nature is further revealed in act one in his initial thoughts after hearing his prophecy from the witches. The means he immediately considers is murder. He states, “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” (I.iii.144-148). Despite renouncing these thoughts, Macbeth reveals his violent ambition, which is only enhanced by the influence Lady Macbeth has over her husband when she convinces him it is his only option.

Throughout the play there are very few opportunities to avoid the tragic ending. Upon further reflection, Macbeth realizes the heinous nature of murdering his respectable leader, Duncan, and seemingly convinces himself that murder is not the answer. Telling his wife of his new plans Macbeth confidently states, “We will proceed no further in this business: / He hath honour'd me of late” (I.vii.31-32). Lady Macbeth’s persuades her husband by mocking and renouncing Macbeth’s manhood, to which he, yet again, agrees to violence. However, after the murder of Duncan it is important to note the human response to violence; after Macbeth has began his killing spree he regrets his actions. The emotional and psychological turmoil Macbeth experiences is the manifestation of his guilt. Derek Cohen comments on his guilt as a form of regret that envelopes the play in a shroud of sorrow, “The sadness of the play is housed in Macbeth's terrible, passionate regret, itself the product of a violence that looms and lingers in the play; it never goes away or gets less” (Cohen). The ramifications of violence are shown on the personal level, indicating that violent means produce anguish and tumult. This reinforces Gandhi’s teaching on just means and just ends. For the violent means inevitably result in violent ends. Cohen identifies this as a paradox, stating, “tragedy is inevitably a story of the contention against violence by violence, a hopeless and paradoxical agon that never fails to repeat itself. Tragedy inexorably carries us on a tide of violence to calamity...[the audience is] forced into an acceptance of the truisms about violence being proven true before our very eyes: violence breeds violence and violence can be effectively countered only with more and greater violence” (Cohen). Thus, Macbeth’s killing of Duncan can only result in more violence.

Perhaps one of the most violent scenes in the play is the Murder of Macduff’s son and his wife, Lady Macduff. Macbeth orders their murder as a way to rid him of the threat that Maduff poses. Illogical to contemporary readers, this may be another opportunity for ahimsa to reign over violence. For it is in Macduff’s response to Macbeth that the end of the play is set in motion and thereby violence ensues. In fact, it is in Macduff’s verbal response that the audience sees his quick dismissal of nonviolent action. He states:

O, I could play the woman with mine eyes
And braggart with my tongue! But, gentle heavens,
Cut short all intermission; front to front  
Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself;  
Within my sword's length set him; (IV.iii.230-234)

Macduff indirectly compares nonviolent actions to the way in which he believes a woman would respond. Similar to Lady Macbeth, Macduff considers ahimsa to be the characteristic of women and violence to be the way of men. Cohen recognizes this and goes further to imply that it is inherent in the nature of the men in the text, “Manhood is violence and its existence is inseparable from the bloody endeavours of men” (Cohen). Again, this concept is not in line with the teachings of Gandhi, who asserted that the stronger, and therefore more masculine of responses, is that of nonviolence. The violence that Macduff commits as an act of retaliation is what brings the play to a close. Macbeth’s false sense of security leads him to death by Macduff’s sword, thereby restoring the kingship to the line of Duncan.

The audience is expected to share in the triumph of the prevailing characters as they celebrate their victory over their oppressor. However, the rapid resolution of the play indicates that in the shadow of violence there is little to actually celebrate. Cohen presents this conclusion as one that should be one of celebration, and yet has an overwhelming dark cloud that remains due to the violent means by which the characters took to rid the country of Macbeth. “[Macbeth’s] death is presented and proclaimed as a release from tyranny and violence: we should rejoice in it. And yet even here, even with the death of the tyrant, a kind of tragic horror hovers like smoke over the ending of the play. Something infinitely precious has been lost in the rubble that violence has left behind. The presence of Macbeth's severed head at the end mocks the aura of triumph with which the play concludes. Its message is mixed and contradictory: the tyrant is dead but violence thrives” (Cohen). Perhaps the audience is forced to consider an alternative ending, one that is not “contradictory.” If Macbeth is a tyrant for his violent actions, then how could Macduff and Malcolm achieve justice through a different means? In the lesson that follows students are asked to examine the moments in the play when the teachings of ahimsa would have created a more just and fortunate resolution.

Conclusion

Mohandas Gandhi provided a framework for nonviolent action that yields positive results. Given the heinous violence in Macbeth is it possible to consider alternative actions that may return positive results, results that the audience, as well as the characters, may be able to celebrate together? Gandhi showed many examples of ahimsa, through his writing, fasting, and marching, and the lesson that follows asks students to consider what means Macbeth and Macduff could have taken to produce different results in addition to the effectiveness of those results. Not only will students think critically and analytically about the texts, but discussing Macbeth through Gandhi’s teachings will bring the seventeenth century bard into modern times.

Bibliography:
Teaching Activities

Day 1: Ahimsa
- Students will brainstorm and define the term, “nonviolence.”
- Class Discussion on the ways in which violence is present in contemporary culture.
- Read: “U.S.: 60% of Kids Exposed to Violence” http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-201_162-5369862.html
- Video: MSNBC-Has America Become Desensitize to Violence? http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yz8P9c9Purw

Homework: Read selections from Hind Swaraj.

Day 2: Gandhi’s Life as a Model of Nonviolence
- Do Now-Nonviolent quotes-Quotes will be sprea throughout the room and students will walk around and choose one that speaks to them. They will partner with one of their classmates and discuss why they chose that quote and then report back to the class.
- Freewrite-Respond to Gandhi’s words on nonviolence versus brute force. Do you find some truth in his words? Are his principles applicable, why or why not?
- Discuss responses
- Powerpoint giving examples of how Gandhi has practiced his own concepts—also leading to other examples of ahimsa.

Begin brainstorming alternate endings to Macbeth.

Day 3: Alternate Endings to Macbeth
Students will work on and consider various opportunities in the play when characters could have chosen a different path.
Students will choose one of those opportunities and then write the way in which the play could have ended if that character did choose non violence.

Materials Needed
- Notebooks & Pens
- Projector & Laptop with internet access
- Copies of Texts: Macbeth
- Copies of Article-60% of Kids Exposed to Violence” http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-201_162-5369862.html
- Video- MSNBC-Has America Become Desensitized to Violence? http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yz8P9c9Purw