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### The Influence of Role Models

Who do you look up to in your life? When faced with conflicts or aspirations, who do you go to for resolution and motivation? Both Charles Yu and William Shakespeare tackle the idea of support systems in their respective works *Interior Chinatown* and *Macbeth*. In *Interior Chinatown*, readers witness the journey of Willis Wu, an aspiring actor confined by stereotypes, and the presence of a positive role model in his life. In *Macbeth*, we follow the title character's path to becoming king and the influence of his wife, Lady Macbeth, on this journey. Both texts feature role models, and by comparing the two we illuminate the role of outside influence on individual destinies, prompting consideration of the importance of having positive role models that overshadow the negative ones.

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare uses Lady Macbeth as the protagonist's primary influence; however, her actions taken to support Macbeth are done in a negative manner. After Macbeth is inspired to take over the throne as king, he passes this news on to his wife. Her reaction is intense and she immediately grows enthralled with Macbeth's path to power. However, her actions to support Macbeth in his journey are filled with acts of peer pressure and negative influence: "Art thou afeard / To be the same in thine own act and valor / As thou art in desire?" (Shakespeare 1.7.43-45). By questioning Macbeth's bravery, his "valor," and asking him if he is "afeard," Lady Macbeth is placing gender stereotypes on Macbeth, as a man is typically expected to be brave and strong. She is questioning his ability to "act" like he "desires," or if he would

rather sit around and talk about what could be done instead of actually doing it. This serves as peer pressure for Macbeth who may now feel as though he cannot simply want to be king without fighting for it. This paints Lady Macbeth as a negative support system for Macbeth as he seeks to become king. Her peer pressure convinces Macbeth to follow his wife's command, ultimately resulting in more negative consequences than positive.

Later in the play, Lady Macbeth's role as a supporting figure returns, but her influence causes Macbeth to go against his own morals. After Macbeth and his wife contemplate the possibility of him becoming king, she convinces him to kill the current king to make that path easier: "The bell invites me. / Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell / That summons thee to heaven or to hell" (Shakespeare 2.1.75-77). The "bell" symbolizes Lady Macbeth's peer pressure and the consequences that result—the bell "invites" Macbeth to kill Duncan, representing the toll Lady Macbeth has on his decisions. Moreover, by calling the bell a "knell," which is rung when someone dies, Shakespeare implies that Lady Macbeth's pressure will result in catastrophic consequences for both the current king and, ultimately, Macbeth. Macbeth's murder of the king raises suspicion among many, including some of whom he once considered friends, now turning against him. This suspicion results in Macbeth's own demise, the aftermath of an innocent person being turned in the wrong direction due to the influence of a negative role model.

In *Interior Chinatown*, the protagonist, Willis Wu, looks up to Older Brother, viewing him as a role model. Older Brother's positive influence on Willis's life proves salutary on his journey to his dreams. Largely influenced by stereotypes, Willis Wu has navigated his life with the aspiration of becoming an actor. Willis wanted to be "Kung Fu Guy," the greatest role an Asian American actor can have; he aspired to be like Older Brother, who originally filled that role. But before a court case, Willis finds Older Brother has become a lawyer: "I know that's

what everyone wanted. A kung fu hero. But I couldn't [. . .] Interior Chinatown isn't the whole world anymore. I had to leave in my own way" (Yu 218-219). Older Brother acknowledges that society ("everyone") expected him to become "A kung fu hero," but he realizes that that wasn't what he actually wanted. By stating that he has left "Interior Chinatown" and is no longer trapped there, Older Brother suggests that he has escaped those stereotypes and instead pursued his dream of becoming a lawyer. This proves that Older Brother is a positive role model, as he learned how to escape the cage society trapped him in, something Willis has yet to accomplish.

After the court case, Willis acknowledges his appreciation and admiration for Older Brother being his lawyer, further suggesting his position as a supportive figure and a role model. Yu uses a dependent clause that points towards Older Brother as Willis's inspiration: "Just the fact that you stood up there . . . in an American courtroom, and argued my case" (Yu 241). Willis views this as a great feat on Older Brother's part—his courage to stand in an "American courtroom" and stand up for the freedom of an Asian American is admirable. This valor encourages Willis to do the same, to stand up for himself and emerge from the cage he felt trapped in. In his last performance as an actor, Willis sticks up for his emotions: "'I can't do this anymore,' [Willis] say[s]. 'See you around, Wu,' [someone] says, pulling [Willis] up to [his] feet, a dead man now free" (Yu 254). Yu describes Willis as a "dead man"—Willis felt so controlled by society that he didn't even have the passion or motivation to feel alive. However, his newfound sense of freedom suggests that he has finally stood up for himself, found the bravery to escape his emotional distress, and is beginning to pursue a new life away from the burden of stereotypes. This act was largely due to Older Brother and his position as Willis's role model. Throughout the entire book, Willis was too afraid to stick up for himself until he watched Older Brother, a lifelong role model, do it.

Role models are not limited to literature—the influence of role models persists throughout the real world and among a diverse group of people. In a research study conducted by Noelle M. Hurd et al., the effects of various adult role models on the lives of African American adolescents were studied. The results of the study showed a significant outcome of having a positive adult role model in the adolescents' lives. These role models helped the teenagers overcome challenges, particularly when exposed to negative adult behaviors. The overall findings support resilience theory, which describes an individual's ability to navigate adversity. The theory focuses on the ability of a person to adapt positively to stress, challenges, or traumatic events, rather than being overwhelmed by them. Noelle M. Hurd et al. suggests that when an adolescent has a positive role model, someone to look up to, they can develop a stronger sense of resilience. This study and *Interior Chinatown* demonstrate the importance of positive role models in both teenagers and adults.

Macbeth's journey, influenced by Lady Macbeth, demonstrates the harsh consequences of a negative role model. Although death may not always be the consequence of negative influences, it points out the necessity to avoid those who may have malicious intent. In addition, Willis's story about the adult experience with a positive role model, coupled with the adolescent experience studied in the research paper, suggests the powerful effect salutary influences can have when negative influences don't overshadow them. From achieving your dreams and escaping stereotypes to finding resilience in times of struggle, positive role models and support systems are fundamental aspects of a vigorous and meaningful life. So what if Lady Macbeth allowed room for Macbeth to consider his own path to becoming king? What if, instead of using peer pressure to sway his beliefs, she encouraged him to follow his morals? Would he still have killed someone? Would he still have become king—well, maybe not. But I think it's safe to say

that living a life full of love, happiness, and unwavering support is better than a life burdened with incessant guilt and the apprehension of betrayal from those closest to you.

Works Cited

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