

Teacher's Notes

For the section on Life and Times of Shakespeare

Section One

Shakespeare Pedagogy One

Discussion

One cannot teach Shakespeare in a vacuum so students need to be given the knowledge about the times and the life of Shakespeare. For this reason this chapter is a necessary introduction to give students a sense of the time of Shakespeare. Teachers can also if they wish to go back a little and show how drama actually began. History shows that it began with the religious plays played by priests to instruct the faithful about the business of salvation. Then slowly it moved away from the church to become morality plays. Then came the interludes and the birth of the Renaissance stage.

The Shakespearean stage

It would also be a good idea to present students visuals that can attract their attention. Slide projectors and slides (which can be produced by oneself quite economically these days), video recordings and large posters can be really useful teaching aid for the teacher.

Acting : Teaching stage movements

This should be also considered as an important part of teaching drama.

As stated earlier, in the project, a video recorder was used to capture the scenes that students were asked to act out in groups. This was to help them see for themselves the challenge of actually acting. Teachers can allow students to stand in for the characters they want to play and move their own selves around as they visualize what the characters would be doing as they speak their line. The important thing to teach students is to suit their speech to the action and, their action to their speech. This would be helping them to use their eyes, their face, posture, their gestures ;that is articulating perhaps in a little exaggerated way, and to make intelligent use of stage properties and the spatial distance between characters to allow the audience to focus on the character that delivers the line of the text at that given moment.

Visuals

The visual samples that follow are meant to help students get a clearer picture of the life and times of the dramatist.

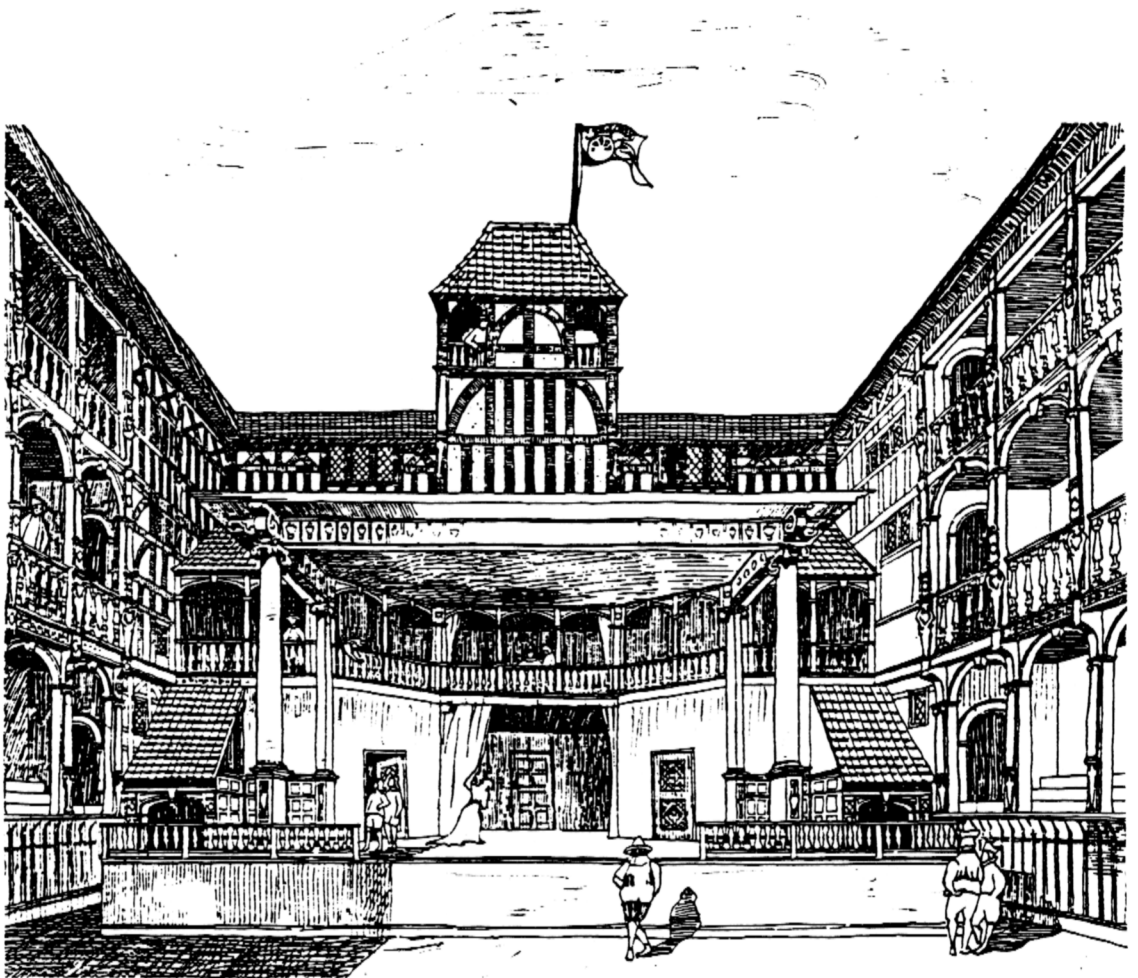


A Shakespeare portrait

The illustrations that accompany the following pages were adapted from the book *Shakespeare and his theatre* by Philip Stewart.



**A flag flying over the Globe theatre meant that a play was
about to begin**



The Fortune: another popular Elizabethan theatre



**An excited crowd watching a play. Note the 'groundlings'
(the standing audience)**



Shakespeare Pedagogy One

Unit Topic : Introduction to Life and Times of Shakespeare

Objectives :

- 1. The students get to appreciate the life of Shakespeare.**
- 2. Students get to know the historical and social background of Shakespeare's England.**

Materials :

- 1. Introduction to Shakespeare**
- 2. England during the time of Shakespeare.**
- 3. The Comedies**
- 4. Major Issues**

LESSON PLAN ON THE LIFE AND TIMES OF SHAKESPEARE

The Life and Times of Shakespeare.

Theory and Research

Students cannot understand 'Twelfth Night' if they study it in a vacuum, but neither can they appreciate a class that takes on a different direction that resemble a history course. It would be advantageous for students to have enough background information about Shakespearean stage to enable them to visualise the action. They should also have some knowledge about the time of the play to help them relate actions, attitudes, superstition, customs, norms, beliefs and other issues that go into making that play. Thus when students encounter these in the play it would not appear strange; or worse they appear lost.

Lesson Objectives

1. The students get to appreciate the life of Shakespeare.
2. Students get to know the historical and social background of Shakespeare's England.

Task

The teacher uses the notes that follow to complement his talk in this lesson and create interest by showing the (slides if he can prepare) visuals (pages 8-11) meant for this section.

INTRODUCTION TO SHAKESPEAREAN DRAMA

Handouts

The Life of Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born in 1564. He is thought to have been born on 23rd April which is St. George's day and baptized on April 26, 1564, in Holy Trinity Church, in Stratford-on-Avon. He died in 1616. In the course of his lifetime which is about 52 years, he wrote about thirty-seven plays and a number of poems which made him probably the most famous author in the world. The other great distinction about Shakespeare is that, he wrote a dozen of great plays without serious weaknesses. Shakespeare is considered a genius because he wrote his plays with such clarity of vision, which is so important in the art of drama.

The bare details of his life leaves us with many questions? We may ask, if we have any idea about his attitude to his work and art, his feelings about theater, what did he hate and love most and so on. Many critics tend to share the view that, perhaps; after all; this is one of the biggest blessings,

after his plays and poems, that Shakespeare has left to later generations. The very absence of personal detail about Shakespeare enables the reader to appreciate his works for what they are. If one needs to know anything about him one has to be satisfied to find this information in the lines he wrote in his plays and poems, which may or may not be based on actual experience and personal feelings.

ENGLAND: During the time of Shakespeare: historical and social background.

Unraveling the mystery of the word 'Elizabethan'

When reading about Shakespeare, the terms, 'Elizabethan England' or 'Elizabethan Age' or 'Elizabethan dramatists' etc. tend to occur frequently.

Shakespeare lived through the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603). This period in English history is called the Elizabethan Age and used to be seen as a "Golden Age", for England.

Thus the dramatists who lived during this period came to be known distinctively as Elizabethan dramatists and so were the writers, Elizabethan writers and Elizabethan artists and so on. Shakespeare however, did live in the "Jacobean" reign as well: the reign of King James I (1566-1625). With this explanation the mystery of words like Elizabethan plays, Jacobean theater and so on would become easily understood.

Theaters

There may have been no theaters built specially for plays in England before 1576. Wandering groups of actors would arrive in towns and villages set up a rough wooden platform with a few poles and perform a play. In the case of Shakespeare's many of his plays were performed in a specially built theater called the Globe Theater. This happened in 1598.

However, it is believed that in 1608 Shakespeare's company had moved to Blackfriar's Theater, which offered indoor facilities and more sophisticated stage production techniques.

The plays in performance

Some people estimate that theaters like the Globe had a maximum capacity of about two thousand, but the actual place inside the theater was small. Plays were performed usually in the afternoon about 2.00pm. The plays were acted on bare stage, and there was no "set" in the modern sense. If the audience needed to know where the scene was taking place, the actors told them by speaking their dialogue. Thus in Twelfth Night the heroine's first words are to ask where she is, and she is quickly answered by a convenient sea caption.

If the scene was to be taking place in darkness then actors would walk the stage clutching burning torches, even though the actual stage was bathed in bright sunlight. Stage costumes were rich and extravagant looking and very expensive. Elizabethan audiences are thought probably to have delighted themselves watching kings, queens and emperors in rich loyal gowns. There were the sound of trumpet blasts and other music just before the entrance of a procession of a royal entourage. Sounds of the elements like wind and thunder could be easily simulated, although in the case of the cannons they used the real thing rather than any imitation.

In one of Shakespeare's history play, cannons fired resulted in the thatched roof catching fire and burnt down the Globe within an hour. An Elizabethan actor was close to his audience, because the 'groundlings', the standing audience, were close to the main stage. Young men (seventeen or eighteen years olds) however, acted female parts since Elizabethan morality dictated that it was improper for woman to appear on the stage. Thus in *Twelfth Night* it would be convenient for the actor to play Cesario because he was indeed a man.

Shakespeare's company of actors was called the Lord Chamberlain's Men. The use of the Lord's name expressed some form of legitimacy and protection of the Lord Chamberlain.

The Comedies

The term comedy originally meant merely a play with a happy ending, in a tragedy it would end unhappily, usually with a lot of sorrow and pity. When one thinks of comedy one must not be mistaken to assume that Shakespearean comedies are all about laughter. They are not. Shakespearean comedies are funny, and make audiences laugh, but they do more than that. Some very serious elements can be realised in Shakespeare's plays. In the message and the plot, Shakespeare subtly exposes the weaker aspects of human nature. Good comedy always has a serious element in it. One needs to explore those issues in order to really appreciate Shakespearean comedies. When enjoying Shakespearean comedies therefore one must learn to distinguish this mark of that serious vein in it.

Just like Shakespeare's four great tragedies, Shakespeare's great comedies are also dominated by four plays: *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*. Each play concentrates on a small section of a specific society – Illyria in *Twelfth Night*. The leading characters have weaknesses. As the play unfolds their weaknesses are exposed and they somehow become the better for it. Sometimes not all characters are allowed to escape happily for their faults. Some are unable to change and so do not find peace and lasting happiness.

In *Twelfth Night* Malvolio is the clearest example. He has such an inflated opinion about himself and is so uncharitable to others that he easily falls into the trap set for him.

Orsino on the other hand is not really in love, but merely trying to imagine that he is in love for his own selfish purposes, but he is allowed to find and marry the right person. The audience is made to value happiness by being shown what is unhappiness. The key ingredient in *Twelfth Night* is self-knowledge. However comedies are written basically to arouse laughter: they are very funny. Word-play and punning in *Twelfth Night* become a source of humour as in other comedies.

Disguise

Disguise in this play is another source of comedy. The most obvious form is the dressing-up of female characters in male clothing, as in the case of Viola. The act of eaves dropping is another significant feature of comedies and this is seen in the orchard scene in *Twelfth Night*. Lastly, disguising one's love is a major topic in the comedies as one will see in *Twelfth Night*. Thus the comedies are, therefore funny, but they also give opportunities to explore human behaviour in a very serious tone.

Twelfth Night

Major issues of the play

1. Feasting versus sobriety

Twelfth Night is traditionally understood as the last day of Christmas feasting, which is celebrated on the sixth of January (twelve days after Christmas). This day also commemorates the coming of the Magi – the three wise men who brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the stable in Bethlehem where the Lord Jesus Christ was born.

This play was specially written for performance on this festive day. There is merriment in the play that suits the entertainment of *Twelfth Night*. It is above all, funny. There is also romance; there are songs and dancing. These elements are evident in the comic sub-plot. Sir Toby, Feste, Sir Andrew, Maria are people who are associated with feasting, eating, drinking and general sensual enjoyment, while Malvolio, the puritan figure stands for sobriety, caution, and restraint.

2. Self-knowledge

Self-knowledge is perhaps the most significant theme in *Twelfth Night*. Though the play begins with Orsino's famous line, "If music be the food

of love, play on." we soon discover that Orsino lacks the self-knowledge that he is really attracted only to the idea of being in love. He believes he is in love with Olivia but he starts to quarrel with her within minutes when he finally meets her. He does not really go to meet Olivia to declare his love but sends messengers to her. Finally as the play ends he realises that he actually loves Viola. In the case of Olivia, she seems to believe herself that she is doing justice to the death of her father and brother by going into mourning for seven years. However, when Cesario (Viola) gets to meet her, she breaks her own vow and quickly falls in love with him. She fails to realise that the actual reason for her detachment from the world, which she declared at first, was her inner-reaction of fear to the cruelty of the world around her. So, it was not actually grief that made her withdraw from the real world, but fear of it. Therefore, it does appear that Olivia lacks judgment too.

Malvolio also lacks self-knowledge and so this leads to the lack of knowledge to understand others. He refuses to consider that he is only a steward yet harbours ambition to marry Olivia who is actually a high – ranking countess. As the play progresses, the events that unfold show that Malvolio's predicaments are his own doings. He has no knowledge of his absurd vanity that really hinders him from learning the truth about himself. Shakespeare's message here is that one must possess self-knowledge in order to understand our own weaknesses and strengths and potentials so that these would help in understanding and appreciating others as they are. These aspects of understanding oneself help in avoiding problems of relationships.

Viola suffers the agony of not being able reveal her love for Orsino because she chose to disguise her real nature. This creates complications in her relationship with others. The play therefore demands honesty about oneself.

Thus the central issue, which is actually seen as the serious theme in *Twelfth Night*, is: people who disguise themselves – from themselves, or from other people – are courting disaster. Self-knowledge and honesty are the key ingredients in a relationship. These traits are therefore vital for every individual in a society if society is to operate smoothly. Self-awareness, self-acceptance are different shades of honesty and respect. These are some of the important human traits that allow people to live in harmony with each other.

In exploring these issues of human nature, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* has endured through different times and cultures. Though the play through the passage of time can cloud out complete understanding and appreciation it nevertheless offers us limitless possibilities of interpretation. In fact, it has grown in significance through each century offering more joy and wisdom to all that read or watch it.