

Othello

William Shakespeare

Curriculum Unit

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About the Cover

Evil Iago spins a web of intrigues and lies to destroy both Othello and Desdemona.

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Lesson 1

Shakespeare and His Stage

Objectives

- To become acquainted with William Shakespeare's time and place
- To understand the structure of Shakespeare's theaters
- To anticipate some of the issues in *Othello*

Notes to the Teacher

Why do so many (eleven) of William Shakespeare's plays have an Italian setting? For Renaissance Englishmen in the post-Henry VIII era, Italy held an exotic fascination. Tales, both tall and small, were brought back by travelers; poetic forms such as the sonnet and Italian stories were translated by scholars. Rome, to an Elizabethan Anglican or Puritan, also meant the seat of hated Catholic power as well as a pleasant climate to escape to from the damp cold of an English winter.

By Shakespeare's day, the Italian Renaissance had been flourishing for two centuries. Italy's independent city-states not only housed treasures of art, with incredible craftsmanship, but also ruling families whose rise to power was strewn with tales of violence, intrigue, and murder. It is no wonder that the country-boy from Stratford was excited by tales arising from so magnificent a background.

The son of a respected, prosperous citizen of Stratford, Shakespeare attended the Stratford grammar school where the curriculum included readings from Plautus, Terence, Ovid, Horace, Virgil, Caesar, and Livy. Young Will would have studied rhetoric and logic as well as Pliny's *Natural History*. Some time in the late 1580s, Shakespeare went to London. How he became involved in theater, which itself was in its growing stage, is a matter of conjecture. In 1594, he joined the company of the Lord Chamberlain's men and he met Richard Burbage, outstanding actor and theater owner. As a cofounder of the Globe theater, Shakespeare was not only its principal writer, but also director, stockholder, and actor. Modern critics who cast doubt on his authorship are chasing an attention-getting will-o'-wisp. Shakespeare was acknowledged by his contemporaries as author of his plays in which they acted, and his prosperity and fame are recorded in business and legal documents of his time. When he died at New Place, his home in Stratford, he left his wife and surviving children well provided for. The epitaph on his grave in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford bespeaks his love for this corner of England:

Good friend for Jesus' sake forbear
To dig the dust enclosed here!

Blessed be the man that spares these stones
And cursed be he that moves my bones.

When Shakespeare was twelve years old, James Burbage designed and built “The Theater” as a great improvement over the inn yards where travelling players previously performed. Burbage’s theater had storage space, dressing rooms, a safe place to keep scripts, and a permanent stage which did not have to be shared with a rival company. Later, his sons inherited the property and, for a variety of reasons, dismantled the theater piece by piece and rebuilt at a new location across the Thames. Their theater, now named the Globe, gave Shakespeare’s genius a new locale.

The Globe burned down in 1613. Until the late 1980s, scholars based their ideas of Shakespeare’s theater on a sketch of the Swan theater drawn by a visiting Swiss patron, on verbal descriptions by contemporaries, and on the plays’ stage directions. Discoveries by archaeologists beginning in 1989 revealed much about the actual structure of theaters of the time. The most important concept is the realization of how small and shallow the stage area was, how close the audience was to the actors, how excellent the actors had to be to get and hold the attention of the ale-happy pit crowds as well as the gallery patrons.

This lesson opens with an activity to elicit students’ interest in Shakespeare. They need access to the Internet, and you should provide bulletin board space or a large sheet of art paper for the class to collaborate to create a mural. Students then examine a time line and consider the structure of Shakespeare’s theaters. Finally, they discuss several situations that are not only central to the story in *Othello* but also relevant today as they were in Shakespeare’s time.

Procedure

1. Use information from the notes as the basis for some introductory comments.
2. Provide a bulletin board or a large sheet of art paper, and have students collaborate to create a Shakespeare mural. Point out that many reputable Internet sites include pictures related to Shakespeare and his career, and Stratford-upon-Avon is a thriving tourist attraction today. As students find pictures, have them contribute to the mural and include brief verbal descriptions. Interject occasional prompts to look for the following:
 - a portrait of William Shakespeare
 - Shakespeare’s birthplace and its surrounding garden
 - Thomas Nash’s house in Stratford
 - Anne Hathaway’s cottage
 - Holy Trinity Church in Stratford
 - Stratford-upon-Avon today
 - Shakespeare’s grave

- a portrait of Queen Elizabeth I
 - a portrait of King James I
 - the Globe Theater
3. When the mural is complete, use it to point out key elements, including the text of Shakespeare's epitaph (see Notes to the Teacher), typical home constructions of the sixteenth century, and the two British monarchs who saw Shakespeare's plays during his own lifetime.
 4. Distribute **Handout 1**, and review the time line with the class. Point out relevant pictures on the mural.
 5. Explain that there are necessarily many differences between Shakespeare's theaters and theaters of our own highly technological society. Display a picture or drawing of the Globe or the Rose Theater on a wall or screen, and point out the following details.
 - Theaters were mostly open air, constructed similar to travelers' inns.
 - The stage was not very deep, so the performance area was limited.
 - Performers and audience members, especially those standing in the pit or yard, were physically close to one another.
 - Wealthier audience members sat in the balconies.
 - There were no complicated stage sets; audience members had to use their imaginations.
 - The whole arrangement was sort of circular; audience members could see each other.
 6. Explain that the class will read a very famous Shakespearean play, and have students comment on previous experiences they have had with his sonnets and dramas. Allow a few minutes of free discussion.
 7. Distribute **Handout 2**, and ask students to complete it individually. Follow with open-ended discussion.

A Shakespearean Time Line

Directions: Carefully examine the following time line, which shows major events related to William Shakespeare's life.

| Date | Event |
|-------------|---|
| 1558 | Elizabeth I becomes queen |
| 1564 | William Shakespeare born in Stratford-upon-Avon |
| 1578 | Shakespeare forced to leave school because of father's business failure |
| 1582 | Marriage of Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway |
| 1583 | Birth of daughter, Susanna |
| 1585 | Birth of twins, Hamnet and Judith |
| 1591–93 | Plague in London; theaters closed |
| 1594 | Shakespeare joins Lord Chamberlain's men |
| 1597 | Purchases New Place, largest house in Stratford |
| 1599 | Part owner of newly constructed Globe Theater |
| 1603 | Elizabeth I dies; coronation of James I |
| 1603 | Shakespeare's company becomes The King's Men |
| 1613 | Globe Theater burns down |
| 1613 | Shakespeare retires |
| 1616 | Shakespeare dies |

