



SHAKESPEARE for Students™

The Characters of Shakespeare Grades 7-12

Program Overview

Shakespeare's plays are filled with an impressive variety of characters — from kings and queens to maids and messengers to ghosts and fairies. While most of Shakespeare's plays were inspired by existing tales, Shakespeare was skilled at embracing each story, making it his own and crafting it for the stage. Shakespeare's portrayal of his characters is an exceptional example of that talent. Take an up-close look at some of the different types of characters found in his plays: stock, dynamic, and even foil characters. What roles do they play? What impact do they have? Discover some of Shakespeare's most memorable characters — Romeo, Juliet, Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello, Brutus and King Lear. Find out what qualities make them memorable, what events drive their actions and how their language shapes them!

Vocabulary

stock characters — Stereotypical and one-dimensional characters. These characters are often predictable and instantly recognizable. Their purpose can be to provide comic relief, to cast a menacing presence, or simply to deliver news vital to the plot.

dynamic characters — Characters that undergo any change over the course of a play as a result of their experience.

foil — A type of character whose purpose is to provide a contrast with another character, often the protagonist. This helps to magnify certain qualities of that main character.

Character Types

While Shakespeare populated his plays with a great variety of characters, their differences are greater than their social status or job functions. They are often defined by their depth. Dynamic characters undergo change. Stock characters, such as the fool and the villain, are more stereotypical and one-dimensional. Another interesting type of character is the foil.

- Artist Greg Wyatt created sculptures that capture his response to key moments and characters in different plays by Shakespeare. Visit www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=486 to see images of his work and the passages that inspired them. Invite students to select a dynamic character from one of Shakespeare's plays and design a sculpture that captures the character's complex qualities or the events that cause him or her to change.
- Horatio, from *Hamlet*, is often cited as the quintessential foil character. His practical and down-to-earth qualities stood in stark contrast to that of his close friend—the idealistic and visionary Hamlet. Have students cite examples of foil characters in other plays, novels and movies.

Brutus (from *Julius Caesar*)

A respected member of the Roman senate, Brutus was a man whose greatest strengths were his idealism and devotion to his country. Unfortunately, these strengths also turned out to be weaknesses that he could not overcome.

Discussion Questions & Activities

- Brutus is married to Portia. Does his honorable, devoted and idealistic reputation also extend to his married life? Is their relationship typical of that time? How does their marriage compare to that of Julius Caesar and Calpurnia?
- An epitaph is a brief statement that commemorates a deceased person. These statements are often inscribed on a tomb or grave. Mark Antony referred to Brutus as "the noblest Roman of them all." Have students come up with their own epitaphs for Brutus. As an extension, invite them to design a tombstone or memorial that could be placed at Brutus' burial place.

Hamlet (from *Hamlet*)

Identifying Hamlet's true character is a tricky task. Sometimes he is restrained and at other times he is reckless. To add to the confusion, early in the play he says that he may, at times, "put an antic disposition on." As a result, he remains one of the most discussed, debated and fascinating characters in all of Shakespeare's plays.

Discussion Questions & Activities

- Visit the "Hamlet on the Ramparts" web site (web.mit.edu/shakspere/ramparts.html) to engage students in a study of Hamlet's first encounter with the ghost in Act 1, Scenes 4 and 5. The images, video clips and promptbooks provide telling evidence of how various productions approached the characters and language of this part of the play in different ways. Identify key similarities and differences across different productions. Then, have students work in small groups to make their own directorial and acting choices in a performance of this part of the play.
- Hamlet is often remembered for his contradictory character. He hesitates when the opportunity to kill Claudius presents itself, but has no problem blindly plunging his sword into Polonius who was hiding behind a curtain. Have students look through the play for other evidence of his contradictory character. Are there any instances when Hamlet's words and actions seem true?

Juliet (from *Romeo and Juliet*)

At the beginning of the play, Shakespeare presents 13-year-old Juliet as a sheltered, dutiful daughter. However, in the span of just a few days, Juliet undergoes a transformation into a strong, determined and loyal young woman, whose life comes to a tragic end.

Discussion Questions & Activities

- Discuss the difficulties of casting for the roles of Romeo and Juliet. The characters are in their teens. Juliet, for example, is not quite fourteen years old. Producers must often choose between teen actors and older, more experienced actors. Discuss the benefits and limitations of each. Then, have students act as casting directors for a production of the play and choose from known celebrities. Invite them to explain their choices. As an extension, students can create a poster advertising the production with their chosen cast.
- Many believe that the character of Juliet is one of Shakespeare's most confident and interesting treatments of a female role. Discuss this view with students to see if they agree. Invite them to compare Juliet with other female characters in Shakespeare's plays, such as Katherine from *The Taming of the Shrew* or Lady Macbeth from *Macbeth*.

King Lear (from *King Lear*)

King Lear is as much about human nature as it is about the character of Lear himself. We see a picture of a vain and foolhardy man who makes some irrational decisions and then has to face their consequences.

Discussion Questions & Activities

- King Lear is a dynamic character because he undergoes change over the course of the play. However, does the change happen too late? Have students take sides and explain their viewpoint.
- King Lear's angry speech in the storm at the beginning of Act 3, Scene 2, is a very powerful moment in the play. What events push Lear to his limit and force him to lash out at the storm? Have students take turns dramatically reading a portion of this speech.

Macbeth (from *Macbeth*)

Some of Shakespeare's most fascinating characters are those who undergo great change during the course of the play. No character demonstrates this more dramatically than Macbeth, who, in the play that bears his name, is transformed from a war hero to a ruthless murderer to a paranoid and pathetic tyrant.

Discussion Questions & Activities

- In what ways did Shakespeare make his plays accessible to all? Engage students in an investigation of the diverse Elizabethan audience for whom Shakespeare wrote his plays. Then, have students take turns giving dramatic readings of the following passage:

MACBETH
Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.
(2.2.78-81)

This is a great passage to show how Shakespeare could move from the elaborate Latinate words to the blunt Anglo Saxon ones. One theory is that the first part was for the elite and "Making the green one red" was for the groundlings.

- The evil of Macbeth's actions eventually prevents him from having any sort of normal human reaction to events. Using evidence from the play, generate a list of events in which Macbeth responds in an unusual way. For example, consider how he reacts to news of Lady Macbeth's death.

Othello (from *Othello*)

One of Shakespeare's most tragic characters, Othello is a strong, confident and respected man who nonetheless falls prey to the evil manipulations of others. His passion, military instincts and outsider status all work against him to stir his imagination and drive him over the edge with jealousy.

Discussion Questions & Activities

- Othello is known for his bold nature, military decisiveness and deep passion. Have students work in small groups to select and perform a passage from the play that exemplifies one of these qualities.
- For hundreds of years, artists have created their own visions of Shakespeare's characters, settings and plots. Visit www.folger.edu/imgdtl.cfm?iageid=94&cid=920 and www.folger.edu/imgdtl.cfm?iageid=176&cid=923 to see drawings and paintings of characters and scenes from *Othello*. Discuss with students their perception of Othello at different points in the play and how might they communicate his range of emotions through images. Then, have them select a specific moment in the play to illustrate. Students can post their pictures around the room for comparison.

Romeo (from *Romeo and Juliet*)

Romeo is best known for his intense passion, which causes him to feel deeply, but also leads him to act rashly, and ultimately contributes to his tragic death.

(Continued)

Discussion Questions & Activities

- At the beginning of the play in Act 1, Scene 1, Romeo sadly pines over Rosaline, who does not return his affection. His sadness fades, however, when he spots Juliet at the Capulet feast in Act 1, Scene 5. He is taken by her beauty and approaches her to speak. Invite students to plan their own performances of these two parts of the play, and then discuss Romeo's use of language. Is how he speaks of Rosaline different from how he speaks to Juliet?
- In Act 1, Scene 4, Romeo hesitates at attending the Capulet's feast because he is disturbed by a recent dream. Then, in Act 5, Scene 1, while banished in Mantua, Romeo recounts a dream he had in which he is dead. Revisit these parts of the play with students. Do his dreams predict his disastrous fate? Should Romeo pay more attention to them?

Suggested Resources

- www.folger.edu/
The Folger Shakespeare Library web site provides detailed information on the life and works of William Shakespeare. Visit the "Teach and Learn" section for a variety of resources that can be used with a number of Shakespeare's plays.
- www.rsc.org.uk/explore/
This site, by the Royal Shakespeare Company, is a great resource for both teachers and students on the performance of Shakespeare's plays. Synopses, performance histories, interviews, picture galleries and video clips are included.
- Boydell, John and Josiah. *Boydell Shakespeare Prints: 90 Engravings*. Dover Publications, Mineola, NY; 2004.
- Dunton-Downing, Leslie & Alan Riding. *Essential Shakespeare Handbook*. DK Publishing, New York, NY; 2004.
- Fallon, Robert Thomas. *The Theatergoer's Guide to Shakespeare's Characters*. Ivan R. Dee, Chicago, IL; 2004.

Selected Works Featured in This Show

- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Folger Shakespeare Library. Washington Square Press, New York, NY; 1992.
- Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*. Folger Shakespeare Library. Washington Square Press, New York, NY; 1992.
- Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Folger Shakespeare Library. Washington Square Press, New York, NY; 1993.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Folger Shakespeare Library. Washington Square Press, New York, NY; 1992.
- Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. Folger Shakespeare Library. Washington Square Press, New York, NY; 1993.
- Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*. Folger Shakespeare Library. Washington Square Press, New York, NY; 1992.

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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COMPLETE LIST OF TITLES

The Characters of Shakespeare

The Language of Shakespeare

Key Passages in Shakespeare's Plays



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