

A FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH SHAKESPEARE - HAMLET



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A successful introduction to Shakespeare at primary school will pay rich dividends both now and later. Here, Alison Chaplin describes a series of activities that offer ways in to a play using both 're-tellings' and Shakespeare's own words.

Exploring Shakespeare with children can seem a daunting prospect. Is it really possible to introduce primary pupils to texts that many adults see as vast, complex and full of difficult language? Is it worth making the effort with children of this age, when many primary teachers themselves remember struggling with the plays at secondary school?

The key to providing children with a fruitful first encounter with Shakespeare - one that makes a real contribution to primary work and will stand them in good stead later - lies in the approach. Rather than going through a play or even a 'story' version of it, from start to finish, I have found that building up a picture gradually using several 'access points', aids pupils' understanding, enables me to develop knowledge through short, discrete sessions, and provides 'tasters' which stimulate real interest in the plays prior to further reading of a story version and/or parts of the original.

This article gives an account of my approach using activities I have developed for primary work on Hamlet. However, these activities can easily be adapted for use with other plays. They are described here in a developmental lesson-plan order. Some require teachers to do pre-lesson preparation, whilst others simply require a good knowledge of the play's basic storyline. All can be used to meet a range of pupil needs, and all provide a cross-curricular approach which covers both literacy and drama work. Finally, all have been put into practise successfully.

CHOOSING A THEME TO EXPLORE

Every Shakespeare play has at least one strong theme which can be explored with children as a stand-alone issue. Sorting out a theme to work on can be time-consuming, so published books of supporting notes - the sort of 'study guides' used by GCSE and A level students - can be an invaluable resource here. These books offer a detailed analysis of a text's theme(s) and sub-theme(s) from which a choice can be made.

The main theme of Hamlet is revenge: Hamlet wants to avenge his father's murder and does so, with tragic consequences. Discussion and activities focused on this theme can provide access to both the story and character motivation. The following ideas, from initial discussions to practical drama activities, work well.

- Initiate discussion by asking: 'What does revenge mean?' and 'Is taking revenge justified?'
- Ask for examples from the children's experiences (no names!) of times when they have wanted to take revenge themselves.
- Discuss how an act of revenge can go wrong. The consequences might be worse than the person taking revenge intended. They could even be dire. Who might suffer as a result?
- Ask the children to suggest books, films or television programmes they know of that have dealt with revenge as either a main, or a minor, theme.
- Ask pupils to write a story based on the theme of revenge - warning them not to just recreate any of the books, films or television programmes previously discussed!
- Use these stories as a basis for creating and enacting short improvisations, or plays.
- Write these plays out in scripted form.
- Ask the children to look at their plays again and create one or two different endings, showing how things could have turned out had the characters made different choices or responded differently to events.

This approach enables children to encounter the play by comparing their stories about its theme with the one that Shakespeare created. Exploring a theme using their own experiences (which are what they often depict in their stories and improvisations) allows them to appreciate how situations affect characters' behaviour. It is also invaluable for enabling pupils to understand that Shakespeare wrote about issues which are still relevant today.

A SAMPLE OF SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE

Shakespeare's language is probably one of the most difficult aspects of his work to explore. Whilst there are many excellent simplified and 'story' versions available, and it may well be on one of these that the teacher is basing their study of a play at primary level, I believe that it is important for pupils - even primary pupils - to gain some knowledge of the original text. It is worth spending some time selecting a short extract from the play being studied - this could be a monologue by a character, or a scene with several characters - and making this the basis of a lesson.

When working on Hamlet, I have found the following extract to be ideal both for exploring the language and providing a basic understanding of the storyline. However, the approach I use could equally well be applied to a different extract from the play.

From Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 5

*Sleeping within my orchard,
My custom always of the afternoon,
Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole
With juice of cursed hebona in a vial,
And in the porches of my ears did pour
The leperous distilment; whose effect
Holds such an enmity with blood of man
That swift as quicksilver it courses through
The natural gates and alleys of the body,
And with sudden vigour it doth posset
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
The thin and wholesome blood. So did it mine.*

I type these words onto a single page, with no indication of who is speaking, or where the extract comes from, and I photocopy and distribute the passage. With the children sitting in a circle, I ask for volunteers to read a line each, taking the extract line-by-line rather than according to punctuation. I give some help with pronunciation where I feel it is required, but I try to avoid making an issue of it. It is far more important for children to understand what is being said than how it should be pronounced.

Discussion

When the children have finished reading through the extract, I ask the following questions:

What is being described?

What has happened?

Who is talking?

Who are they talking about?

Who are they talking to?

What was the person doing when he was murdered?

How was the poison administered?

What effect did the poison have on his body?

These questions, when correctly answered, indicate that someone is speaking to someone else about their murder by the second person's uncle; and I add further information to lead the children to the point where they know that a father is speaking to his son about the fact that the son's uncle (his own brother) has murdered him. In every case, children have then questioned me as to how the murdered man could speak, but they have accepted, quite readily, the fact that he has returned as a ghost to talk to his son! The only other information that I give at this stage is that the murdered man was a king, that the uncle married the king's widow (the son's mother), and that the uncle has inherited the King's power and is at the moment living without fear of ever being found out as a murderer. He does not know that his nephew now knows what has happened.

This information provides a hook to gain the children's interest. The extract has given them a way in to the story, and has also given them a first taste of speaking and interpreting Shakespeare's language. They should now be more interested in reading a story version of the play and/or further extracts.

THE POETRY - AND THE PUNCTUATION

Punctuation is one of the tools that Shakespeare uses to give his language its poetry and its meaning. To help pupils to understand the importance of punctuation in Shakespeare's writing - its function in creating rhythm and helping actors give expression to the words they speak - the following simple activity works well. The version I have given here uses the same extract from the play as the activities on language given above.

- The children take up positions in the room, taking their printed extract with them.
- They are asked to walk around the room slowly and carefully, reading the extract aloud and changing their direction every time they come to a punctuation mark - a comma, full stop, or semicolon.
- They are asked to walk around again, reading and changing direction with punctuation as before, but this time increasing their pace slightly on sections which read more quickly and slowing down on those which seem slow or ponderous.
- Finally, the children are asked to repeat the activity with the added requirement that they increase or lower the volume of their voices according to whether the section they are reading is fast or slow.
- The children then sit down and discuss which parts of the extract they thought were fast and why; which they thought were slow and why; what effect punctuation had on the rhythm of the language, and how this reflected what was being expressed, e.g. contrasting the drowsiness of the afternoon with the swift effect of the poison and the slow ending as both the story and the narrator die.

Presentation

This activity gives pupils a productive focus and helps to consolidate their understanding of the language. They can be asked to form groups of five or six to prepare a presentation of the extract. These should be performed aloud to the rest of the class, and pupils should be encouraged to experiment with their voices, to include simple movement, and to change reader at each punctuation mark. There is plenty of scope for children to be imaginative, for example creating realistic still images (freezes, tableaux) or miming actions which represent the narrative, or making movements which are not a literal reflection of the text but which convey the mood and rhythm of the words.

The class can view all these presentations and then discuss how effective each was, and why. For example, discussion can centre on which presentation was the best for conveying to the audience the literal meaning of the text and which managed best to convey the mood of the extract.

Interpretation

As a final activity on poetry and punctuation, children can be asked to go into their groups again and to rewrite the extract in their own words. They should use strongly descriptive language, just as Shakespeare does (though they should be dissuaded from lifting too many words from Shakespeare's text), and should try to use punctuation to convey pace and rhythm and to reflect the moods and actions that are being expressed.



When the rewrites are completed, the children can present them, using the same methods of presentation as before. Each pair of performances ('original' and 're-write') can then be discussed and compared to decide which was the more powerful and which managed to convey the mood most effectively.

At the end of this session, pupils will be familiar with the rhythm of Shakespeare's language and far more confident in their ability to understand and interpret it. Their familiarity and confidence can both be built on by employing the same methods to explore longer extracts from the play and, eventually complete scenes.

CHARACTERS AND THEIR ACTIONS

As with most tragedies, the inexorable deterioration of the situation in Hamlet is the result of certain characters taking certain actions at certain moments, as the audience looks on, suspecting or knowing that the characters' choices will lead to tragic consequences. Although the behaviour of some of Shakespeare's characters lacks an obvious explanation, or suddenly changes for no obvious reason, and other behaviour loses something in the 'translation' between Shakespeare's time and our own, most of his characters are fully formed, fully flawed, and totally understandable today as human beings. Using these characters to access the text provides children with an understanding that Shakespeare's plays contain 'real' people whose emotions they can understand and which are not dissimilar to those seen in any popular TV soap opera.

The following activities are best done as a follow-on from those described above; but they can be employed to access any text once children have gained a basic understanding of its themes and language.

- The children, in pairs, improvise the scene between Hamlet and his father's ghost where the ghost tells Hamlet about his murder, taking it beyond the point at which the extract finished. They should be advised to focus specifically on what happened next:

How did Hamlet react?

What did he say?

How did the ghost respond?

What did Hamlet decide to do?

The class can view all of the improvisations and discuss how realistic the characters' actions and reactions were, what they felt about Hamlet's chosen course of action, and what outcomes this might have.

- The children are asked to write up these improvisations in scripted form, adding extra lines before the extract begins to explain why Hamlet's ghost has decided to tell his son what happened.
- The children perform their scripted pieces, and again the class discusses the realism of the characterisation.



- The children get into pairs, with one child becoming Hamlet and another a journalist who is questioning him. The journalist must discover what Hamlet knows, how he feels about the information the ghost has given him, and what he has decided to do about it. Hamlet can decide to reveal as much or as little information to the journalist as he wishes.
- The interviews are written up as magazine or newspaper articles with the journalist commenting - positively or negatively - on Hamlet's chosen course of action.
- The children are asked to change partners and improvise another scene, this time between Hamlet and his uncle (the murderer).
 - Does Hamlet confront him with what he knows?*
 - Does he try to get his uncle to confess?*
 - How does he do this?*
 - Does he interrogate his uncle to try and confirm that what his father has told him is true?*
- These improvisations are written up as diary entries from the perspective of each character. For example, Hamlet might write a diary entry which describes what he knows, what he suspects, how he feels, and what he intends to do about the situation; Hamlet's uncle (King Claudius) might write a diary entry which confirms his guilt, describes how he feels about Hamlet knowing what he's done, and says what he intends to do to escape his predicament.
- In groups of three or four, the children write the scripts for two contrasting scenes between Hamlet and his mother, Queen Gertrude, who is now married to King Claudius. The first script assumes that Queen Gertrude knows nothing about the murder; the second assumes that she knows everything but has still married King Claudius. The children should be encouraged to consider the following points when writing these scripted pieces:
 - Does Hamlet confront Gertrude?*
 - How much does Hamlet tell her?*
 - How does he feel about her marriage?*
 - Is he angry or sympathetic towards her?*
 - If Queen Gertrude is innocent, how does she react to her son's devastating news?*The children should begin each scene with Hamlet saying, 'I'd like to talk to you about something'.
- When the two contrasting scripts have been written, the children perform them or read them aloud to the rest of the class. Again, the realism of the character portrayals is discussed, together with the believability of the character responses and the effectiveness of the language used. These scripts can also be compared with scripts for soap opera episodes.

It does not matter that these scenes may bear little resemblance to what actually occurs in the play. The main objective of the activities is to encourage children to view the central characters as three-dimensional human beings, rather than simply as literary figures. When children have explored all the possibilities of what might have happened following King Hamlet's terrible revelation, they will be eager to learn what actually did happen. The story of Hamlet's anger towards his mother, the enactment of the play-within-a-play complete with the King's guilty reaction to it, and the fatal duel set up by the King to dispose of Hamlet does not disappoint!

Other characters in the play (for example Ophelia) can be explored in a similar manner. All that is needed is some preliminary reading about them in the original play or a story version, or some explanation from the teacher of their relationship to Hamlet and their part in the plot. The ultimate aim is for the children to be interested in these people and concerned about what happens to them - and this is achievable.

MAKING THE MOST OF A DRAMATIC STORY

The work I am suggesting on the storyline of the play requires a certain amount of preparation in advance of any activities. Most importantly, the teacher needs to know the storyline of the original play really well. There are a number of books available which offer plot outlines: for example, the books in the 'Letts Explore Literature' series of literature guides contain a plot synopsis for each play covered; and the books in the 'Graphic Shakespeare' series provide a comprehensive and easy-to-read introduction to Shakespeare's plays that includes consideration of the storylines. Of the books for children, Terry Deary's Top Ten Shakespeare Stories gives a humorous guide to storylines that can provide a different perspective. Another way of preparing for children's questions about the storyline of the play is to buy a copy of the play on cassette tape or CD and listen to the actors perform either whilst simultaneously reading the play text or whilst performing other activities.

Once children are familiar with the theme and story of the play from reading a story version and/or working on some of the activities given above, the following activities provide ways of consolidating and developing their understanding.

- The teacher works with the whole class to create a complete synopsis of the play. In this, the events are listed in short sentences in the order in which they occur. Teachers should be prepared for this to take some time!
- The children get into groups of five or six, and each group is allocated two or three lines of the synopsis. They prepare improvisations representing each sentence. The class views the improvisations in chronological order.

- The children get into different groups of five or six. Through discussion, they select important scenes, or moments from the play - ones where the decisions made have dramatic consequences, or where essential information is conveyed. They may choose up to a maximum of four scenes or moments, and are then asked to create a still image (freeze frame/tableau) representing each of their selections. The class views all the still images and discuss whether any other scenes could, or should, have been included.
- Working individually, the children are asked to write a news report based on any event from the play. Many will select the murder of King Hamlet, but it is worth encouraging them to go for other events, such as the death of Polonius, Ophelia's suicide, or the final duel.
- Working in new groups of four to six, the children are asked to prepare and perform a television news programme - with a news reader and special correspondents - based upon the news reports they have written. The lead story will, obviously, be the murder of King Hamlet but two or three of the other reports should also be included, along with either a weather bulletin or sports round-up! Each group's news programme is presented in turn to the rest of the class.

These activities should help to convince children that Shakespeare is exciting and relevant, and that his stories are full of drama, human interest and constant plotline twists and turns - in fact, everything we look for in a good book, play or film!

If the teacher who first introduces children to Shakespeare approaches the work with a high level of enthusiasm, and enables them to bring to life real characters and dramatic storylines, then there is a good chance that later work on the plays will be looked forward to and enjoyed, rather than being seen as a chore to be endured. It is my hope that some of the activities I have outlined here will enable teachers to achieve this.

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Alison is also the author of 'Performance Plays', which include three Shakespeare adaptations: *Hamlet - The Murder Mystery*; *Love Me Tender* (a soap opera version of *Romeo and Juliet*) and *Three Murders, a Suicide and a Near Miss* (*Othello*)

References and Bibliography

For teachers

'Letts Explore Literature', a series of guides published by Letts Educational: *Antony and Cleopatra; Hamlet; Julius Caesar; King Lear; Macbeth; The Merchant of Venice; A Midsummer Night's Dream; Henry V, Othello; Romeo and Juliet* and *Twelfth Night, The Winter's Tale*.

The 'Graphic Shakespeare' series, published by Evans Brothers: *Julius Caesar; Romeo and Juliet; Macbeth, Twelfth Night, The Tempest*.

For children

Shakespeare Stories by Leon Garfield, illustrated by Michael Foreman, published by Puffin Books. An audio cassette version is available.

Stories from Shakespeare by Geraldine McCaughrean, illustrated by Antony Maitland, published by Heinemann in their 'New Windmill Retellings' series

Tales from Shakespeare by Charles and Mary Lamb, published by Wordsworth

Top Ten Shakespeare Stories by Terry Deary, illustrated by Michael Tickner, published by Scholastic Children's Books.

Favourite Tales from Shakespeare by Bernard Miles, published by the Hamlyn Publishing Group. (Now out of print.)

