

Race in Shakespeare



This sample project links to the listen live/download audio clip

Level 1

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Level 3



The world today is far more diverse than it was in Shakespeare's time. In our age, racial and religious tolerance is celebrated, and intolerance is not acceptable.

Do you think modern films, plays and television shows reflect this tolerance and diversity?

- Are particular groups of people typecast as villains? If so, who are they and why do you think this is?
- Is there a good balance of race and religion or do some groups get more or less coverage than others? If so, who are they and is the image positive or negative?
- Has your own ethnic background or religious beliefs been unfairly portrayed in anything you have seen?

Shylock shows his humanity, yet he is not the hero of the play.

- How does Shakespeare use Shylock?
- What is Shakespeare saying about humanity?



Research and compile a list of Shakespeare's plays where the action is wholly or partially set in Britain (refer to worksheets 2a and 2d).

- Split the list into comedies, tragedies and histories.
- Do your findings tell us anything about how Shakespeare felt about his homeland?



All of the history plays plus The Merry Wives of Windsor, King Lear, Macbeth and Cymbeline are set in Britain.



Is Shakespeare a writer for the world or is he absolutely a British or English writer?

Write a short report to answer the question. Consider:

- Do his plays advance the cause for a united England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland?
- Do his plays advance the cause for England staying English?
- How important was a national identity in Shakespeare's age?
- His work is performed and published all over the world. How do you think modern audiences and readers react to him?

Write a short soliloquy from the perspective of someone who feels they've been judged unfairly by the world. Here are some suggestions for your choice of subject:

- A teenager judged by their appearance
- A disabled actor always cast in shows about disability, never in shows that include a disabled character
- Someone whose religious beliefs are feared or pre-judged following fanatical or extreme behaviour from others of the same faith



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Level 3



Some people might argue that Shakespeare was racist, because of his portrayal of non-European characters and the fact that there are so few of them in his plays. What do you think?

Consider:

- England, Scotland and Wales form an island. How much was known about the world beyond their shores in Shakespeare's day?
- His work does include racially diverse characters. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare reveals Shylock's humanity in an age where Jews were routinely stereotyped as evil moneylenders.



Imagine Shakespeare had discovered the Earl of Essex's plot to frame Lopez and knew of his ambitions for the crown. Write a letter to Queen Elizabeth I in which he:

- Defends Lopez and expresses his beliefs in the Jewish people's humanity
- Explains why Essex is not to be trusted – he has designs on the crown and plans to set up the innocent Lopez
- Says he will write more plays with cautionary themes on the subject of plotting against the crown.



Divide the class into small groups to devise a short play, especially written for the Queen, to be performed at court. The story should reveal Essex's plots and ambitions, without mentioning him by name. It should include:

- A treacherous favourite
- A Jewish doctor falsely accused of plotting against the crown
- A soliloquy that expresses the Jewish doctor's humanity

Perform the play in class. Allocate the roles of Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Essex and have other students question their reactions when the play is over.



Two or three short scenes would be ideal to build the action, but it can be presented as a single scene.

This exercise echoes Shakespeare's use of a 'play within a play' and it may be useful to play track 31, an excerpt from A Midsummer Night's Dream in which a group of nobles watch and comment upon a play.

It may also be a good opportunity to read Act 2 Scene 2 from Hamlet.

Level 3



Jews were expelled from England in 1290 and in 1594 the strength of this prejudice allowed Elizabeth I's enemies to frame her personal physician, Roderigo Lopez, and have him executed on a trumped-up charge of attempting to assassinate the Queen.

- In which other periods of history have Jews been discriminated against?
- Which other groups suffered persecution in 16th century England?
- In 1620, which group of people left Plymouth, England, in search of greater religious freedom in the New World?



Jews were most notably discriminated against in Nazi Germany 1933 – 45, but also throughout history.

Protestants and Catholics suffered persecution in 16th century England, depending on who was on the throne.

The Pilgrims left England for America on the Mayflower.



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Research and compile a list of all the non-white characters in Shakespeare's plays.



They are Othello, Aaron the Moor in Titus Andronicus, The Prince in The Merchant of Venice and Caliban in The Tempest.

Essay

Shakespeare gives us a stereotyped vision of Jews in *The Merchant of Venice*. Discuss.

Points to consider:

- How were other playwrights presenting other races and religions at the time?
- Is Shylock a complete stereotype?
- By presenting different characters from different religions and races, was Shakespeare helping to acknowledge to his audience that there was a wider world out there?

