

ENTER WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

The Early Years

There are a large number of unknowns in the early life of Shakespeare. It is also difficult to get exact dates for the first performances of many of his plays. The most likely facts are as follows:

Around the year 1594 Shakespeare is living in London and is writing plays for the Burbage family. At this time James Burbage owned the Theatre to the north of the City while his rival, Philip Henslowe owned the Rose to the south.

Perhaps Shakespeare had been part of a team writing collectively earlier, but the first plays written solely by Shakespeare seem to date from this time.

1594-96 or earlier

Henry VI Part 1	History
Henry VI Part 2	History
Henry VI Part 3	History
The Two Gentlemen of Verona	Comedy
The Taming of the Shrew	Comedy
The Comedy of Errors	Comedy
Titus Andronicus	Tragedy
Richard III	History
The Comedy of Errors	Comedy
Love's Labours Lost	Comedy
Richard II	History
Romeo & Juliet	Tragedy
A Midsummer Night's Dream	Comedy
King John	History
The Merchant of Venice	Comedy
Henry IV – Part I	History
The Merry Wives of Windsor	Comedy
Henry IV – Part 2	History
Much Ado About Nothing	Comedy
Henry V	History
Julius Caesar	Roman Tragedy
As You Like It	Comedy
Twelfth Night	Comedy

In the first ten or twelve years of his writing career, Shakespeare had written some 23 plays. These plays consisted of 11 Comedies, 9 Histories, and 3 Tragedies.

The Middle Years

By the year 1600 Shakespeare was a wealthy property owner. He was now a partner in the Burbage family business, and a part-owner of the splendid new Globe Playhouse which had been built on the south bank of the Thames. This theatre was a neighbour of the Henslowe's Rose, and was bigger and much more successful.

Shakespeare himself had bought property in his home town of Stratford on Avon. He was 36 years old – definitely middle-aged for the life expectancy of that age. His reputation as a playwright lay in exciting history plays and crowd-pleasing comedies.

And then came the change. He re-wrote Thomas Kyd's old play "Hamlet" and created a great tragedy – a play that would forever represent a pinnacle of great art and stand as one of the greatest pieces of world literature. From being a minor tragedian, Shakespeare became the greatest of them all. And over the next six years, among the histories and comedies that had made his fortune, he followed "Hamlet" with further great tragedies that changed the nature of theatre and English Literature..

The plays of these middle years were:

1600	Hamlet	Tragedy
1602	Troilus and Cressida	Comedy
1603-04	Othello	Tragedy
	Measure for Measure	Comedy
	All's Well that Ends Well	Comedy
	Timon of Athens	Tragedy
	King Lear	Tragedy
	Macbeth	Tragedy
	Antony and Cleopatra	Roman Tragedy
1607	Pericles	Comedy
1608	Coriolanus	Roman Tragedy

The Later Years

By now Shakespeare was in his mid-Forties, and seems, perhaps, to have retired and left London to live in his home town of Stratford-on-Avon. From now until his death ten years later, it seems he wrote just three plays, and possibly helped edit or correct a few other plays written mainly by other writers. The plays of the later years are:

1609	The Winter's Tale	Comedy
1610	Cymbeline	Comedy
1611	The Tempest	Comedy
1613-14	The Two Noble Kinsmen (written with John Fletcher)	

The Plays of William Shakespeare: Comedy, Tragedy or History?

In "Hamlet" (Act II, Scene 2) Polonius announces that the visiting troupe of actors are:

"The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene undividable or poem unlimited. Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light."

Polonius could think of at least eight different categories for plays. Shakespeare's plays are generally put into three categories: Comedies, Histories, Tragedies. But the boundaries between the different categories are not always clear. There are ten plays generally included in a list of Shakespeare's tragedies. In (approximate) order of writing these are:

Titus Andronicus
Romeo and Juliet
Julius Caesar
Hamlet
Othello
Macbeth
King Lear
Antony and Cleopatra
Coriolanus
Timon of Athens

T H E
Tragicall Historie of
H A M L E T,
Prince of Denmarke.
By William Shakespeare.

Newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much
again as it was, according to the true and perfect
Coppie.



AT LONDON,
Printed by I. R. for N. L. and are to be sold at his
shoppe vnder Saint Dunstons Church in
Fleetstreet. 1607.

When Shakespeare's works were first published (in the First Folio 1623) "Cymbeline" and "Troilus and Cressida" were called "comedies". Later editions classified "Timon of Athens" as a comedy.

"Richard II" and "Richard III" are listed in the History plays, but both their leading characters have tragic aspects. "The Merchant of Venice" is a comedy, but the downfall of the Jew, Shylock, has a strong tragic element.

Later scholars have changed the classification of "Julius Caesar", "Antony and Cleopatra" and "Coriolanus". Because of their historical connection they have been taken out of the Tragedy listing and put into a new category – "The Roman Plays".

No one, however, has any doubt whatsoever that a central group of four plays –

Hamlet
Othello
Macbeth
King Lear

stand together as Shakespeare's fullest development of tragedy. These four represent the "Great Tragedies". They will be dealt with separately and individually in a later section. To help see the four "Great Tragedies" in the context of the overall Shakespearean output, it is worth a short examination of the tragical elements in the rest of his works, in the comedies, histories, and especially the other Shakespearean plays listed as tragedies.

Some Tragic Aspects in the Histories and Comedies

Richard II

This is a "History Play", but the character of King Richard dominates the play and his eventual death has strong elements of tragedy. Richard is psychologically flawed. He believes he is divinely appointed by God to be King. He cannot accept the demands of his noblemen which will force him to lose some of his powers.

- His inner conflicts are exposed in a series of soliloquies, much in the manner of Hamlet.
- He is brought to his death because of the tragic flaw in his character, much in the manner of the leading characters in the four great tragedies.



Richard III

This is another of the History Plays where a forceful character is destroyed because of a flaw in his character. Richard III is a first-class villain, so glitteringly evil and so openly ambitious and scheming that audiences cannot help but admire him. In spite of his physical handicaps he achieves all his ambitions through manipulation and breath-taking daring. His flaw is that he is thoroughly and totally evil. His intelligence and wit would have made him a very great king if he did not have this evil flaw. There is an element of tragedy in his death – a potentially great, brave and fearless man has been brought down – but it is not a real tragedy. It is justice.



- He addresses the audience directly in a number of soliloquies and reveals his innermost thoughts – though sadly they are all evil!
- His potential greatness is destroyed by a character flaw – a major flaw since he is totally and irredeemably evil.

The Merchant of Venice

Shylock is a Jewish money-lender, despised by the Christians in Venice. He lends money to Antonio on a joking basis: if the debt is not paid, he will accept a pound of Antonio's flesh in return. Antonio's ships all sink and meantime Shylock's daughter runs away with a Christian and Shylock receives more bad treatment.

Shylock is so destroyed by his daughter's betrayal that, in his madness, he demands the actual pound of flesh. He is tricked into believing he will get it and refuses mercy to Antonio. Then he is cheated by a legal problem: he is entitled to a pound of flesh but not to any blood, and if he sheds any Christian blood he will die. He is defeated and broken

- There are touches of Senecan tragedy in this play, and there is great sympathy for Shylock because of the way he is treated.
- His downfall is as a result of his mad desire for total revenge – a kind of “tragic flaw”.

The most excellent Historie of the Merchant of Venice.

With the extreame crueltie of Shylocke the Iewe
towards the sayd Merchant, in cutting a iust pound
of his flesh: and the obtaining of Portia
by the choyse of three
chests.

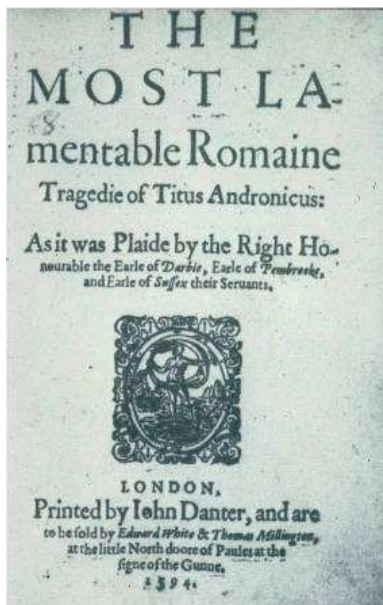
As it hath bene diuers times acted by the Lord
Chamberlaine his Seruants.

Written by William Shakespeare.



AT LONDON,
Printed by I. R. for Thomas Heyes,
and are to be sold in Paules Church-yard, at the
signe of the Greene Dragon.
1600.

Some Aspects of the Plays Listed as Tragedies



Titus Andronicus

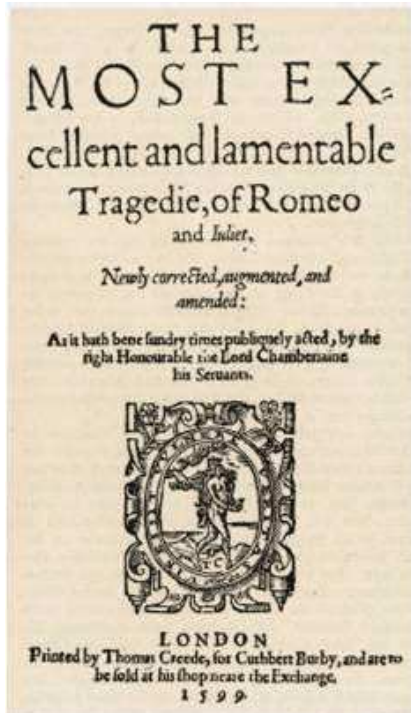
Shakespeare's first tragedy is a melodrama definitely written in imitation of Seneca and is a bloody tale of revenge and madness. Titus is a victorious Roman general. His daughter, Lavinia, is raped and mutilated. His two sons are executed on false charges. Titus kills his own daughter, Lavinia, because she has been dishonoured and then seeks to revenge the death of his three children.

In revenge, Titus kills the two sons of his enemy, Tamora, and tricks her into eating a pie into which her two sons have been baked. He then kills Tamora and is himself killed. It is violent and crude and was enormously popular. It can be seen very much in the style of today's horror-movies, and very much appealing to a new, young playwright like Shakespeare.

Although a long way away from being a great tragedy, it was a good example of the Senecan drama of the time. It does have a few glimpses of what Shakespeare would create in his later works.

- Titus pretends to be insane but then shows signs of real insanity (a glimpse of the future Hamlet)
- Titus is a simple man, a military leader who is easily manipulated by the villain Aaron (a glimpse of the future Othello and the villainous Iago)
- Titus commits his crimes in the name of honour (but he never becomes aware of his errors in the way that King Lear does.)

Romeo and Juliet



Based on an old Italian story, this portrays two families, the Montagues and the Capulets, who have a long-standing family quarrel. Romeo, the young son of the Montagues, falls in love with Juliet, the daughter of the Capulets. These “star-crossed lovers” have a pure innocent love, which contrasts with the pride of their parents and the worldly pursuits of other characters in the play like Mercutio and the Nurse.

The achievement of Shakespeare in this play lies in the beautiful verse, the breath-taking innocence and true love of the famous balcony-scene. The tragedy lies in the inability of the two families to rise above their petty quarrels. Romeo and Juliet are both dead at the end not through any major flaws in their own characters, but because of the circumstances around them.

Shakespeare establishes an important theme in “Romeo and Juliet” :

- the human spirit is greater than its mortal destiny.
- This will be an important element in all the great tragedies.

Julius Caesar

This is the story of the events surrounding the assassination of Julius Caesar. Caesar is killed quite early in the play but he remains the central figure, re-appearing as a ghost at various points in the play. This is a political play. Brutus truly believes that Caesar’s ambitions to become Emperor of Rome will destroy the democracy of the Republic. Killing Caesar is an act he must do for the good of the State. However, afterwards he and his fellow assassins are struck with a guilty conscience

This play gives the first example of what will be a distinctive part of the great tragedies:

- Brutus reaches a tragic end because of his own virtues.
- His idealism leads to disaster for himself and his world because he is following a flawed political ideal.



Antony and Cleopatra

This was written after the four great tragedies and is the story of the doomed lovers, Mark Antony and the Queen of Egypt, Cleopatra. It is, in some ways, a grown-up version of “Romeo and Juliet”, and the love-poetry in the later scenes of the play is beautiful and powerful. The action takes place against a vast Imperial canvas of Rome and Egypt. The tragedy is not so much created by personal flaws in character; it is social, political and outside forces which really lead to the downfall.

- Cleopatra shows great human dignity as she accepts defeat and faces her own death. This echoes the dignity in defeat shown by Macbeth and Hamlet.

Coriolanus

Possibly the last tragedy written by Shakespeare, this play has led later scholars to wonder exactly where Shakespeare's political sympathies lay. Coriolanus, an aristocrat who has successfully saved Rome from an enemy attack, shows contempt for the common people and is therefore banished from Rome. In his anger he joins his former enemies and attacks the city. He is about to destroy Rome when he eventually decides not to, following the pleas of his mother, Volumnia, and his wife, Virgilia. Because he spares Rome, he is captured and killed.

- This is another example of a great man whose greatness is accompanied by moral and psychological failings that bring about his downfall.
- Coriolanus, like Cleopatra, shows great human dignity when faced with his death.

Timon of Athens

Timon is a wealthy Greek lord who suddenly loses all his money. His friends all desert him, and Timon becomes disillusioned and bitter with the world. His downfall is a result of his own failings. Much of the play is a satire on people's attitude to wealth and money. The play is loosely constructed and the only real character development is of Timon himself. Some critics feel the play is unfinished and is only a draft version. Because of the satire, it is often placed in the category of the Comedies.

A summary of tragic elements in Shakespeare's plays written before and after the four "Great Tragedies"

- **There is a powerful central character whose most outstanding personal quality – his "tragic flaw" – is the cause of his downfall and catastrophe.**
- **He is often the victim of his own strength of character – he cannot change or adapt to the circumstances around him**
- **He can dominate all around him with his force of personality**
- **His inner conflicts are frequently revealed to the audience by means of soliloquies**
- **Unable to alter the evil around him, he often falls into evil himself.**
- **The leading character grows in self-awareness throughout the play, though he cannot halt the forthcoming disaster**
- **He faces his final death with a great show of human dignity and acceptance**

All these characteristics and elements will be found in the four great tragedies:

Hamlet
Othello
Macbeth
King Lear

– but to them will be added much more. They will show a much greater knowledge of the human condition and a much deeper insight into the nature of humanity and life itself. An examination of each work individually will reveal why these four works are amongst the greatest works of literature ever created.



The famous English actor, Laurence Olivier, in the 1948 film version of "Hamlet"

THE FOUR GREAT TRAGEDIES

HAMLET

Written in 1602, this is probably the most famous play written in the English language. There had been earlier play versions of the same story. The earlier plays were "Revenge Tragedies" – all about Prince Hamlet getting revenge on Claudius, the man who murdered his father.

Shakespeare's play is much more than a "Revenge Play". It is a study of life and death, and the reason for our existence on earth.

THE MAIN CHARACTERS

The Ghost of Hamlet's father

The dead King Hamlet, killed by his own brother, Claudius. He was the father of Prince Hamlet.

Prince Hamlet

The Prince of Denmark. The son of the dead King Hamlet and Queen Gertrude.

King Claudius

The present King of Denmark, Hamlet's uncle. He murdered his own brother to get the throne, and then married his dead brother's wife, Gertrude.

Queen Gertrude

The Queen of Denmark, Hamlet's mother. She was married to the first King Hamlet, and later to Claudius, his brother,

Horatio

A soldier, and Hamlet's friend

Polonius

A chief Minister in the Government of Denmark. Father of Laertes and Ophelia.

Laertes

Polonius's son

Ophelia

Polonius's daughter

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern

students from the same University as Hamlet

The Players

a group of touring actors

The Gravedigger



Hamlet and his father's ghost—the painting by William Blake

THE STORY OF HAMLET

It is midnight at Elsinore Castle in Denmark, and the guards see a ghost. It is the ghost of the dead King Hamlet. King Hamlet died suddenly when his son, the young Prince Hamlet was away at University. The dead King's brother, Claudius, has become the new King of Denmark and has married Gertrude. She was the wife of the old King Hamlet and the mother of the young Prince Hamlet.

Polonius, one of the chief ministers at the Court, has a son called Laertes and a daughter called Ophelia. Laertes is leaving for France, but tells his sister to be careful not to fall in love with young Hamlet.

Horatio, one of the guards, goes to tell Hamlet about the ghost, and Hamlet goes to the castle walls at the next midnight. The ghost appears and calls for revenge. The ghost says Hamlet must kill Claudius, because Claudius is a murderer who killed his own brother in order to take over the kingdom.

Hamlet is not sure if it really is the ghost of his own dead father, or perhaps a trick by the Devil.

Hamlet decides to pretend to be insane, and to act

in a strange way to try and find out the truth. In his pretended madness, he tells Ophelia to go away and that he does not love her. He says

“Get thee to a nunnery”

– telling her to join a holy order and forget about Love.) Polonius and King Claudius are watching secretly, worried about Hamlet's strange behaviour. Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, students from Hamlet's University, arrive at the Castle. A group of travelling actors also arrive. Hamlet asks the actors to put a new scene into the play they will perform. This extra scene will show a man killing a king – and show it in the same way the Ghost said he was killed by Claudius. Hamlet says

“The play's the thing, wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King”

Hamlet watches Claudius during the performance to see if Claudius looks guilty. Claudius does, indeed, look guilty. He shouts a lot and rushes out of the room during the new “murder” scene.

Hamlet now knows that Claudius is guilty. He goes to kill Claudius, but finds Claudius kneeling in prayer. Hamlet thinks if you kill a man while he is praying, then his soul will go straight to Heaven, and not to Hell, which is what Claudius deserves. Hamlet wonders if he should kill a man at all. If Hamlet kills Claudius, then isn't Hamlet himself just as guilty of killing? Hamlet is so distressed, he even thinks about killing himself. He says:

“To be, or not to be, That is the question”

Claudius knows he has to get rid of Hamlet. He says he will send Hamlet to England to cure his madness. But secretly, he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that Hamlet must be killed on the journey to England, and it must look like an accident.

Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, asks Hamlet to come and talk to her in her private bedroom. The politician, Polonius, hides in Gertrude's room to listen to the conversation. Hamlet sees the curtain moving and thinks it is Claudius. Hamlet uses his knife to stab through the curtains. He is horrified to discover he has killed an innocent old man and not the wicked King. Suddenly the Ghost appears



John Millais' famous painting of the drowned Ophelia

again and tells Hamlet to stop wasting time and to kill Claudius. Hamlet's mother is amazed. She cannot see the ghost and thinks Hamlet is talking to the air! She thinks he is definitely out of his mind.

Hamlet leaves for England. Ophelia goes quite mad: the man she loves has killed her father, and has now left Denmark. She has nothing left to live for. She drowns herself. Hamlet discovers Claudius's plan that Rosencrantz & Guildenstern should kill him on the ship, so he manages to kill the two of them instead, and returns secretly to Denmark. On his way back he comes to a graveyard where he meets his friend, Horatio.

A gravedigger is digging up old bones and throws out a skull. The gravedigger tells Hamlet this is the skull of the old Palace Clown, Yorick. When Hamlet was a child he used to play with Yorick. He holds the skull and says

"Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest".

A funeral procession arrives. Hamlet is shocked to learn the dead person is Ophelia. Her brother, Laertes, attacks Hamlet and blames him for the death of Ophelia.

Back at the Castle, Claudius learns that his murder plan has failed. He arranges a party to welcome Hamlet home, and suggests, for entertainment, that Laertes and Hamlet should have a friendly sword fight. Claudius secretly puts poison on the end of Laertes' sword – so that if Hamlet should get a small cut, the poison will kill him. As a back-up plan, he also puts poison in a glass of wine – which he will give to Hamlet if the first plan fails.

But things go wrong. Both Laertes and Hamlet are wounded with the poisoned sword, and, by mistake, Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup. Hamlet, dying from the poison, kills Claudius. The stage now has four dead bodies on it.

The King of Norway, King Fortinbras, arrives and Horatio tells him what has happened. Horatio holds the dying Hamlet in his arms and says:

"Goodnight, sweet Prince, and flights of angels guide thee to thy rest."

OTHELLO

Shakespeare's choice of a black African as a hero for his play is most unusual. At this time, black was a colour associated with evil and death. In the theatre of this time, a "Moor" – Moorish people – and Jews were usually the villains and the bad people.

In an earlier play, "Titus Andronicus" Shakespeare has created another black role – Aaron the Moor – and he is completely evil. Showing Othello, a black man, as a noble, powerful, good man was most unusual. Othello's downfall is his jealousy, and nothing to do with his blackness.

This is a very fast play. Most of the action takes place within 24 hours. A number of scenes begin in the middle of a conversation. The horror of the play comes because it is unstoppable. We know what Iago is planning and we are forced to watch it all happen.



Poster for an 1884 production with the American actor Thomas W. Keene

THE MAIN CHARACTERS

Othello

A Moor (a black man) in charge of the armies of Venice

Cassio

Othello's lieutenant (second in command)

Bianca

Cassio's mistress (girlfriend)

Iago

perhaps Shakespeare's greatest villain

Emilia – Iago's wife

Roderigo – a soldier in love with Desdemona

Duke of Venice – the ruler of Venice

THE STORY OF OTHELLO

Othello is the commander of the army. He has chosen the handsome, young Cassio to be his Second-in-Command. This has made Iago very angry. Iago thinks he himself should have been chosen. Iago wants revenge. Othello, who is a black man, is in love with a white girl called Desdemona. They are planning to get married. Iago gets another soldier, Roderigo, to go to Desdemona's father and tell him about this planned marriage. Iago hopes to get the marriage stopped.

However, this plan doesn't work. When Desdemona's father complains to the Duke of Venice, the Duke has a meeting with Othello and Desdemona. He believes they really do love each other and says he will allow them to marry.

The Duke asks Othello to take the army to Cyprus to stop a Turkish attack. He gives permission for Desdemona to go with Othello. By the time they reach Cyprus, the Turkish army has gone away.

Iago tries again. This time he gets Cassio very drunk, and arranges for Roderigo to fight with Cassio

in the street. Othello is so angry that his second-in-command should behave so badly that he dismisses Cassio and makes him, once more, just an ordinary soldier.

Iago, who has ruined the career of Cassio, now decides to ruin the marriage of Othello and Desdemona. He will try to make Othello think that his wife, Desdemona, and Cassio are secret lovers. Firstly, he tells Cassio to go and see Desdemona and ask her to talk to her husband. Perhaps, if Desdemona asks Othello, then Othello will give Cassio his job back. Secondly, Iago goes to Othello and tell him to be careful of Cassio and Desdemona – Othello should watch for secret meetings or private talks – in case Desdemona is being unfaithful to her husband.

Othello is mad with jealousy. He asks Iago to help him kill Cassio, and promises that Iago will become the new second-in-command. Othello is so jealous that he says once Cassio is dead, he will then kill Desdemona. Othello is warned about the power of jealousy:

**“O, beware my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on”**

Iago now steals Desdemona's handkerchief and hides it in Cassio's bedroom. When Othello sees Cassio's mistress, Bianca, with Desdemona's handkerchief, Othello now truly believes his wife is unfaithful. Iago persuades Roderigo to kill Cassio, but it goes wrong. Roderigo ends up bleeding. As Cassio walks away in the dark, Iago rushes up and stabs Cassio in the leg. Cassio cries out in pain. Othello hears this and believes Cassio is dead.

Now that Cassio is dead – so he believes – Othello goes home to kill Desdemona. Iago is now very busy. First he kills Roderigo (so that Iago's evil plans will remain a secret) and then he pretends to “find” Cassio in the street. He tells Cassio that he saw the person who stabbed Cassio in the leg – and that person was Bianca, Cassio's own mistress. Iago now tells his own wife, Emilia, to go to Desdemona and tell her that Roderigo is dead and Cassio wounded. Othello is the first to get to Desdemona's bedroom. She is asleep. He kisses her, wakes her, and tells her she is guilty. He asks her:

“Have you prayed tonight, Desdemona?”

Although she says she loves Othello and she is innocent, he takes her pillow, puts it over her face, and kills her. He says:

“Put out the light, and then put out the light”



Emilia rushes in, and, with her dying breath, Desdemona again says she is innocent, but no one should blame Othello. Desdemona dies. Iago and some others come in the room and Emilia tells them Iago is the man who has caused all this to happen.

Othello sees the truth and tries to kill Iago. Iago kills Emilia and runs out of the room. Othello blames himself and commits suicide. Outside the room Iago is captured by the soldiers and taken away.

Some Extra Notes on “Othello”

THREE MAJOR THEMES:

The three major themes in “Othello” are

- Jealousy
- the power struggle between the sexes
- the problems of race and colour.

JEALOUSY

The central theme of “Othello” is jealousy and the destructive power of this emotion. Shakespeare describes it as:

“. . . the green-eyed monster, which doth mock
The meat it feeds on.” (III.3)

There is a strong sense of devouring and being devoured in the images of this play. Iago describes Othello as being “eaten up with passion”. These lines suggest the exact nature of Othello’s jealousy: once he believes his wife is unfaithful, his jealousy feeds on itself and leads him to behave monstrously.

There are three different kinds of jealousy in “Othello”:

- Iago’s personal and professional jealousy which sets events in motion
- Bianca’s suspicions, which closely mirror those of Othello, and
- Othello’s own towering jealousy which propels him towards tragedy.

All three of these people have the same reasons for jealousy: both men are jealous because they think they have lost the love of their wives; Bianca is jealous because she thinks she’s lost the love of Cassio. Jealousy makes both Othello and Iago murderous and violent.

- Iago’s jealous nature is cool, calculating and thoroughly evil, and never to be satisfied. He continues plotting against Cassio even after he has disgraced him. He is not content to disturb Othello’s peace of mind, and must continue until Desdemona is dead.
- Othello’s jealous nature is wild, uncontrolled, uncalculated and towering in its passion
- Iago’s jealousy is villainous; Othello’s is tragic.

POWER STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE SEXES

The second major theme is the relationships between men and women, and between man and his fellow-man. These relationships are driven by love and hate, honour and dishonesty, loyalty and betrayal, trust and suspicion and, above all, by power over another person.

The play has some very powerful women characters. A daughter has deceived her father and claimed her independence by choosing her own husband. This is a male-vs.-female conflict about opposition and power. The play has other examples of power struggles between couples, partners and friends:

- Iago struggles with Desdemona to gain the confidence of Othello
- Desdemona and Emilia defend themselves against their husbands’ suspicions
- Bianca struggles to claim her rights as Cassio’s mistress

At the beginning, Othello and Desdemona are too noble to be involved in any power struggle. He loves her for her feminine grace and sympathy; she loves him for his masculine heroism. They are two opposites who make one harmonious whole – a meeting of equals. They are a contrast to Iago and Cassio who both regard women as inferior objects.

There are a number of layers in the relationship between Iago and Othello which might explain why Iago is determined to destroy the love between Othello and Desdemona.

- One of these layers is straight-forward jealousy, since Iago cannot bear to see two lovers “well-tuned” (II.1).
- On another level it is possible to see in the Othello-Desdemona-Iago relationship a kind of love triangle, perhaps Iago wants to force Othello to return to the masculine values he embodies as a soldier.
- A third possible cause of this jealousy is that Desdemona has power over Othello, and Iago cannot bear the fact that a woman can hold power over another man.



Ira Aldridge (1807-1867) the black actor most famous for his Othello.

THE PROBLEMS OF RACE AND COLOUR

Racial prejudice is not a major theme in “Othello”, though Shakespeare specifically describes him as a “Moor”. Various critics say this means he is a Negro, or he is Arabian, or from some other black race. Other critics say Othello’s race is irrelevant,. And yet Shakespeare has broken with all contemporary traditions and presented a black man as a hero. Before “Othello”, black characters in Elizabethan drama were all villains. Shakespeare has taken pains to portray this black man as noble, brave and heroic.

The play presents two very different views of the Moor. Othello himself is proud of his heritage. The Duke of Venice and Desdemona all praise his character and nobility. He has also become a General in the Venetian army and is a distinguished member of Venetian society. There is no colour prejudice in his case.

On the other hand, Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio are alarmed by Othello’s colour and racial heritage, particularly because he has married a white female. They talk of his “sooty bosom” (I.2), his “thick lips” (I.1) and “an old black ram” (I.1) who practises witchcraft. These are all negative images, but they are spoken by characters we do not respect. Othello is more noble and impressive than any of the other male characters in the play, but as the play progresses and jealousy takes hold of him, his “black” nobility becomes the same as the “white” evil of Iago. Black becomes white, just as earlier in the play the white characters were “black” in their hearts.

In “Othello” Shakespeare does not take sides in any black versus white argument: he has chosen a black hero and a white villain to emphasise the contrast between the characters and not to make any kind of racial statement.

Imagery in the play:

Shakespeare’s use of imagery and figurative language is especially strong in “Othello”. The main images centre on

- poison and poisoning
- Hell and the Devil
- animals and insects
- the sea and military heroism
- the contrast between black and white.

MACBETH

This is one of Shakespeare's shortest plays, but it is also one of the most powerful. It shows what happens when ambition is allowed to run free, with no moral control. At the start of the play Macbeth is a brave and noble soldier. By the end he has fallen to uncontrolled madness and death. He has been driven to it by his ambitious, violent wife. She, too, ends in madness and death.

The play says a lot about the dangers of testosterone-filled "manliness". Lady Macbeth is constantly telling her husband to "be a man", or asking him if he is a man. Malcolm tells Macduff after the murders of his wife and children, to take the news in a "manly" fashion.



American actor Orson Welles as Macbeth in the 1948 film

"The Scottish Play!"

Here is a piece of interesting additional information - nothing to do with English Literature - but actors in the English theatre never call the play "Macbeth". This is considered unlucky. The play is called "The Scottish Play" because it has always been associated with bad luck. It is said the very first Lady Macbeth (a young boy actor) collapsed and died in rehearsals. Other people say that in an early production instead of three "witches" on the stage, one day there was a fourth - and this was the Devil himself. Probably because the play is all about murder, blood, witchcraft and dead babies, it has got a reputation for being "unlucky". If an actor mentions the name of the play by mistake he has to leave the room, then knock three times, and when invited to come in, he has to quote the words "Angels and Ministers of grace, defend us" (Which is a quote from Shakespeare's "Hamlet")

THE MAIN CHARACTERS

The Three Weird Sisters

Although usually called the three witches, Shakespeare never calls them "witches". They are called the "weird sisters" (*)

Macbeth

an ambitious Scottish general

Banquo

a brave general

Fleance

Banquo's young son

King Duncan

The King of Scotland, murdered by Macbeth

Malcolm

King Duncan's first son

Donalbain

King Duncan's second son

Lady Macbeth

Macbeth's wife, a deeply ambitious and evil woman

Macduff

A Scottish noble

The Porter

an old drunken gatekeeper

(*) The word "weird" is pronounced "wee-erd" and means strange, magical in a nasty way.

THE STORY OF MACBETH

King Duncan is the King of Scotland. Two of his chief soldiers, Macbeth and Banquo, are on their way back from a battle. In a wild “blasted heath” in a thunderstorm, they meet three strange women (the “weird sisters”) The three sisters ask each other:

**“When shall we three meet again?
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?”**

These women tell the future, and say Macbeth will become the Thane of Cawdor (a Scottish honour equal to an English Duke) and then Macbeth will become King of Scotland. Banquo’s future children will become a line of Kings. The weird sisters disappear.



John Henry Fuseli's 1783 painting of the Weird Sisters

King Duncan welcomes his army back from the battle, and says that to thank Macbeth for his recent victory, the King will make him the Thane of Cawdor. (Macbeth and Banquo are astonished by this news.) The King says that on his way back he will make a short visit to Macbeth's castle.

Macbeth sends a messenger with a letter to Lady Macbeth. The letter tells her what the weird sisters said. Lady Macbeth plans to do everything she can to make these things come true and to help her husband become the next King of Scotland.

King Duncan arrives with his two sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, and with Macbeth and Banquo. They are accompanied by other noblemen and soldiers. Late in the night Macbeth and his wife secretly make plans to kill the King.

The King is asleep in a room, with two guards outside. Lady Macbeth has given the guards drugged wine, so they fall asleep. But Macbeth is troubled by his conscience. Is it wrong to kill? Especially a king? He imagines he sees a dagger in front of him.

**“Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand?”**

Lady Macbeth tells him to act like man, to stop being a coward and to stop being frightened by shadows. Macbeth kills the King and the guards. Lady Macbeth leaves the bloody daggers beside the dead king so that the guards will be blamed for the murder.

In the morning, the noble soldier, Macduff, arrives and knocks on the castle gates. A porter talks to the audience in a short comic scene about being drunk. The Porter tells us things are not always what they seem. (This is the only comedy scene in the whole play, and although it is full of jokes, the jokes are about lies, and cheating and the Devil.) This kind of scene is called “comic relief” – giving the audience a chance to relax between the dark, heavy scenes.

When the gates are opened and Macduff enters, he goes to wake the King. The dead King’s body is discovered. Macbeth then rushes on and says he himself has killed the two guards. It was in a moment of great anger, because they had not protected their King.

Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain run away to England, afraid that someone is trying to kill all the royal family of Scotland. Because they have run away, they are blamed for killing the King. Macbeth is elected King of Scotland, but he is feeling guilty. He is also worried about the weird sisters prediction that Banquo’s children will be the next Kings after Macbeth. He arranges for both

Banquo and his son, Fleance to be killed. But the murders go wrong. Banquo is killed, but the young boy, escapes.

There is a celebration dinner to mark the coronation of Macbeth. Suddenly the ghost of the murdered Banquo appears – but only Macbeth can see him. When Macbeth starts shouting at some unseen thing, the guests think Macbeth is ill, and Lady Macbeth asks them to leave.

Macbeth goes back to the place where he first met the three weird sisters. He wants to know more about the future. The three old women make a spell by throwing all sorts of things into a cauldron (*a cooking pot*). They say the words of a spell:

**“Double, double toil and trouble,
Fire burn and cauldron bubble”.**

The Three Weird Sisters tell him three things:

1. He will be safe from danger until the trees of Birnam Forest move to Macbeth’s castle at Dunsinane.
2. He will never be harmed by anyone born of a woman.
3. But Banquo’s son, Fleance, will be the father of a long line of Kings.

Some of this is good news. The trees in the forest can never move to the castle – therefore Macbeth will be safe. Macbeth need not worry about any man at all, since all men are born of women. But the bit about Banquo’s son is not good news.

Meanwhile, King Duncan’s son, Malcolm, is in England and is raising an army to invade Scotland to fight Macbeth. The noble Macduff has also gone to England to help. Macbeth is so angry that he sends people to murder all Macduff’s family – his wife and all his children.



The famous English actress, Ellen Terry, as Lady Macbeth, painted in 1889 by John Sargent

Macbeth feels safe in his castle at Dunsinane. But suddenly he is told that Birnam Wood is moving towards him. This is impossible. Trees cannot move. But Malcolm’s and Macduff’s army has arrived in Scotland. They have cut down branches of the trees and are using them to hide themselves as they move towards the castle of Dunsinane. The trees are “camouflage” – but it does mean the trees are moving. Macbeth is frightened.

Lady Macbeth, too, is frightened. She is going mad with guilt at murdering the King. She walks in her sleep. A doctor and a nurse are watching her, and, in her sleep, she can see imaginary blood on her hands. She keeps trying to wash away the blood. She says:

“Out, damned spot! Out, I say”

as she tries to wash away the imaginary blood. All her secrets are being told, even though she is asleep. The doctor and the nurse are filled with horror at what they hear.

Finally Lady Macbeth kills herself. The news is brought to Macbeth just as the battle starts outside his castle. Macbeth really did love his wife. For a moment he wonders if it is worth fighting now she is dead.

What is life all about, he asks himself. He thinks life is like an actor who spends an hour or so on the stage, full of passion and anger – but after the performance is over, it really all means nothing at all. (This speech is – next to Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” – the second most famous of all Shakespeare’s speeches):

**Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing”**

Macbeth, though frightened, is not a coward. He fights bravely. He now knows the three weird sisters have tricked him. But, there is a last hope: he can never be harmed by any man born of woman.

Macduff approaches, determined to kill Macbeth in revenge , because Macbeth’s men killed Macduff’s wife and all his children. Macbeth laughs at him and tells him no man born of a woman can kill Macbeth. Macduff has a shocking piece of news for Macbeth. Macduff was not born of a woman in the normal way. Macduff was born by a Caesarian operation – where the baby is removed by cutting the womb open.

Macbeth realises that the three weird sisters have cheated him all the time. Macduff kills Macbeth, and cuts off his head. Malcolm says the war is over, and Malcolm is now the new King of Scotland.



*The ending of the 1971 film version , with Jon Finch as “Macbeth”.
The film was directed by Roman Polanski.*

FREYTAG'S "PLOT PYRAMID" & MACBETH

Gustav Freytag, a German playwright and critic, recognized that all of Shakespeare's tragedies have six distinct structural elements:

EXPOSITION:	the mood and conditions existing at the beginning of the play; the time and place (setting) will be identified as well as the main characters and their positions, circumstances, and relationships to one another
EXCITING FORCE:	the complication or initial incident; the exciting force "gets things going", thus beginning the conflict which will continue throughout the play
RISING ACTION:	the series of events that lead up to the climax of the play; events that provide a progressive intensity and complicate the conflict
CLIMAX:	the turning point of the play; a crucial event takes place and from this point forward the tragic hero moves toward his inevitable end
FALLING ACTION:	the events occurring from the time of the climax to the time of the hero's death; advances and declines in the various forces acting upon the main character
CATASTROPHE:	the necessary consequences of the hero's actions with result in his death; conclusions in Shakespeare's tragedies are comparatively simple and brief

STRUCTURAL ELEMENT	MAIN EVENT(S)
1. EXPOSITION	1.1 Witches appear in a storm 1.2 Macbeth defeats Duncan's enemies
2. EXCITING FORCE	1.3 Prophecies of the witches; Macbeth named "Thane of Cawdor"
3. RISING ACTION	1.4 Malcolm named successor 1.5 Lady Macbeth receives news 1.6 Duncan comes to visit 1.7 Macbeth decides to kill Duncan 2.1 Banquo suspects; floating dagger 2.2 Murder of Duncan; guilt 2.3 Porter scene; the murder is discovered 2.4 Macbeth is crowned 3.1 Murderers commissioned 3.2 Division between the Macbeths
4. CLIMAX	3.3 Murder of Banquo; Fleance escapes
5. FALLING ACTION	3.4 Banquo's ghost appears 3.5 Hecate plans Macbeth's ruin 3.6 Macduff goes to England 4.1 Three ghosts make predictions 4.2 Macduff's family butchered 4.3 Malcolm tests Macduff 5.1 Lady Macbeth walks in her sleep 5.2 Military preparations made 5.3 Preparation for war continues 5.4 Birnam Wood moves 5.5 Lady Macbeth dies 5.6 The battle begins 5.7 Macbeth and Macduff meet
6. CATASTROPHE	5.8 Death of Macbeth; Malcolm is restored

(It could be interesting to draw up this "pyramid" for the other tragedies!)

KING LEAR

This is one of Shakespeare's most famous tragedies. Some people think it is an even greater play than "Hamlet". The story deals with madness, despair, old age and death. The scene in which the mad King Lear, naked in a storm, shouts against his daughters and against nature itself is thought to be one of the best scenes of tragic poetry in all English theatre.

THE MAIN CHARACTERS

The Earl of Gloucester

a nobleman, loyal to King Lear

Edgar

Gloucester's "real" son, who disguises himself as a beggar called "Poor Tom"

Edmund

Gloucester's illegitimate son. He pretends to be in love with both Goneril and Regan to try and gain money and land for himself.

The Earl of Kent

a nobleman, loyal to King Lear

King Lear

the very old King of Britain

Goneril

King Lear's first daughter

Regan

King Lear's second daughter

Cordelia

King Lear's youngest daughter

The Duke of Albany

married to Goneril

The Duke of Cornwall

married to Regan

The King of France

will marry Cordelia and lead an army to rescue her father

The Fool

the Court Jester – an old man allowed to make fun of the King.



*English actor, Laurence Olivier,
as King Lear in a TV Production*

THE STORY OF KING LEAR

Next to the King, the two most powerful men in England are the Earl of Gloucester and the Earl of Kent. Gloucester has two sons – Edgar who is a "legal" son, and Edmund who is "illegitimate" (*). In the law, when Gloucester dies, Edgar will get everything and Edmund will get nothing. But Gloucester says he loves both sons equally. Kent says he has no children. Their talk ends when the King arrives.

(*)"Illegitimate" means the child was born to parents who were not married. The term "bastard" is also used to mean a child whose parents are not legally married.

King Lear, King of Britain, has three daughters. Now that he is very old, he has decided to retire. He will share his kingdom amongst his three daughters. The daughter who loves him most will get the biggest share, and so on. The first daughter, Goneril, married to the Duke of Albany, and the second daughter, Regan, married to the Duke of Cornwall, both say they love him more than words can say. He is pleased with their answer.

The third daughter, Cordelia, the youngest and not yet married, says she loves him as much as a daughter's duty says she must. King Lear is angry with this answer. He doesn't think her words show enough love. He says:

*“How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is,
To have a thankless child”*

He divides his kingdom in two, Goneril gets half, Regan gets half, but Cordelia gets nothing. There were two men wishing to marry Cordelia. One of them, the Duke of Burgundy, no longer wants to marry her now that she has no land or money. The second man, the King of France, says he loves her for herself and not for her money or power. He will marry her and take her to France.

King Lear's old friend, the Earl of Kent, tells the King not to be foolish, and not to send Cordelia away with nothing. The King is so angry that he tells Kent to leave the country at once. Gloucester, too, thinks the King is making a mistake, but he keeps silent. The only one who can tell Lear he is a foolish old man is the Fool – but Lear likes the Fool and allows him to stay.

Edmund is angry that he will not get any money or land when his father dies. He tells a number of lies to Gloucester, his father. He says that the legal son, Edgar, is planning to kill Gloucester to get his money. Edmund then goes to his half-brother, Edgar, and tells him that he must leave the country or he will be killed by certain unknown enemies.

Edgar doesn't leave the country. Instead, he dresses up as a beggar, and walks around the countryside, pretending to be a madman called Poor Tom. At the same time, the Earl of Kent, who was ordered to leave Britain, has also disguised himself and returned to work for King Lear, pretending to be a servant. He has done this because he wants to protect the King from his two daughters. Lear has said he will spend half the year with each daughter in turn.

The first daughter, Goneril, makes life very difficult for King Lear. He becomes very angry. He leaves and goes to stay with his second daughter, Regan. The wicked Edmund pretends to be very friendly with both daughters and their husbands. He even makes love to both women. Edmund then makes even more trouble, this time for his own father. He persuades the two daughters and their husbands that Gloucester (Edmund's own father) is trying to get King Lear back into power.

When King Lear arrives at Regan's castle, she tells him he cannot stay. He must return to Goneril until his six months have ended.



*John Runciman's 1836 painting of Lear and
the Fool in the Storm Scene*

He is so furious that he, the Fool and Gloucester go off into the night and into the wilderness. There is a fierce thunderstorm going on. King Lear shouts against the storm, crying out:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow! _

Lear goes mad with anger. Gloucester takes the King and the Fool into a wooden hut for shelter, then Gloucester leaves them there while he goes to seek help from the Earl of Kent. He wants Kent to help them get to the sea-coast to meet Cordelia and the King of France. They have arrived with an army to help Lear against Regan and Goneril.

Inside this wooden hut Lear and the Fool meet Edgar, still dressed as a beggar and still pretending to be a madman called Poor Tom. When the storm is over, the mad king, the old Fool and Poor Tom start walking towards Dover and the sea.

Gloucester did not manage to find Kent and get help. He was captured by Regan and her husband, the Duke of Cornwall. Regan is so angry that Gloucester tried to help Lear that she orders him to be blinded. Her husband, Cornwall, sticks his thumbs into Gloucester's eyes and makes him blind. One of Cornwall's servants tries to stop this horrible act by attacking Cornwall. Cornwall is killed in a fight with this servant. However, Regan is not very angry that her husband is dead. She is now free to marry Edmund.

Gloucester is walking blindly along the road when Edgar finds him. Edgar still pretends to be Poor Tom and not Gloucester's real son. Gloucester wants to kill himself because he is blind, but Edgar helps him to accept that he must live.

They then meet the Fool and King Lear, who is still quite mad. All of them are rescued by Kent who takes them to the King of France's army and to Lear's daughter, Cordelia. But there is no happy ending. The French army loses the battle. Cordelia and Lear are captured. Gloucester dies from his eye injuries. Goneril is so jealous of her sister, Regan, making love to Edmund, that she poisons Regan. She also sends soldiers with orders to kill Cordelia.

Edgar, now disguised as a loyal knight, challenges Edmund to a sword-fight. In this fight, Edmund is killed. Just before he dies, Edmund confesses to all his crimes, and tells them Goneril has ordered the death of Cordelia. Goneril kills herself as Edgar and the Duke of Albany rush to save Cordelia, but they are too late.



Lear enters, carrying her dead body. He dies of a broken heart, leaving Edgar and Albany to try and restore the Kingdom of Britain.

*King Lear weeping
over the dead
Cordelia—
painted by
James Barry 1787*

SOME NOTES ON SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDIES

Because the four great tragedies are amongst the greatest works of World Literature, most College studies concentrate on the Shakespeare's tragic output. It is worth remembering that he also wrote some of the world's greatest comedies! And it is worth a quick study of some of these plays.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

This was probably written to celebrate a real marriage – the grand-daughter of the man who was the main patron of Shakespeare's theatre company. The play works on very many levels. It can be a simple fairy story. It can also be a dream story, full of magical symbols. Some productions have the actors who play Theseus and Hippolyta also play the parts of Oberon and Titania – suggesting that the whole play is a dream inside a dream.

Sometimes the meaning of the play is said to be “Freudian” with erotic desires –especially because Bottom is turned into a donkey. The overall themes of love, reality, sexuality, imagination and authority make this a play which is like an onion – you can peel away very many different layers.

THE MAIN CHARACTERS

- Theseus**
the Duke of Athens about to marry Hippolyta
- Hippolyta**
his bride
- Hermia**
a young girl in love with Lysander
- Lysander**
a young man in love with Hermia
- Demetrius**
a young man, also in love with Hermia
- Helena**
Hermia's friend, in love with Demetrius
- Oberon**
the King of the Fairies
- Titania**
the Queen of the Fairies
- Puck**
a fairy spirit, also known as Robin Goodfellow
- Bottom, Peter Quince, Francis Flute, Tom Snout, etc**
workmen



English actress, Vivien Leigh,
(1914-1967) as Titania

THE STORY OF A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

There are two girls – Helena and Hermia – and two boys – Demetrius and Lysander. Helena loves Demetrius. Demetrius, however, was once in love with Helena, but doesn't love her any more. Demetrius is in love with the other girl, Hermia. However, Demetrius is wasting his time, because Hermia doesn't love him back. Hermia and Lysander are in love with each other. (Complicated? Just you wait!)

Hermia's father wants Hermia to marry Demetrius. When she refuses (because she is in love with Lysander), her father goes to the Theseus, the Duke of Athens. The Duke orders Hermia to obey her father. He gives her two choices: either she will marry Demetrius, or she will have to become a nun



and never marry anyone. She has just four days to make up her mind. (She thinks this is a very hard rule – especially since the Duke himself, is planning his own wedding to Hippolyta in four days time!)

Hermia and Lysander decide to run away into the forest and get married. They tell Helena. Helena tells Demetrius that Hermia and Lysander have run away. She hopes that this will make Demetrius forget about Hermia and come back to his

first love. Firstly Demetrius and then Helena follow Hermia and Lysander into the woods. It gets dark, and both couples get lost in the woods.

Deep in the woods, Oberon, the King of the Fairies, has quarrelled with the Fairy Queen, Titania, over an Indian boy she refuses to give him. Oberon listens to Helena and Demetrius quarrelling, and learns how much she loves him but he doesn't love her in return. The couple fall asleep on the ground, but not near each other. Oberon decides he can do some magic and put things right.

He sends his fairy servant, Puck, to get a magic flower. He tells Puck to squeeze the juice of the flower onto the boy's eyelids. When the boy wakes up he will fall in love with the very first creature he sees. This means Demetrius will fall in love with Helena, and all will be well.

This magic flower grows at the other end of the world and Oberon tells Puck to be quick and fetch it. Puck says:

“I'll put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes”.

While Puck is getting the flower, the lovers Hermia and Lysander appear. They, too, are tired, and they fall asleep on the ground. When Puck returns with the magic flower, Oberon takes some of it for himself. He sprinkles some in the eyelids of the sleeping Fairy Queen, Titania. He will then stay near her and when she awakes, she will forget her quarrel with Oberon, fall in love with him all over again, and give him the Indian Boy.

He gives the rest to Puck and tells him to go and find the boy from Athens and make him fall in love with the girl sleeping near him. Puck sees the boy lying on the ground, but it is the wrong boy! He puts the magic juice in the sleeping Lysander's eyes not Demetrius. Lysander is woken up by Helena. The magic works. Lysander now says he is in love with Helena and he hates Hermia. It is now a terrible muddle.

Whilst all this is going on, a group of workmen who work in the Palace, decide to put on a play as a wedding present for the Duke and his bride. They will perform the story of Pyramus and Thisbe. Bottom, the weaver, will play the lover, Pyramus. Flute, the bellows-mender, will play the girl's part, Thisbe. The others play the parts of the Moon, the Wall and the Lion. The director of the play will be Quince, the carpenter. They are having a rehearsal in the woods. The fairy-servant Puck watches the rehearsal and plays a trick on them. He uses his magic to give Bottom an ass's head (the head of a donkey!) which frightens the others away.

Bottom, making donkey noises, moves towards the sleeping Titania. Because of the magic flower

juice put in her eyes by Oberon, she wakes up and immediately falls in love with the man with a donkey's head. She gets her fairies to sing to him and give him nice things to eat.

Oberon sees this and uses a magic spell to change things. Titania is horrified to think she fell in love with Bottom. She forgives Oberon. Oberon uses another magic spell to change Bottom back to normal. Bottom goes back to Athens to rehearse. The King and Queen of the Fairies are happy again.

The two boys and girls, all muddled up, have quarrelled so much, they are tired and have fallen asleep again. Oberon uses the magic juice to put things right. They go back to Athens, Lysander and Hermia in love with each other, and Demetrius and Helena in love with each other. They decide to share their wedding day with the Duke and his bride.

They wonder, did all this really happen, or was it a Midsummer Night's Dream? Bottom and his workmen perform the play of Pyramus and Thisbe in front of the wedding guests. As the three couples leave the stage, Puck and the fairies return to bless the palace and its people.

TWELFTH NIGHT

"Twelfth Night" is the last night of Christmas celebrations – usually January 6th. It is known in the Church calendar as Epiphany – a day for games, jokes, disguises and fun. It was probably written for the Twelfth Night celebrations when an Italian nobleman, Duke Orsino of Bracciano, was visiting London.

It is one of several "cross-dressing" Shakespeare plays ("As You Like It" is another one) where the leading role is a girl dressed up as a boy. Because in Shakespeare's day all the parts were played by men (no women were allowed on the stage) Viola would have been a boy pretending to be a girl pretending to be a boy! It is about mistakes, tricks, lies, madness and the crazy things people do in the name of love.

THE MAIN CHARACTERS

Count Orsino

a nobleman in love with his neighbour, Countess Olivia

Countess Olivia

a wealthy lady

Viola (Cesario)

a young woman who dresses up as a man and calls her(him)self Cesario

Sebastian

her twin brother, thought to have died in a shipwreck

Malvolio

Countess Olivia's main servant – a very pompous man

Feste

a clown, or jester in Olivia's mansion

Maria

Olivia's maid

Sir Toby Belch

Olivia's uncle

Sir Andrew Aguecheek

a friend of Sir Toby's.

THE STORY OF TWELFTH NIGHT

Orsino, the Duke of Illyria, is in love with his neighbour, the Countess Olivia. He is sad because she doesn't return his love. He is listening to sad music. He says:

**“If music be the food of love, play on!
Give me excess of it”**

Olivia is mourning the death of her brother, and has decided to avoid all men for seven years. A group of sailors arrive on the shore with a young woman, Viola. She and her twin brother were on a ship that has been wrecked in a storm. Viola is safe, but her brother has been lost. She thinks it will be difficult for a young woman to survive on her own in a foreign country, so she dresses up as a boy, and pretends to be a young man called Cesario.

Cesario (Viola) gets a job as page-boy to Duke Orsino and the Duke sends his new page-boy with messages of love to Olivia. This is difficult for Viola (Cesario) because as soon as she first saw the Duke, she fell in love with him. But he thinks she is a boy!

When Cesario (Viola) goes to Olivia, Olivia finds him (her!) very handsome, and begins to fall in love with him (her!). After Cesario has gone, Olivia asks her pompous servant, Malvolio, to follow Cesario and give him a ring as a present.

Living in Olivia’s mansion are her uncle, Sir Toby Belch, and Sir Toby’s friend, Sir Andrew Aguecheek. Olivia also has two other servants, a girl called Maria, and a Clown called Feste. Sir Andrew also hopes to marry Olivia – he is interested in her money. All of them, Toby, Andrew and the servants Maria and Feste all hate Malvolio, because he is so arrogant and pompous.

They all decide to play a trick on Malvolio. They send him a fake letter, making him think that Olivia is in love with him. He need not worry about her being a great lady, and him being just a servant. The letter tells him:

**“Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and
some have greatness thrust upon them”**

If he returns her love, says the letter, he must give her some kind of sign. He must wear yellow stockings with green cross-garters, and he must smile all the time. When he appears in these ridiculous clothes with a silly smile on his face. Olivia thinks he has been taken ill with madness.



Malvolio before Olivia painted by Johann Heinrich Ramberg, 1789

She gets him locked away in a dark room to cure him of his madness.

Meanwhile Viola's twin brother, Sebastian, has arrived in Illyria. He, too, was saved from the shipwreck. He was rescued by a sea-captain called Antonio. Antonio has to be careful in Illyria because the Duke Orsino has accused him of being a pirate, and there is an order out for Antonio’s arrest.

Neither Viola nor

Sebastian know each other is alive. Everyone else, when they see Sebastian, think he is Cesario. Complications begin. Olivia falls more in love with Cesario (Sebastian) , who is able to return the love. Sir Andrew challenges Cesario (Viola) to a duel, and will fight him (her!) . He hopes to get rid of the man who is his rival for Olivia’s love. Antonio steps in to help his friend Sebastian (but it’s really Viola) and he is recognised and arrested for his alleged piracy. Olivia now agrees to marry Cesario (Sebastian).

Sebastian (Viola known as Cesario!) is accused of deserting both Antonio and Olivia . Just as things are at their most complicated, the real Sebastian arrives. Seeing both twins together, all is revealed to Olivia.

The Fool, Feste, brings a letter to Orsino from Malvolio. Now the truth is known, Malvolio is released from his locked room. Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Maria admit that they wrote the false letter. Malvolio leaves, promising revenge on them all. Maria and Sir Toby decide to get married. Olivia and Sebastian decide to get married. Orsino says that once Cesario is dressed as a woman, then they too will be married.

(There has been a lot of study on the treatment of Malvolio—just how cruel is it? Does the way he has been treated make him a kind of semi-tragic figure, and so on.) The play “Twelfth Night” is usually considered to be among the best comedies ever written.

MUSIC IN TWELFTH NIGHT

Most of Shakespeare’s comedies do not include songs, but “Twelfth Night” has five of them, mostly sung by Feste, the fool. It is likely that the actor playing Feste had a good voice and Shakespeare, ever practical, took advantage of this, for almost every Act contains a song. However, the songs are not just put in to entertain the audience. Each song does tell us a little more about the mood of the moment and adds to our understanding of the people and the story.

“O Mistress Mine” in Act II is an example of the “carpe diem” song (literally translated as “seize the day”). The idea is we will all grow old and eventually die, so it is important that we take advantage of youth and enjoy both life and love while we are able.

In the song “Come Away Death” Feste is deliberately adding to Orsino’s self-imposed heartache over his one-sided love for Olivia.

The final song, “When That I was and a Little Tiny Boy” jokingly tells of the cycle of a man’s life, which ultimately means nothing at all. The play is just a play. Real life goes on, and the rain will continue to fall everyday. What happens to each individual does not mean much in the end, which may sound rather depressing, but “that’s all one.”

**“When that I was an a little tiny boy
With a hey-ho, the wind and the rain’
A foolish thing was but a toy
For the rain it raineth every day”**

(This final song reminds the audience that this is simply a piece of entertainment - much like Puck’s final speech in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” . A shorter version of this song also appears in King Lear.)



SHAKESPEARE AND THE SONNET

The sonnet is a poem containing 14 lines of verse. It first appeared in Italy. Elizabethan English poets copied the idea, making some changes.

THE ENGLISH SONNET

- Contains 14 lines of verse, written in “iambic pentameters” (*)
- The 14 lines are arranged as 3 sets of rhyming 4-lines (= 12), and a final 2 – a “couplet”.

(*) What is an “Iambic Pentameter” ?

“**Iambic**” (pronounced “Eye-am-bick”) is a two-syllable sound, with a louder second syllable – the sound is “**da-DUM**”.

“**Pentameter**” (Pronounced “Pen-tam-it-er”) means “five measures”

Therefore an Iambic Pentameter is five measures of “**da-DUM**” rhythm. It sounds like this:

da-DUM - da-DUM - da-DUM - da-DUM - da-DUM
 “Shall- I com-PARE thee-TO a-SUM mer’s-DAY”

RHYMING SCHEME

The rhyming scheme is usually

“a/b/a/b” “c/d/c/d” “e/f/e/f” & the “couplet” – “g/g”

(First group: Four lines rhyming a/b/a/b)

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?	“day” = (a)
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:	“ate” = (b)
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,	“may” = (a)
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:	“ate” = (b)

(Second group: Four lines rhyming c/d/c/d)

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,	“ines” = (c)
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;	“immd” = (d)
And every fair from fair sometime declines,	“ines” = (c)
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;	“imm'd” = (d)

(Third group: Four lines rhyming e/f/e/f)

But thy eternal summer shall not fade	“ade” = (e)
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;	“west” = (f)
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,	“ade” = (e)
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:	“west” = (f)

(The final couplet: two lines rhyming g/g)

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,	“ee” = (g)
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.	“ee” = (g)

WHY WERE THE SONNETS WRITTEN?

It seems they were not written to earn money. They were written as private letters to friends, or as presents for important people that Shakespeare wanted to flatter. Perhaps they were written over many years? And perhaps most were written in those years when the theatres were closed because of plague, and Shakespeare had nothing else to do.

WHEN WERE THE SONNETS WRITTEN?

Some were written as early as 1598, when there is a reference to Shakespeare's "sonnets among his private friends". Two of them appeared in a collection of poems printed in 1599. Shakespeare did not give his permission for them to be printed, but in those days there was no copyright law.

WHEN WERE THE SONNETS PUBLISHED?

They were collected and published in 1609. By this time Shakespeare was a famous writer and his name would help sell the poems. However, it is possible that they were printed without Shakespeare's permission.

The order in which the sonnets are printed is probably not the same order in which they were written. It seems as if the publisher printed them in no particular order, and added numbers just to make it easier to find an individual sonnet.

It is also possible that some of the sonnets are NOT by Shakespeare.

WHAT ARE THE SONNETS ABOUT?

They are about a handsome boy (possibly a rival poet). Shakespeare writes lovingly about this handsome boy. He is also unhappy that the handsome boy is in love with a "dark lady".

Some people have said that Shakespeare was in love with the handsome boy and is jealous that this handsome boy does not love Shakespeare in return. The boy loves the dark lady and not Shakespeare. Some people have said the sonnets are, perhaps, the first poems of gay love in English.

Other people say this is not true. They say Elizabethan poets wrote about "love" in a spiritual not a physical way. When Shakespeare says how much he loves the handsome boy, he does not mean it in the same way we use the word "love" today.

Later on, Shakespeare himself seems to be in love with the Dark Lady. Perhaps she is his mistress? Or perhaps both Shakespeare and the handsome boy were in love with the same lady?

The sonnets have to be read as a series. In one sonnet Shakespeare will say something and he will say something completely different in the next sonnet. There are all sorts of possible meanings. Shakespeare is changing his mind very often.

The 154 sonnets fall into three separate groups

- Writing to or about a Young Man (Sonnets 1 – 126)
- Writing to or about a "Dark Lady" (Sonnets 127 – 152)
- Telling Classical Greek stories (Sonnets 153 – 154)



Nicholas Hilliard's miniature portrait of a young man

Group One: The Young Man – Sonnets 1 - 26

The first 26 sonnets are addressed to a young man described by Shakespeare as "*beauty's rose*" (Sonnet 1). This young man is often called "my love." In seventeen of these sonnets Shakespeare is telling the young man to get married and have children. In Sonnet 20 Shakespeare clearly defines his love for the young man as non-sexual.

Group Two: More about the Young Man – Sonnets 27 – 126

There are another 99 sonnets, also written to a young man (probably the same young man as in the first 26). These have a variety of themes,

- The beauty of the young man
- How beauty doesn't last and fades with age
- Competition with a rival poet
- Sadness about being a long way away from the young man
- Unhappiness because the young man is behaving coldly
- Anger that the young man has had an affair with a woman (the dark lady?)
- Saying sorry to the young man for being angry
- Saying sorry for cheating on the young man

Group Three: The "Dark Lady" - Sonnets 127 – 152

The remaining sonnets tell about the "*dark lady*," possibly Shakespeare's mistress. He describes her as his "*worser spirit*" (Sonnet 144) and says that she is married. The sonnets tell of a very sexual but painful relationship in which Shakespeare cannot leave her because of love and his great sexual attraction.

Sonnets 153 – 154

These are two Greek classical poems turned into sonnets. They are possibly not by Shakespeare.

TIME

The word 'time' is used over 80 times in the sonnets. Shakespeare describes time as a "*bloody tyrant*" (Sonnet 16), "*devouring*" and "*swift-footed*" (Sonnet 19).

Time is often turned into a person, and appears with a capital letter, like in a name. Time is making Shakespeare old and he is getting near to "*hideous night*" (Sonnet 12) or death. Time will gradually steal the beauty of the handsome young man.

DIFFICULTY WITH LANGUAGE

As always, the English of over 400 years ago is very difficult for students today. It is very difficult for English students, and therefore almost impossible for students learning the English language. As an example, here is one of the most beautiful sonnets in the original and a "new English" version



Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton—thought by some critics to be the young man Shakespeare's sonnets were addressed to.

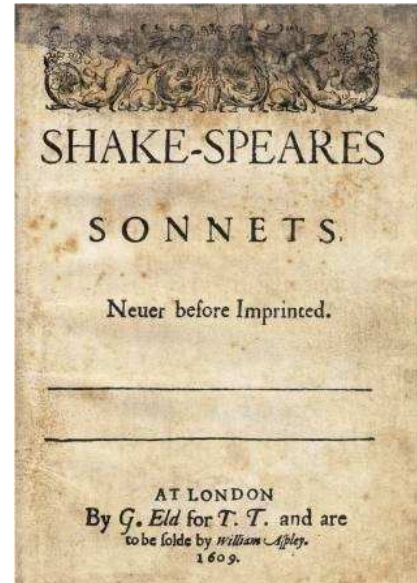
Shakespeare's English:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date:

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
 And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;

But thy eternal summer shall not fade
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
 Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
 When in eternal lines to time thou growest:

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
 So long lives this and this gives life to thee.

**Modern English:**

I think I shall say you are like a summer day
 But you're prettier and even better, even calm
 Because sometimes it gets windy and the buds on the trees get shaken off
 And sometimes summer doesn't last very long

Sometimes it's too hot
 And sometimes the sun disappears behind a cloud
 And everything beautiful loses its looks
 Sometimes by accident or because everything gets old and ugly.

But your handsome looks will never fade away,
 You will never lose the beauty you now have
 You are not going to die
 Because I have written this poem about you

As long as men can breathe and see
 My poem will last to tell of your beauty.

Themes, Content and Images of some of the Individual Sonnets

No. 1: "From fairest creatures we desire increase"

Theme: Young Man

Content: Shakespeare asks the young man to have children so that his beauty will not die and will be passed on. There are echoes of the Bible's message in Genesis 9:1: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth".

Images: Beauty is like a rose – when the rose dies, a new rose grows in its place.
 The young man is like a beautiful flame, but he will burn himself out. He is wasting his beauty by not sharing it. He is eating his own beauty just as the grave will eat it.

No. 17 “Who will believe my verse in time to come”

Theme: Young Man and children

Content: Shakespeare asks the young man to have children so it will show the future people how handsome the young man was and how Shakespeare’s words are the truth.

Images: The poem is like a gravestone, which only tells part of what a man was like. When people in the future read the poem on paper “yellowed with age”, they will think the poet was saying the man was more handsome than he really was. If the young man has a child, then there will be two ways of proving the young man’s beauty – the poem and the child.



No. 22: “My glass shall not persuade me I am old”

Theme: Two hearts beating as one, and the young heart will keep the older one alive.

Content: Shakespeare says he and the young man should make their two hearts join together as one, for each one needs the other one if they are to live.

Images: “Time’s furrows” are signs of old age. (“Furrows” are the lines in the earth made by the farmer’s plough, and they are like the lines on an old man’s forehead.) The heart is treated “like a tender baby”.

No.91: “Some glory in their birth, some in their skill”

Theme: Love is the most important thing, says Shakespeare.

Content: What matters to Shakespeare is Love. All the things that other people want mean nothing to the poet. (This is the same message as in Sonnet 25)

Images: This is one of the most simple and straight-forward sonnets. No poetic images – just a list of things valued by men, It does let us know that clothes and hawks were considered very important at that time.

No. 116 : “Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments”

Theme: Real Love will never die

Content: A beautiful sonnet that says real love will last forever, no matter what happens in the world outside.

Images: Love is like the fixed star used by ships to find their way. Even in storms that star is always in the same place. Time is like a farmer who can cut down the harvest of summer, but even Time cannot alter true love.

No. 107: “Not mine own fears nor the prophetic soul”

Theme: Doom

Content: Another sonnet which says the poet’s words will remain and keep memory alive forever, even though the poet himself is growing old.

Images: The images are of astrological events and an eclipse of the moon, and great changes in the world. Some scholars link this to the death of Queen Elizabeth I and the crowning of the new King, James 1st – a time when an eclipse did happen.

No. 18 “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day”

Theme: Beauty

Content: A beautiful and famous sonnet that says the handsome young man is even more beautiful than Nature itself.

Images: “Rough” wind, “darling” buds, the sun is the “eye of Heaven”, all images of sunny, bright Nature. Death is seen as living in the “shade”.

*No. 29: "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes"***Theme:** Bad Luck and Being away from Love.**Content:** Another excellent sonnet where Shakespeare says he is sad and crying because people hate him and he is far away from his loved friend. But then he thinks of his friend, and he is happy again.**Images:** Shakespeare cries, but Heaven is deaf and doesn't hear. When he thinks of his love, it is like a lark (a songbird) rising into the air and singing at the gates of Heaven.*No. 33: "Full many a glorious morning have I seen"***Theme:** Losing Love because of others getting the way..**Content:** Shakespeare's handsome young man has been taken away from him by others getting in the way.**Images:** The sun kisses the mountain tops and streams (when Shakespeare and the man were together) A dark cloud passing over the sun makes things ugly (when other people took the young man away.)*No. 98 : "From you I have been absent in the spring"***Theme:** Absence**Content:** (Almost the same as Sonnet 97 – two versions of the same poem?) Shakespeare is absent and misses his beloved friend.**Images:** Shakespeare has been away from the handsome youth during the Springtime – images of warmth, new growth, April, etc. – so therefore it feels like Winter for him.*No. 132: "Thine eyes I love, and they, as pitying me"***Theme:** The Dark Lady**Content:** Shakespeare says the lady has a dark face and eyes – and black is the colour of sadness.**Images:** Dark eyes are seen as the colour of "mourning" (grieving for the dead) with a play on words – "morning" (the start of the day)*No. 142: "Love is my sin, and thy dear virtue hate"***Theme:** Pity**Content:** The author still can't reach his mistress and defends himself by reproaching her wooing of others.**Images:** The images turn things upside down: Love = Sin; Virtue = hate. There is also reference to "Bonds", "Revenues" and "Rents" - all images of money.. Some scholars have said this may mean the Dark Lady was the mistress of someone else – and not for love but for money.*No. 104 "To me, fair friend, you never can be old"***Theme:** Time and growing old**Content:** The handsome youth is now beginning to grow older.**Images:** The clock is ticking, the hands of the clock are moving, the seasons are passing, winter, autumn – these are images of time passing and growing old.*No. 55: Not marble nor the gilded monuments"***Theme:** The Power of Poetry.**Content:** Shakespeare says that because of the power of poetry, the young man's fame will last forever.**Images:** The same as in the classical Latin poem by Horace which says "*Exegi monumentum aere perennius*": "I have built a monument more lasting than bronze".
War destroys, Time destroys, but the written word lives on.