



Modernizing Shakespeare: Finding Contemporary Themes from Othello

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by T.J. Vari

Introduction and Rationale

Shakespeare is certainly not the easiest subject matter to tackle at the high school level. That's not to say that students won't enjoy it once they are into the characters and plots, but more often than not, the sheer mention of his name can instill fear and loathing in the high school classroom. Even for the adult reader, college student, or literary scholar, be honest, Shakespearean English can be a feat.

For this reason, high school English teachers often shy away from his 38 plays and 154 sonnets, among other poems, and students aren't getting a healthy dose of Shakespeare. To compound the lack of usage, those who do teach Shakespeare rarely properly prepare the readers; without a hook¹ or proper introduction, students shut down and reject difficult material. Hence, my goal is to bring Shakespeare into the classroom and develop a unit which can be fun, easy, modern, and different.

I want students to view Shakespeare as relevant, interesting, and new. I'm using *Othello*, which isn't inevitably recognized by the students. I hope this will prevent them from dismissing the play prior to our investigation. I have found students to discard the idea of reading *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, simply because they know the name, the difficulty of the language, and maybe the story line. *Othello* possesses qualities which I intend to use as motivation—a racy subject, several modern adaptations, and only a few major characters to memorize.

This unit is a tool for anyone who wishes to teach Shakespeare, *Othello* in particular, or who wants to introduce film, adaptations, and new research skills. On the other hand, I wouldn't discontinue reading this unit, merely because you aren't planning to teach Shakespeare's *Othello* using adaptations. I plan to stay true to the idea that this is, first and foremost, a *teaching tool* and can be adopted for many reasons and adapted to meet the needs of any film, literature, reading, or writing assignment.

Shakespeare and *Othello*

Orson Welles offers an opinion of *Othello* that I share, although *he* doesn't proclaim his notions to be axiomatic.² He says that *Othello* is one of the twelve best plays ever written, nine of which, by the way, come from Shakespeare. That's pretty substantial, and given that I trust Welles as an authority on this subject, I'll

say that *Othello* is something worth using in the classroom. There are reasons for this. *Othello* withstands the tests of time. The themes found in this oh-so-ancient play are oh so relevant today. What's better than racy subject matter when trying to get young people hooked on learning? I actually don't see any other way in getting students to take a second look at Shakespeare, or a first for that matter.

*Getting a Short Synopsis of Othello*³

Of course you can pick up a copy of *CliffsNotes*, and I actually advocate this. Using resources like *CliffsNotes* or *SparkNotes.com*⁴ isn't shameful. This can help with a number of things. Just the same as using this unit to teach *Othello*, using these resources isn't cheating; why reinvent the wheel when something is provided? Such resources supply teachers and students with summaries, quote explanations, theme and character analysis, quizzes, essay topics, and much more.

Film in the Classroom

Film can be used as part of the high school English curriculum. I would say, speculating of course, that most English teachers and maybe most teachers in general use film to supplement curricular materials. Reading Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and showing the film starring John Malkovich is an example. But genuinely teaching film is a different story. Showing students that film is an art form of its own, and that adaptations can exist separately from the original source, is different from simply complementing a reading selection with film.

I'll be the first to admit that I could do a much better job with film in the classroom. I'm learning—I have the luxury now of doing so—that it can be quite simple. In the past, I've used film to solidify a reading. I've looked for movies with some fidelity to an existing text, hoping to help students understand what they've read. But film can be used, with a little preparation, as more than supplemental. *Of Mice and Men* can be more than a comparison to Steinbeck's novelette; it's more than the book shown on screen.

For the purpose of this unit, it should be clear, when I mention using film in the classroom, I'm speaking primarily of adaptation. The films used in this unit were chosen because they have been made using an original literary source. I'm sure that some of the lessons in this unit can be used with film as a sole source for teaching, but here, the plan is to use adaptation to stimulate student questioning.

Strategies

When teaching such an important and intricate work as Shakespeare's *Othello*, it is very important to have a unit ready or a precise plan in mind. The first part of my plan is always to know the prospective final result before beginning. Recently this has been distinctively named Understanding by Design⁵ (UBD), but to me it seems like common sense: know what you want students to know before you teach. The alternative seems to be to stand up in front of students and talk about content with no particular direction in mind; I can't imagine this as an approach to teaching, but a book was published assuming that this was or is normal application in the classroom—I missed something along the way. Anyway, the final outcome for this unit is a research paper about adaptation and *Othello*. Upon reaching the summit of this excursion, students will write an essay, in the style of a documented research paper, which discusses Shakespeare's *Othello*, its adaptation to film, and the implications when a director makes decisions in doing so.

Elsewhere along the way, students will be answering a series of questions based on those outlined in the subsection of this unit entitled "Questioning and the DSTP." These questions will be in accordance with each selection as it orbits around our study of Shakespeare's *Othello*.

The first selection I plan to use for the purposes of this unit is a 2001 film directed by Tim Blake Nelson and cleverly named *O*.⁶ I'm not being facetious with my use of "clever" in the previous sentence; Nelson has made the film truly cyclic in nature. Hence, the cipher is symbolic of the film's plot, the original play, and the main character from both. I'm hoping that Nelson's cyclic style in *O* will become a symbol for my unit—the plan is to come full circle.

O is a modern adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Tim Blake Nelson says it himself in the director's commentary: there's no better place to retell the story of *Othello* than in a modern high school. As teachers we know that jealousy, love interests, hate, anger, secrets, and even violence can be everyday affairs in our high schools. Nelson brings this story to the basketball court of a private school where Odin is one of the only minorities and dating a school official's daughter. The film is rated R, but I don't see a problem with showing it, even to 9th graders. I will show it to tenth grade students with the deletion of one scene. There is one pretty racy sex scene, but it isn't necessary for the plot, therefore students don't need to see it. This scene is easy to skip using a DVD, but I am going to edit it out of a copy I have using a program on the computer. Other than the one sex scene, which doesn't show any nudity by the way, drugs and profanity are part of the story. I personally don't find the amount of drug use in this film to be offensive or inappropriate for high school students. The drugs aren't glorified and become part of Odin's destruction. The profanity isn't excessive either and I don't think it goes too far for high school students. On the other hand, to make things clear to parents, I always send a letter home about R rated films. The letter explains the nature of the film, why we plan to view it, and an alternative for students who aren't permitted to do so. I have never met with any resistance, but I want to make sure that I do the responsible thing in notifying parents when content is controversial.

I don't want *O*, at this point in the unit, to overwhelm students. I want them to, more or less, view the film without attachments. I don't want to bog them down with questions and projects so to divert their concentration away from the film. I'm certainly not going to have them view the film without structure, but I don't want to impose on their ability to focus. Here's where I insert some of my personal philosophy: students should never see a movie at school for the sake of enjoyment (although they may) or to fill time. Even films that seem "off-task" can lend to a learning activity. The rule of thumb, so to speak, is that desks shouldn't be empty simply because a film is playing; students should always have an assignment pertaining to the screening, even if it is very light. I once showed a film and had student take notes whenever the film's point-of-view changed. In this case, they aren't doing much, yet their attention has a focus, and they're not too busy to enjoy.

While watching *O*, students will have a series of questions to answer. The questions are meant to hook students into the rest of the unit. Because *O* is contemporary, using the backdrop of a modern high school basketball team, students should relate to some of the characters and situations. Students will answer three important tasks/questions (in paragraph form).

1. Summarize the film in *chronological* order. Be sure to include characters, themes, setting, conflicts, etc. (major *literary elements*7).
2. What are Hugo's *motives*; *why* does he *manipulate* the other characters?
3. *Why* might Odin be *vulnerable* to Hugo's actions?

Students are going to get time to take notes during the film and use the notes to answer these three questions in paragraph form. The answers, and this will be explained to students in detail, should be thoughtful with the inclusion of evidence from the film. The DSTP always asks students to provide "evidence" from the selection. This is practice for students in that they must be specific about how they made their inference. The italicized words in the three questions are important for student understanding and vocabulary. Questions two and three are inferring questions; students really need to think beyond the film itself. My students generally have problems with *why* questions. High stakes tests usually ask questions about *motives*, either author or character, and it's important that students get practice with this. I find it puzzling, but students have a hard time remembering and summarizing in chronological order. They can usually remember most of a plot, but the order tends to be skewed or they leave something out of the equation. The other reason for these questions in particular is that they point at some of the things we'll be dealing with as the unit progresses; we're building prior knowledge for future application.

Once students have had time to discuss⁸ the questions for *O*, we're going to move to a short story entitled "Hecatommithi."⁹ This story about a Venetian Moor is said to be the basis for Shakespeare's play, *Othello*. The story line is almost identical and is dated pre-Shakespeare. I will personally read the entire story out loud, and I do this because I find it most effective. I had the privilege to attend a reading cadre directed by Doctor Kylene Beers.¹⁰ She explains that reading aloud to students is often times more effective in teaching struggling readers how to become better readers than having them read on their own. She promotes reading aloud as a strategy that won't disturb the class when a struggling reader volunteers to read. She explains that when a good reader, the teacher, reads aloud, students get a better sense of voice, punctuation, pronunciation, vocabulary, and diction. When students read silently, in groups, and aloud to each other (not to say this is inappropriate or shouldn't ever be used) they often times struggle and become frustrated.

As students follow along with "Hecatommithi," they will create a character chart. I want them to match the characters from *O* to those in this short story. They will first make an outline including all of the major characters from the film; then, as we read, they can link the characters. To prove the characters are the same, students will provide evidence from the film and story. This evidence will either be character description or character action as it pertains to both genres. Students must provide evidence for each character from both selections. Upon completing the short story, students will be informed that Shakespeare adapted this story to write his play, *Othello*.

Before reading *Othello*, I want students to find themes from "Hecatommithi." Of course they'll be using *O* as background knowledge as well, but this is the idea. The following question will be addressed and discussed:

1. What *aspect or general themes* from Giraldi Cinthio's 1565 "Hecatommithi" might make an interesting stage play for Shakespeare's *adaptation*?

At this point, students will need a working definition for *adaptation*. Students will develop, in their notes, a definition for adaptation using the idea that *O* is an adaptation of *Othello*. This can happen even before they read *Othello*, given that they've seen *O* and read "Hecatommithi." Students will work this out using dictionaries and inference, but the final product (we gather together on the board) will look something like this: *something, as in a story, that can be changed or altered (using interpretation) to suit another, even similar, purpose*. We aren't going to say this is the only definition, but students will need a point of reference when discussing adaptation.

Before reading *Othello*, students will develop a third portion of their character chart. They will, as we read, add

characters from the play to the chart in proper alignment with the characters from the previous two genres. I should also mention that I will teach *genre* as a vocabulary word, especially since this is a word used in questions on the DSTP. Students in my class always have a notebook with them; this is one of the supplies I require on a daily basis. Students are always ready to stop and take notes and when the word *genre* becomes part of the vocabulary, we'll need to make a note and refer to it as we move forward.

One resource, that helps with my own anxiety as well as student acceptance, is the use of *Side by Sides*.¹¹ *Othello, Side by Sides* is a text which encompasses a version of Shakespeare's language, appearing on the left page, accompanied by a modern translation on the right page. The use of this type of supplemental material is played by ear. I don't want to read the translation for the duration of the play, but I want students to be comfortable with the language before their crutch is removed.

In taking all the precautionary methods, I'm positive that *Othello* will be a hit with the students. This monumental work of art deserves special time in the classroom and without refutation. At this point in the unit, it's important to funnel all effort into the play. The high-order thinking questions (found in the "Objectives" section of this document) will be applied as often as possible. I will have students do summarizing activities using acts and scenes, explanation of character actions, and interpretation of the language. This will happen prior to reading a section of the play and after each section is complete. I like to plan each day or section with a pre-reading activity, during reading activity, and post-reading activity. These activities can be as simple as to share the character charts and explain or to summarize a complete section. It's difficult to predict what specific reading questions will arise when reading Shakespeare, but it's important to note that there are plenty of sources for study questions about *Othello* that can be found online.

The "Lesson Plan" sections herein explain a few tutorials in detail, but there's tons of excitement in using Shakespearian plays. As I mentioned before, teacher resources are infinite online, but I often invent a lesson or two on my own. For example, after reading Act III, Scene 3, students might explore irony. This is a turning point, when Othello becomes suspicious and angry, at the same time the scene ends in a beautiful garden. Students will also need to make inferences and predictions about the play's ending; this will be particularly interesting after viewing *O* and reading "Hecatommithi." They know these adaptations are similar, but are they the same?

The play itself, even when paired with adaptation is the most important element in the unit. It takes the most time to study and provides the most complexity for discovery.

At this point in the unit, students have viewed *O*, I have read "Hecatommithi" to them, and we have read *Othello*, in its entirety, aloud as a class. We are now going back to *O*, the full circle is complete. Students are going to revisit their original summaries of *O*. After reading *Othello*, I want them to make connections and begin to think about *O* as an adaptation—not that they haven't already. This will be a discussion about director's purpose.

1. Why use high school as a setting for an adaptation of *Othello*?
2. Why use a private school and Odin's character to mimic the situation with *Othello*; what are the similarities?
3. What's happening in American high schools around the time that this is directed? Violent crimes, racial inequity, and other relevant themes.
4. What aspects in particular can you remember as taken or adapted from *Othello*?

Once these questions have been answered, discussed, and explored, we will turn to the director's

commentary. This is a function of most new movies on DVD, and particularly valuable in *O*. Tim Blake Nelson speaks over the entire film, discussing everything from symbolism to music. I want students to see if their inferences were on target, but it's also interesting for them to follow the director's commentary as many of them have never done so. Most students will find this intriguing and don't really realize that thought has been given to every aspect of a film. This, too, deserves a class discussion and can be done in two ways, either after the feature is finished or pausing to discuss intermittently.

Students are now ready to do their own researching to explore the idea of adaptation. I have access, at my school, to a computer lab and library. Students can use both resources to search for books and on the Internet to gather information. I want students to read about other adaptations, besides *O*, that were made using Shakespeare's *Othello*. I have seen approximately 59 matches for *Othello* adaptations. Students will develop a 4-paragraph report using the information from class and their individual research. Research must be taken from two or more sources. I'm encouraging three sources.

The following outline is an example of how I would imagine the research to unfurl. This organizational measure is intentionally brief. It's meant to be a guide and tool. I will spend time explaining these paragraphs to students as they take notes. I want the students to have creative license, yet I don't want them to be lost. This is a perfect example of differentiated instructional practice. Some students will rely on this to format their document. Others will go beyond what I provide—it will be up to me to promote each student's potential. For example, in this first paragraph (below), some students might need a push merely to write a proper chronological summary of the play; others might have the skills to add commentary and analysis to their synopsis (see "Sample Lesson: Day One, Researching for more details).

Paragraph One/Introductory Paragraph:

1. A brief synopsis/summary of Shakespeare's *Othello*
2. Definition of adaptation
3. Example Thesis: The themes and story line in Shakespeare's *Othello* are so predominantly universal that they lend to adaptations in film, including Tim Blake Nelson's *O* and . . . (students find a second adaptation to complete the thesis¹²).

Paragraph Two/Tim Blake Nelson's *O*:

1. Connect Shakespeare's *Othello* to *O*
2. Discuss this adaptation and why it works
3. Pick an act or scene from the play and connect it to a portion of the film

Paragraph Three/Researched Adaptation:

1. Find an adaptation of *Othello*
2. Discuss the adaptation and why it seems like a promising idea
3. What is it about the time, place, direction, characters, outside influences, etc. that make this relevant to *Othello*?

Paragraph Four/ Conclusion/Relate *Othello* to Self

1. How do the themes in *Othello* relate to your high school/your life? Provide examples.
2. If you made an adaptation of *Othello*, where might it take place and why?

Students may look in many places for adaptations of *Othello*. I won't guide them at first, but sometimes a push in the right direction is necessary. Students can use anything from Blockbuster to Netflix for information; one great site is <http://us.imdb.com/>.¹³ I want students to find, at the least, a synopsis including setting and description of some of the major elements of the adaptation. It would be nice if students could view the adaptation on which they choose to report, and this is a possibility, but isn't feasible in every case.

My personal philosophy on teaching research skills is to do it on an individual basis. I don't do much traditional teacher-led instruction in this respect. I have never found students to grasp the ideas needed to conduct research using a stand-up-and-preach method. Likewise, I think it's important to visit each student individually *while* they're learning to investigate and examine sources. For example, at my school we have an Academic Skills Center (computer lab) connected to the library. After we've seen Nelson's commentary on *O*, students will be ready to visit the lab. In the lab, I plan to do some investigating of my own. I'll be wandering around, looking at computer screens, and monitoring what students think are good sources. I might redirect a student or make a few blanket statements aloud if more than a few are going in the wrong direction. This one-on-one instruction is far more effective for learning to research. Plus, I can learn from things that students find on the Internet and use them in the future. If I find that I'm tackling the same problem over and over, I'll address the class using direct instruction before our next day in the lab. This is my way of teaching research and learning how to become a better teacher of research for the future.

Most of the strategies and lesson criteria I've unfolded have come from information provided by data. This data is taken from a student testing program in Delaware and is disclosed in the following section of this unit entitled "Objectives." I'm not sure it's valuable information for everyone. It pertains particularly to my situation and the questioning strategies I'm using with my students. This is not to say that the information provided isn't interesting and/or helpful with the other ideas provided. One might pay particular attention to this section, "Objectives," if one were interested in such applications as school policy, district curriculum guidelines, and student demographics. I do not think the content is at all necessary to be able to teach the unit or to apply its concepts to another classroom setting. Something of real value might be the "Lesson" sections immediately after "Objectives." Here I explain in detail a few lessons that I teach as the unit unfolds.

Objectives

My primary objective is to encourage higher-order thinking. I believe Shakespeare's *Othello* is a perfect way to reach my goals. I can get students hooked with something familiar and transition to Shakespeare using the momentum. My question objectives aren't from a book or something I invented. I'm taking my wording and targets from data driven by a state test. Using multiple genres and more than one selection to inspire thinking will at once help students practice for the test and develop the skills they need for the writing assignment I've developed.

Questioning and the DSTP

The DSTP or Delaware Student Testing Program is a high stakes test for public school students in Delaware. The actual "stakes" are unclear and developing, but prospectively, the test can affect the type of diploma a student receives upon graduation. As a high school teacher, the primary grades of concern are eighth and tenth. Even though my school is 9 through 12, we are concerned with the eighth grade test. Each year, a

portion of incoming ninth grade students haven't passed the eighth grade DSTP. In this case, they must take the eighth grade test until they pass all sections. The tenth grade test is particularly important for a number of reasons, including funding and publicity. With this in mind, much of our curriculum is targeted toward student achievement and the DSTP.

Many educators are worried about "teaching to the test" and although this may be a valid concern, the test does serve a purpose. The DSTP data shows districts, schools, and even teachers how they stand up against one another. This can be frightening, but certainly helpful. If one group is doing much better than another, provided the demographics are similar, we should take a look at *why* they're doing better and *what* they're doing differently.

Something else the DSTP data provides is student areas of need. The test's data can show a particular school exactly what students aren't getting when they take the exam. In ELA (English Language Arts), which is the Reading and Writing portion of the test, this boils down to the types of questions students aren't answering correctly. And, in some cases, the data is specific enough to show the percentages of students that are having trouble with a particular type of question.

In looking at the data provided to my school, all students, taking the eight, ninth, and tenth grade exams are having difficulties in the same areas. In some cases, up to 65 percent of students are incorrectly answering questions with a particular style of thinking and responding. Such question varieties include: to extend meaning, to explain text, to elaborate upon a question or scenario, to analyze, to interpret meaning, to infer author's purpose, and to discern a chronological order. These questioning strategies will be the focus for assessments in this unit, both formative and summative.

One last important aspect to recognize about the DSTP and the types of questions students are facing is that the test often uses two reading selections at once. The test asks, often times, that students use two reading selections and their personal life to answer an extended response. This solidifies the idea that using film and literature in tandem is a great approach to student thinking and good practice for this high stakes test.

Howard High School of Technology, Targeted Students for this Unit

This unit is intended and the objectives within are designed for tenth grade students. The culminating project will be for students to produce a research paper, which is one element of the tenth grade portfolio. Each year, in the New Castle County Vocational and Technical school district, English students complete a series of writing assignments working toward the completion of a writing portfolio. These portfolios account for 20 percent of a student's final grade in English, and each year the portfolio is kept in a folder until a student is ready to graduate. Every year students write a portfolio piece assessing their individual strengths and weaknesses in writing. The folder, containing all three years of portfolios, is used when students write a four-year self-assessment during their senior year in English.

All four years, students are expected to produce a research paper as part of the portfolio. Research is a major area of study in the district and an area where, I believe, students have particular needs. I have found that even twelfth grade students tend to struggle with research, both methods and writing, even after completing this portfolio in the previous years. For this reason, my plan is to incorporate a research paper as the final project for this unit. I'm hoping that students will find it refreshing to conduct research as part of a film and literature study.

Our tenth grade students at Howard High School¹⁴ are not tracked in terms of ability. Students have selected a

shop in their ninth grade year and now have career class for three periods, of eight, per day. These students, as they're scheduled for academic courses, are coming to class with a varying gamut of prior knowledge, skill, aptitude, and intelligence. In one given block period¹⁵ the level of student can range from unidentified advanced placement to undocumented special education and/or learning disabled. It's important for teachers in this environment to use differentiated instructional practices for these varying degrees of ability as well as a backwards design approach so that each student understands the expectation prior to the lessons and evaluation.

Sample Lesson¹⁶ : Day One, Viewing *O*

Viewing films during instructional time can be an iffy practice. I have heard of instructional supervisors that aren't keen on using the television for anything. And, this may be a valid point. Slipping in the DVD and having students watch movies with little or no purpose is a waste of time. Students need to be trained to view films as a learning activity and not simply for leisure. I don't mean that they have to only watch documentaries and educational materials. Teachers and students need to approach the film as we do a text. We should be reading the film, and this includes a before, during, and after exercise.

In addition to my philosophy about film in the classroom, I always spread the screening across two days. Even when we can finish the film in one day, I don't do it; there won't be enough time for enriching activities. In the case of *O*, the film is 95 minutes in length. I'll round this to 100, and plan for 50 minutes of my 90 minutes per period for viewing. I have 40 minutes left. I'll use 15 at the beginning and 25 at the end for instruction, preparation, and review.

I don't want to preface the film too much; I want students to be uninhibited while viewing. A portion of my time in the beginning is certainly dedicated to proper behavior while the film is playing. I feel the need to give particularly detailed instructions before the first film of the semester, and to return to these instructions prior to each subsequent film. Students need to be reminded about acceptable behavior. For my class, this means that students will have their heads up, mouths closed, and notebooks open. Students are not permitted to place their heads on the desks in a resting position; they're not permitted to comment or talk during the film; and they must be participating in the "during film" activity while they watch. You can't teach anything if you can't manage the classroom. This is especially important for film study; students are accustomed to watching a movie, dosing off, and using film as anything but mind stimulation.

The first 15 minutes of the period will be used to explain the film questions and to explain our rules while watching (previously described). Students will be answering three questions in paragraph form (listed below and found in the "Strategies" section of this document). I'll expect students to take notes while the movie is playing, but they'll need the questions to focus. I don't expect students to take notes during a film without some point of reference. You might ask this of a college student or graduate student, but, in my experience, high school students need something to focus their thinking. They'll get time to properly respond when the film is finished, but they'll need to take notes while watching.

1. Summarize the film in chronological order. Be sure to include characters, themes, setting, conflicts, etc. (major literary elements¹⁷).
2. What are Hugo's motives; why does he manipulate the other characters?

3. Why might Odin be vulnerable to Hugo's actions?

I'll play the film, and as long as there aren't problems, I'll let it run. I don't like to stop a film too often. It's not necessary when the students have a focus for their viewing (note taking in this case). I'll certainly monitor the room, making sure students are working and not sleeping, but I don't need to stop the film to discuss at this point.

After 50 minutes and with 25 minutes left in the period, I'll stop the film for the day. I want students to have 15 minutes to begin answering the questions. They won't have complete control of their answers, but I want them to write while the film is fresh. If I wait until the end, I'm afraid they'll have forgotten key aspects from the beginning.

With ten minutes left in the period, I'll ask students to write down a prediction for the end of the film. If they've seen the film, they'll need to keep their predictions secret. Those that haven't seen the film will get a chance to share with a partner and then aloud with the group. I like to use partners before whole group activities. I find that when students share an idea with one other person first, they're more likely to participate in front of the whole class. The next day will begin with either a recap of the predictions or one-sentence summaries of the film thus far.

Lesson Timetable¹⁸ : 90 Minutes

- 15 minutes: explanation of film questions and viewing behavior
- 50 minutes: film and note taking
- 15 minutes: writing preliminary responses
- 5 minutes: making predictions
- 5 minutes: sharing predictions

Sample Lesson: "Hecatommithi"

Remember that we're working with 90 minutes per class period. I never spend the entire time on one thing. I might keep us to one subject, as is the case in this lesson, but not one activity. For example, if we're in the middle of reading a long novel, I would never spend 90 minutes reading. I like to chunk the lessons into blocks within the block-period. I believe this helps with the students' attention span. Actually, it helps with my attention span; I find it redundant and boring to do the same thing for any duration of time.

At this point, we will have finished with our first viewing of *O* (the second viewing will be using the director's commentary). I like lessons to overlap and have a cyclic feel. I want students to enjoy a cohesive pattern from day to day. With this in mind, we start today by remembering the film. Students are going to make character charts. In one column I want them to write down the names of every character from the film. They'll be working with partners; no more than two students together. In another column they're going to jot down a short, one to three sentence, character description for each. When this activity is finished we'll move on to the next.

I'm going to give students 20 minutes to complete this task. We'll begin with 15 and I'll monitor their progress. I like to announce the time I'm allotting for each activity as we begin. This way students know how to pace

their efforts. I know that students aren't going to stay focused for the entire time; some off-task behavior is inevitable and, in my opinion, forgivable. But, I will be on foot and supervising as they work.

Next, we share. We always share. This helps with many learning targets, including confidence building, communication skills, revising/editing, listening and taking notes. After students are back at their assigned seats, I'll call on individuals to share a character from their list and the description. Then, others may add to the description. We'll do this until each character from the film is identified and properly described. This should take about 10-15 minutes.

At this point, I will distribute a copy of the story, "Hecatommithi," and give instructions for our reading assignment. Each student will get their own copy of the story. If I make two-sided copies, we'll only use four sheets of paper per student. I think, when feasible, it's important for students to have their own copy of a reading assignment. When they have their own copy, they can take notes in the margin, highlight, underline, and use symbol strategies while reading. Active reading is important for comprehension.

While we read, students will be searching for each character from the text. They can highlight or underline every time a new character enters the story. This simple activity will force them to follow along and we'll use it during the next activity. We will only read for about 40 minutes regardless as to whether we finish. Again, I don't find it helpful for students to sit and do one thing for a very long time. Students lose interest and the ability to concentrate.

The last ten minutes will be used for two short culminating activities. Students will add the characters from "Hecatommithi" to their character charts from *O*. In a new column, they align the story's characters to those found in the film. It should be easy for students to make the connections. They might not have all of the characters, as we haven't finished our reading, but they can take about 5 minutes to match the ones they found thus far. When they've completed this, I'll have them each write a one-sentence summary of today's reading. We'll use these summaries to begin the next day's lessons.

Lesson Timetable: 90 Minutes

- 20 minutes: remembering characters from *O* (taking notes with a partner)
- 15 minutes: Sharing aloud
- 5 minutes: Preparing to read "Hecatommithi"
- 40 minutes: reading
- 5 minutes: character charts
- 5 minutes: one-sentence summary

Sample Lesson: Day One, Researching

I'll start this lesson by introducing the outline for our research paper (located below and found in the "Strategies" section of this document). Each student will get a copy of the outline and as I introduce the expectations, they'll take notes. Students can choose to take notes in their notebooks and/or directly on the outline. The outline is brief so that the instruction can be differentiated. Some students need this and can't work without it, some students need this to get started and to learn *how* to focus, and some will digest it and toss it aside. It is my job to manage their potential. We'll spend about twenty minutes clarifying the

expectation for each paragraph. Students can ask questions as I delineate.

Paragraph one, I'll explain to students, is the introductory paragraph in which I want students to provide some kind of summary of *Othello*. They might provide a chronological synopsis, they might provide commentary, they might focus on literary elements from the play, or get creative. The minimum expectation is a summary and I want it to be a transition into their ideas about adaptation. They'll have a definition in their notes. They should discuss how Shakespeare is adapted and how he adapted stories to write his plays. They should touch on *Othello* and *O* and "Hecatomithi." I would be impressed if they discussed the phenomenon of adaptation and they could research this a bit to do so. Minimally, they'll need to use their prior knowledge from the previous lessons. The last sentence will be their thesis (a guide is provided in the outline).

In paragraph two, I'm looking for students to make connections between *Othello* and *O*. If they've done a decent job in Paragraph One (P1), this second paragraph should be a good transition. I want them to move from a broad view of the film as an adaptation into something specific like an act or scene. They can start by simply comparing and contrasting the play with the film, but I want more than a broad overview. They need to find one particular part of the film and discuss it as an adaptation of the play. Students will need guidance, but I want them to really think about, and make connection between, *Othello* and *O*.

For P3, students will be conducting research about another adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* (besides *O*). In this paragraph, I want students to go beyond the provided text. They need to find an adaptation of *Othello* and give reasons for its existence. At minimum, students should find an adaptation, director, year, country, and something about its properties of adaptation. For example, there is a made-for-TV movie adaptation in which the situation is that of a police department's politics, and the *Othello* character is promoted to police commissioner. Students should be able to speculate about this as a promising idea for a director. The idea is to have students digging deeper into their research about people, places, and things that influence an adaptation they've discovered.

I give students two class periods to gather the research. Some students will need less time and can begin writing, others will need the entire time, and some will stay after school. At first, students can use the Internet and have free-range. I want them to explore the "junk" that they find. Some students will be on the right track in no time while others will need help. Depending on the number of students who need help, I'll either have the ones that found something show the others what they did, or I'll give one-on-one help to those in need. They'll get approximately 65 minutes on the first day and almost the entire period the second day for researching. Because the instruction is differentiated, students will be working at an independent pace and some will begin typing before others. I make deadlines for each stage of the process; after day two of researching, all students will be expected to show their researched materials before they start writing.

Paragraph One/Introductory Paragraph:

1. A brief synopsis/summary of Shakespeare's *Othello*
2. Definition of adaptation
3. Example Thesis: The themes and story line in Shakespeare's *Othello* are so predominantly universal that they lend to adaptations in film, including Tim Blake Nelson's *O* and . . . (students find a second adaptation to complete the thesis¹⁹).

Paragraph Two/Tim Blake Nelson's *O*:

1. Connect Shakespeare's *Othello* to *O*

2. Discuss this adaptation and why it works
3. Pick an act or scene from the play and connect it to a portion of the film

Paragraph Three/Researched Adaptation:

1. Find an adaptation of *Othello*
2. Discuss the adaptation and why it seems like a promising idea
3. What is it about the time, place, direction, characters, outside influences, etc. that make this relevant to *Othello*?

Paragraph Four/ Conclusion/Relate *Othello* to Self

1. How do the themes in *Othello* relate to your high school/your life? Provide examples.
2. If you made an adaptation of *Othello*, where might it take place and why?

Lesson Timetable: 90 Minutes

- 25 minutes: outline description
- 65 minutes: researching with teacher guidance

Annotated Teacher Resources

Beers, Kylene. *When Kids Can't Read: What Teachers Can Do: A Guide for Teachers 6-12*. N.p.: Heinemann, 2002.

This book is a great resource for any teacher, not just reading teachers. It reveals strategies for teaching students to comprehend what they're reading. I like some of the basic suggestions, like teaching students to reread, more than once, to gain better understanding.

Corrigan, Timothy J. *A Short Guide To Writing About Film*. 6th ed. N.p.: n.p., 2007.

The back cover explains that this book "introduces students to the terms and major theories they need to know to think and write critically about film." I recommend it to anyone currently teaching film or planning to teach film in the future. This is great information for an English teacher who supplements curriculum with film or one who wishes to truly teach film as part of the curriculum.

Filming Othello. A film by Orson Welles. 1978. Videocassette.

This is a documentary done by Welles about *Othello* and his experience in adapting the play for film. There's nothing better, in my opinion, than hearing from the horse's mouth. In this 90 minute production, Welles reviews his opinions and interpretations about Shakespeare, film, and *Othello*.

Hulbert, Jennifer, Kevin J Wetmore, and Robert L. York. *Shakespeare and Youth*

Culture. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

This book is a great resource for teachers who want to teach Shakespeare to a younger audience. It discusses, in detail, many of the

available adaptations of Shakespeare's plays and the modern implications. There's a section entitled "Smells Like Teen Shakespirit" which highlights *O* as a modern adaptation of *Othello*.

Manvell, Roger. *Shakespeare and the Film*. New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1971.

This is a book about Shakespeare and film adaptation. Because it was published in 1971, it doesn't discuss the newer adaptations that may excite students, but it is a great resource for many of Shakespeare's plays that have been made into films.

McCulloch, Helen, and Gary K. Cary. *Shakespeare's Othello, CliffsNotes*. N.p.: IDG Books Worldwide, Inc., n.d.

This is an easy to use way to get lots of information about *Othello*. A teacher might read this when making a decision whether or not to teach the play. Students can use this as a guide when reading or to supplement difficult areas of the text. I particularly like the section entitled "Critical Essays."

O. Directed by Tim Blake Nelson. 2001. DVD.

This is adaptation of *Othello*, set in a modern high school, uses basketball as a backdrop to recreate Shakespeare's tragic play.

Othello. Directed by Geoffrey Sax. 2002. DVD.

This adaptation of *Othello* has all the elements of Shakespeare's play retold using a modern police department and the bureaucracy therein.

Othello Side by Sides. Side by Sides. London: Prestwick House, Inc., 2005.

This is a great student resource and helpful to teachers when teaching Shakespeare. Side by Sides are published using original Shakespeare text accompanied by modern rendition. Teachers can use this during specifically difficult sections of a play or for an entire reading. Because Shakespeare's language is on the left page with rendering on the right, it makes it possible to use them simultaneously, one after the other, or only when needed.

SparkNotes: Othello. 2006. SparkNotes LLC. 6 July 2007 <http://www.sparknotes.com/otello/>.

Much like CliffsNotes, yet online, this is a great resource for teachers and students alike. I don't think it's cheating for teachers to elicit help from sources like this. I like Spark Notes because it's free and easy to use. Students can gather information here for studying and solidifying their own thoughts or answering questions. This particular URL will get you to the *Othello* information, but the literary index is infinite.

Wiggins, Grant, and Jay McTighe. *Understanding by Design*. 2nd ed. N.p.: n.p., 2005.

This book is the basis for many new professional development seminars for teachers. It outlines an approach to teacher where the instructor understands the finished product before beginning a unit. The instructor develops the assessment prior to teaching each lesson so that teacher and student are clear about expectations.

Notes

1. "Hook" is a general term used to describe an interesting introduction to a lesson, unit, or reading selection. The "hook" gives students prior knowledge, preparation, and hopefully a level of excitement about the upcoming assignments. Whenever I discuss using the word hook, I'm not referring to a captain or something used for hanging dirty clothes; this hook is actually more like what you would see at the end of a fishing line, only here we're fishing for interested learners. The term hook, I guess, is really the bait. "Bait them in, get them hooked."
2. *Filming Othello*, Videocassette, directed by Orson Welles (1978).
3. Helen McCulloch and Gary K. Carey, *CliffsNotes, Shakespeare's Othello* (IDG Books Worldwide, Inc.).
4. <http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/othello/>.
5. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Association for Supervision & Curriculum DEVELOPMENT , 2005).
6. *O*, DVD, directed by Tim Blake Nelson (Miramax: 2001).
7. Literary Elements are a standard for high school English. Students study the elements throughout the semester.
8. Discussions will take place in the form of pairs/partners, groups, or whole class. I usually need to take the class pulse for the day and make this decision on the fly. For example, on any given Friday, students tend to be a bit more talkative and having group work might not be productive. In this case, working in pairs is a good alternative. In any case, it depends on the circumstances at play.
9. Giraldi Cinthio, "Hecatommithi," (1565).
10. Clinical Assistant Professor in the College of Education, University of Houston. Member of the board of NCTE's Assembly on Adolescent Literature.
11. *Othello, Side by Sides* (London: Prestwick House, 2005).
12. This thesis is strictly an example for students. Other versions are acceptable and may be better.
13. This site is great for information about movies; it claims to be "Earth's Biggest Movie Database."
14. Located in the City of Wilmington.
15. Howard uses block scheduling; academic courses are 90 minutes in length.
16. All of the "Sample Lessons" are taken from different points within the unit. These are meant to be a snapshot of a particular day during the unit's timeframe. Each "Sample" provides an explanation of how I teach a portion of the unit, some of my philosophy on teaching particulars, and a timetable that may be useful when planning.
17. Literary Elements are a standard for high school English. Students study the elements throughout the semester.
18. None of the timetables in this unit are meant to be an exact science. These are merely a guide. I like to plan minute-by-minute because I don't want time remaining at the end of the period. This maximizes instructional time and minimizes off-task behaviors.
19. This thesis is strictly an example for students. Other versions are acceptable and may be better.

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