



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2015 Volume II: Explaining Character in Shakespeare

Fate or Action: Character Agency & What the 21st Century Student Gains from *The Merchant of Venice*

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Introduction

“Be just, and fear not” –William Shakespeare, *Henry VIII*

Why Shakespeare?

Sweaty palms, rapid heart rate, and complete paranoia arose. I sat in the desk furthest from where my professor lectured and managed to skillfully avoid his gaze for months until one day in late October when he gestured in my direction and asked me to discuss the shift in Kate’s disposition at the end of *The Taming of the Shrew*. I froze. As an English major and 4.0 student, I felt immediately fraudulent and entirely incompetent in spite of having read the play several times. I knew there was a ‘right’ answer. I was also painfully aware that I didn’t intuitively know the answer he wanted. As I feared and half expected, he countered my response and followed up with his own analysis. In that moment, I wanted to run from the professor, the class, and from Shakespeare. In truth, I never stopped running from the playwright. Years later, as a high school teacher, I was assigned senior English in which I knew I would be required to teach the Bard. Sweaty palms, rapid heart rate, and complete paranoia arose, all over again.

Arguably, there is no running away from William Shakespeare as his legacy and works penetrate the world we engage in, and in time I grew more comfortable with both the writer and his words; however, the above moment in my own academic history serves as a salient reminder of the educator I do not want to be and the feeling I never want my students to experience. Aside from biblical stories, perhaps, there are no other works more prevalent than those of Shakespeare, and I can feel confident that his name will fall on the ears of my students long after they leave the confines of my classroom. When that happens, I want my students to be active participants in the discussion. I do not want them to cower away in fear and intimidation and run away as I did years ago. Instead, my intent for them is to connect, examine, and ultimately feel secure enough to assert themselves in the conversation wherever it arises. I want them to pick up on the references and get the jokes. When it comes to Shakespeare, I want them to be ‘in on it’. To state it plainly, I want them to regard Shakespeare as their ‘homie’, someone who can give insight, provide comfort, and is relevant.

Regarding the following unit, above all else, it is the eradication of intimidation and the inferiority complex associated with the reading of Shakespeare that is central to my aims. No one wants to get Shakespeare wrong, and the goal of our class study must be transparent from the onset. It is not a goal to develop Shakespearean scholars, though if that is a happy side effect- I have no complaints. The goal is instead to foster a sense of confidence and willingness to work with Shakespeare and his texts as relevant, well-crafted works of literature, and to make sure that along the way everyone will have something to add to the conversation. Shakespeare may be long dead, but his words live on because they resonate and still harbor truths about character and circumstance. For that alone, there is a tangible measure of importance that can be associated with the teaching of Shakespeare, and the following unit focusing on *The Merchant Of Venice* will humbly attempt to do just that.

Demographics of School and District

Currently, I teach eleventh and twelfth grade English in Richmond City Public Schools at Franklin Military Academy in Richmond, Va. Given that my school is not a traditional comprehensive high school, there several distinctions worth noting. First, students travel from all over the city and the total student population is only around 375. There is only one teacher per subject grade level, two in my case, so all students required to take English 11 or 12 have to take my course with no alternative offered. It is a militarily run school in which each morning begins with formation and orders of the day. Students are dressed daily in army uniforms and earn military rank through a JROTC structure. Teachers are also addressed with military rank and respect; I hold the rank of Major, and the students address me as such.

Aside from the military distinction, the students are not unlike any other population of children in Richmond City. The population of our students labeled economically disadvantaged by federal standards is just over 91%. The ethnic breakdown of our students is roughly 94% African American, 4% white, and 2% Indian/Hispanic, and the gender breakdown is close to a 50/50 ratio. Due to the number of students in our school, the student to teacher ratio is smaller than that of our comprehensive school counterpart at roughly 15:1. Additionally important to note, we are entering our fourth year of federal school improvement, and although we are making great strides, we still have some areas of weakness we are continuing to work on collectively as a school.

Rationale

Why The Merchant of Venice?

A simple Google search of "*The Merchant of Venice*" and "banned books" will yield nearly 300,000 results, many of which are news articles about school districts banning the text, the use of the play as Nazi propaganda, and other arguments for and against the teaching of the work. When I examine this as an educator, what strikes me as most arresting is the sheer volume of inquiries and level of discourse present among teachers. For a senior English class like mine, this discourse in itself seems appropriate to investigate for a thoughtful discussion of censorship and literature. In supporting the reading of the text in a classroom, a rationale for teaching the text despite previous and present censorship needs to be explicit.

A high school teacher, writes in "The Case against '*The Merchant of Venice*'" published in *The English Journal* in 1953 that "our age is slowly outgrowing *The Merchant of Venice*" because of increasing sensitivity to

offending Jewish students. He believes that because Shylock is “almost the very model of the racial stereotype” the play’s days in the classroom are numbered (Carlin 1953). He ends his critique with insight from his students gained from an informal survey after teaching the play. He asks whether it should be taught in schools and whether they believed the play made any contribution to the understanding of Jews. The answer, distilled in the last seven words of his piece, is “My students said no on *all* counts.”¹

Respectfully, I disagree; though this small classroom account sheds light on the declining presence of *The Merchant of Venice* in today’s high school curriculum, it is literature that provides a ripe place to hold discussion on issues of racial tension, bias, and other topics potentially deemed controversial, and it is this play specifically that holds many truths for students in urban environments. The very fact that it was and is considered a banned piece of literature is a fantastic point of discussion and the mere idea of it being forbidden fruit is an incentive to read it. If one were to ban all literary works that were controversial and provocative, there would be nothing left on the shelves. Understandably, there are ebbs and flows in social consciousness that alter attitudes toward books; however, a closer look at these ebbs and flows and at what the igniting point of agitation with texts like *The Merchant of Venice* is exactly what should be occurring in senior English classes like mine. If, as a system, we are preparing today’s student for college readiness, it is exactly these classroom discussions and critical analysis that are necessary. It is in my classroom where I can begin to introduce an appropriate manner and vocabulary—and skill in interpretation—to navigate controversial topics and controversial texts that really do deserve to be read (granted that not all do).

The Merchant of Venice is notably a banned book regular and there is rich argument for and against the teaching of it in classrooms across the world. One may say it sits in good company with notable works like *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, *The Awakening*, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, just to name a few. There are however established models for teaching previously censored literature, so before reading a single line, to be sure our approach is sensitive in the right ways, we will examine NCTE’s “The Students’ Right to Read” and create a bank of appropriate strategies and vocabulary to use when navigating the controversial reasoning behind the censorship of the play.

Finally, for the most salient reason behind the selection of *The Merchant of Venice*, the answer can be found in the direct relevancy it holds for my students. The play has obvious thematic and situational connections to the complexities my students face daily, thus the immediate relevancy helps to create and sustain buy-in. If my students see themselves in the characters and situations, they are much more likely to invest themselves in the outcomes and commit to reading. Though the play was penned in 1596 (a widely accepted though still estimated date), my 21st century student will see themselves in the isolation and degradation of Shylock, in the need to put up a financial front in order to ‘get the girl’ as Bassanio does, and in the desire to help at one’s own expense as does Antonio. Additionally, the themes of poor decision making, being at the mercy of a court and the manipulations of the justice system, and of being systematically, financially oppressed are all extraordinarily relevant to everyday lives of my student.

Content Objectives

Problem Play? Purposeful not Problematic

“There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” - William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Though the play is problematic for scholars regarding where it belongs in the Shakespearean genre mix, as it is not quite a comedy in the same way that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is, for example, I will be taking the position that modern scholars' classification as a problem comedy is purposeful for class discussion when working with high school students. As the last lines elapse in *The Merchant of Venice*, there is no death in the tangible sense of body count; however, one can argue that there is loss of identity and faith, in Shylock's case. Also, although lovers reunite and marriages are intact, not all loose ends are neatly tied at the conclusion. Readers are left wondering what is to happen to Shylock, as he must endure a living death of sorts. Additionally perplexing is what one is to do with Antonio because although his flesh is spared and he learns of his ships arriving safely, his original source of melancholy is still ever-present. Looking closer at the marital unions, even those are left with cracks in the foundation as there are seeds of mistrust planted, so there are no true 'happy endings'. It is the very problematic elements that distinguish this play as intriguing and complex.

Decision Making & Fatedness as a Scapegoat

“All that glisters is not gold.” - William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

The most apparent starting point to discuss decision making in *The Merchant of Venice* is with the three caskets. Looking specifically at the inscriptions and the logic each suitor used in their choosing will need close examination, but also significant is the reaction each suitor has and how often an undesired outcome is blamed on fate or fortune instead of on oneself. A clear lack of self-examination is pervasive in these scenes. First, the reader is introduced to the Prince of Morocco, who says, “Some god direct my judgment! Let me see; I will survey the inscriptions back again...” (II,vi,13).² It is noteworthy that he calls on a higher power to guide his decision and then goes into his own reasons for his selection; whatever his weaknesses, he is not blaming fate exclusively. Looking at the Prince of Arragon's attempt, the concepts of fate, luck, and chance become more prominent. He states, “Lastly, if I do fail in fortune of my choice, immediately to leave you and be gone.” (II, ix,13). As a forewarning of a wrong choice, he in a sense establishes that it will be as a result of fortune. Interestingly, the only suitor who makes no mention to fate or fortune is Bassanio. He is resolute in his reasoning and steadfast in making a choice in spite of Portia's encouragement to take his time. In the case of the three caskets, it is in fact Portia who has no real agency. She is at the mercy of her deceased father's will and her lack of power is illustrated in her comment, “Besides, the lott'ry of my destiny bars me the right of voluntary choosing...” (II, i,15).

Another important example of questionable decision making is Antonio's choice to loan Bassanio three thousand ducats given that his assets were tied up in ships that were underway. Immediately, the adage of not spending money one does not have comes to mind. If not blinded by his affinity for Bassanio, he likely would have not made that choice given the need to do financial dealings with Shylock. Fortune's double meaning comes to light most clearly with Antonio as it means both money and fate and the juxtaposition of its use in his lines is worth noting. The last mention of fortune from him is as follows, “Grieve not that I am fall'n to this for you for herein Fortune shows herself more kind...” (IV, i,263). It is here that he is trying to lessen Bassanio's guilt because in truth had it not been for his request, Antonio would not be facing death in this moment, so he displaces responsibility from both himself and Bassanio. Instead, it is Fortune to whom he attributes his circumstance and is positive in the outcome as he says it will avoid the problem of a rich man

outliving his wealth.

It is important to take a close look at a character's choices and questionable decision making because of their direct relevancy to my students. Often my students, and their national counterparts, make choices and displace responsibility for those decisions by simply attributing them to powers bigger than themselves. If my students can be critical of a character's choice, we can begin to build awareness of the choices they are making in their own life. For example, I can recall a student being incensed at a store owner for calling the police when he was caught stealing, resulting in the student's arrest. He felt that there had been unjust harshness, but never looked at the original action as a fault on his part. Fate, fortune, or higher powers of any sort should not be allowed to serve as scapegoats, and that lesson can begin if we first start with the actions of fiction's characters and then slowly transition to the critical analysis of one's own actions. There will be an abundance of present day connections and reflections to bring this connection to life in the classroom, and more detail can be found in the activities section of this unit.

Façades as Deceit

“But love is blind, and lovers cannot see the pretty follies that themselves commit.” - William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

Examining façades as tools for intentional deceit will get a close examination by looking at the need to borrow money to create the appearance of wealth for personal gain. Concerning Bassanio specifically, the façade is for the purpose of romantic and financial gain. It should be noted that the idea of appearance verses inner wealth is related here but will translate to the discussion of race, stereotype, and prejudice in more detail later in the unit. I want to take a special pause to examine façades because of their close relation to the life my students lead. The idea of 'putting up a front' is something they grapple with often. For purposes of survival, often I see my students creating a façade to hide what they are lacking. Yet to complicate this idea further, they are often shamed for being fake to any degree, so this delicate balance is tough to navigate, and Bassanio's need to borrow money to appear that he is more financially sound than he is in actuality will resonate greatly.

Again, looking specifically at the façade of wealth Bassanio originally presents to Portia gives rise to questions like, is his love true if one of the chief purposes of courting Portia was to rid himself of debt? As proof, one may examine the exchange between him and Antonio when he first requests the loan: "...and from your love I have a warranty to unburthen all my plots and purposes how to get clear of all the debts I owe" (Act I, i,132). It is a question of motivation. Further examining façades, one may look at the many instances of cross dressing where women disguise themselves for various aims, both selfish and unselfish. Jessica deceives the townspeople. Portia and Nerissa deceive the court.

Transvestism is employed throughout Shakespearean plays and when teaching his works, one should take pause to highlight the conventions of the time in which a young boy actor would be charged with the role of a female character. Therefore, an added level of façade is present because in actuality one has a boy actor playing the character of a woman who is acting like a man, and this should not be lost on modern audiences as it pushes the idea of façades and gender bending to the forefront. In *The Merchant of Venice*, transvestism is usually pointing to the assertion of one's self, with the small exception of Nerissa, as she is mostly acting as a follower instead of employing the deception of cross dressing for gain. To break out of the social confines given by gender, cross-dressing becomes a means to an end.

Transvestism creates power positions for the woman of Shakespeare, allowing them to fluidly move in the patriarchal society. It is also noteworthy that often times, these women put on the clothes of a man of lower rank than themselves, but it is the disguise of a man itself that provides the access one would otherwise not be granted. By contrast, in *The Merchant of Venice* and throughout Shakespeare, there are no instances of male characters disguising themselves as women as there is no need for his men to assert power by this means. In *The Merchant of Venice*, female cross-dressing highlights tension in general. In Jessica's case, for example, it highlights the tension involved in the shift from one religion to another and her means of physically traversing from one world to the other. To translate this idea for the student of today, one should discuss clothing as a means to identity and examine how often students create a façade to break the social confines they find themselves in. Though the act of putting on the dress of the opposite gender is not commonplace, the reason one might do so should resonate.

Usury of Then = The Payday Loan of Today

“Money is a good soldier, sir, and will on.” -William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

Usury, as it is listed in today's dictionary, is defined as “the practice of lending money and requiring the borrower to pay a high amount of interest” (*Merriam-Webster*). To understand the context of the play, however, one must look at the Christian prohibition against usury that was foundational in the creation of laws at the time when *The Merchant of Venice* is set. These laws use scripture as evidence, specifically Leviticus 25: 35-37 in conjunction with Luke 6:27.³ First, Leviticus states:

And if your brother becomes poor, and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall maintain him; as stranger and sojourner he shall live with you. Take no interest from him or increase, but fear your God; that your brother may live beside you. You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit.

It is the above scripture, combined with Luke 6:27, which states not only that Christians should treat all men as brothers, but they should “love their enemies,” that laid the foundation for divisive laws in the Middle Ages. When those in the Catholic Church were outlawed for lending money with interest, the remaining money lenders were then nearly all Jewish, for whom there was no scriptural prohibition, and indeed rather perhaps even scriptural encouragement, as Shylock's interpretation of the story of Jacob and Laban may indicate. To further understand Christian attitudes toward usury stemming from the Medieval period, one may consider the placement of (Catholic) usurers in Dante's hell, where they're placed far down in the inner ring of the seventh circle.

Shakespeare takes the practice of usury and makes it a central point of tension in *The Merchant of Venice*. Upon first read, today's student may not understand why Shylock's line of business is aligned with that of prostitution or blasphemous misconduct, but given some historical context, an understanding can be reached. Once students understand the historical context, they will better understand the actions of the play, and begin to connect its belief system to the real lives they lead, which will help them see that the text is a living one with current applications. A rich area of connection is examining predatory credit lending in conjunction with ‘the other,’ as it should resonate as a contemporary conflict, given the predominance of check cashing and payday loans on the corners of many lower income neighborhoods. Additionally useful in emphasizing usury in

The Merchant of Venice is the opportunity to provide life skills by looking at interest rates on credit cards and loans that the students will likely be offered once they are 18 and often before leaving high school. In this unit, students will calculate interest rates applied if using a check cashing service, credit card payment calculations, and student loan interest rates, with their long term outcomes. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio agreed to the terms of an outlandish loan because he was confident of future earnings, and my students can learn from his mistake. Here is a real world lesson to be learned, together with a wonderful opportunity to do some cross-curricular study using economics and math.

What's in a Name?

“You scullion! You rampallian! You fustilarian! I'll tickle your catastrophe!” -William Shakespeare,
Henry IV, Part II

Referring to one's given name implies that there is thought and reason behind the naming. The name is 'given;' it is in fact decided upon by someone. We all have one. We are called by it, and it is intertwined in the fabric of our identity. So, what happens when we are called anything but our given name? What psychological impact ensues as a result? A close study of naming and the absence of a proper name will serve as an introduction to the prejudice in *The Merchant of Venice* and as a point of entry to discuss the anti-Semitism that makes this a controversial text.

Beast, villain, fool, prodigal, wretch, devil, want-wit, prancing boy, and cutthroat dog are just some of the words used by the characters of *The Merchant of Venice* in reference to others. In fact, Shakespeare is known for the beauty and craft of his insults, but it is interesting that *The Merchant of Venice* lacks gusto in its name-calling, compared to many of his other works. One explanation for this lack of gusto is that serious issues of religion and identity are hiding behind the name-calling and insult hurling. We can begin with Shylock when he states, “Thou call'dst me dog before thou hadst a cause/ But, since I am a dog, beware my fangs” (III, iii,7). In the teaching of the text, handling the issue of anti-Semitism with care, it feels appropriate to start with this quote to emphasize Shylock as a round character who is reacting to the systematic oppression of which he is a victim. My students are extremely familiar with the phrase, 'hurt people hurt people,' and will likely see Shylock's steadfast commitment to his bond with a bit more compassion--although a healthy classroom discourse is always welcomed.

Much discussion and highlighted attention will be will be paid to the insults used as well as the self-assigned names, but the absence of a name is also very telling, and it occurs most with Shylock, who is most often referred to as 'the Jew'. Looking closely at the text, one will find that Shylock is named by his given name eleven times, but is referred to as 'the Jew' thirty-one times, often by the same characters who refer to him at least once as Shylock. The conscious choice of which name to use points to a pattern of intention, and what follows provides a sampling of when 'the Jew' is used by others to emphasize a dehumanization of sorts.

The first time he is referred to as 'the Jew' is by Antonio after the initial discussion of the bond in which he states, “Content, i' faith: I'll seal to such a bond/ And say there is much kindness in the Jew” (I, iii,160). Next are several line examples throughout the play that highlight Shylock's dehumanization. First, Gobbo states “...Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnal; and, in my conscience,/ my conscience is but a kind of hard conscience,/ to offer to counsel me to stay with the Jew” (II,ii,17-28). The subsequent quotes occur in formal circumstances, like the courtroom environment, that make the broad designation even more offensive. Portia says, “What sum owes the Jew” (III,ii,310). The Duke says, “Go one, and call the Jew into the court” (IV,I,13).

Lastly, the Clerk emphasizes the distinction between a label and a proper name when he says, "I acquainted him with the cause in controversy between the Jew and Antonio the merchant..." (IV,i,159). It is important for students to realize the impact of not being called by a given name and the detrimental power of being identified with a broad label. The cause and consequence of the dehumanization and anti-Semitism are eloquently summed up in arguably the most famous speech in the play given by Shylock which states:

Hath a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimension, senses, affection, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (III,I,49-59)

It is in these lines that the reader can feel the inequity Shylock feels, and can realize how longstanding systematic discrimination among faiths and ethnic identities results in a mentality of retaliation. In sum, stereotypes and prejudice are living entities which the students of yesterday, today, and many tomorrows will comprehend as relevant.

While looking at the power of words and in what is in a name, it is fitting to also discuss the origin of the word ghetto as it relates to *The Merchant of Venice*. In a previously taught unit, my students were required to define words and compare definitions in an effort to understand point of view and one of those words was ghetto in which responses ranged from "where poor people live" to "a ratchet way of acting" and still others provided definitions instead of concrete examples. None of my students wondered about the origin of the word and would likely be surprised that although it is related to an area of geographic separation, it had nothing to do with African Americans or America at all. Instead, the etymology of the word is Italian, from the Venetian dialect: ghèto island was where Jews were forced to live (Balsler 2006). It is to be assumed that this is where Shylock is forced to reside, despite his financial success, and it further points to the systematic oppression he is subject to. To fully depict the climate of the time one should know that "Pope Innocent III decreed that Jews should be forbidden from holding public office, should have clothing that distinguished them from Christians, and should not appear in public during Easter week."⁴

Teaching Strategies

This unit will focus on student centered, active learning that will encourage each child to be investigative and think critically about the changing world he or she lives in through the lens of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, and this objective will be attained by providing numerous and varied strategies, to be implemented throughout the nine week time frame.

Reading Journals: Daily Reflective Writing

Reflective writing will provide students an outlet to release their thoughts on the information presented,

assigned readings, and classroom discourse as it occurs without rigid guideline or prompt. Especially since this content is in many aspects controversial, there will be rich opportunities for students to make sense of it on their own first while also making tangible connections to their own lives. The only restrictions will involve length of writing and the requirement that the given prompt is followed. These writings will be housed in their classroom journals. The routine for this exercise is already established from previous units. This preliminary writing may be a rich source for them when they transition to writing their formal reflective academic essay at the end of the unit.

Literature Circles

Given the challenging task of covering a text in its entirety, strategies for classroom discussion must be varied and time conscious so that students are efficiently moving ahead while creating an environment that is not reliant on teacher-centered instruction. Therefore, literature circles will be used to do thematic close studies in which student groups will all be covering an overarching theme but will have separate passages to analyze. As in most classroom reading circles, each part will join back with the whole and synthesize their group's findings and discussion points, with one person appointed to report to the class. Literature or reading circles give students an opportunity to dialogue with their peers and refine their ideas before sharing to a larger party. Further, since the entire effort (aside from the actual reading, which will likely be as a homework assignment) is carried out collectively, there is less risk felt that one may be wrong.

Investigative Study

Throughout this unit, a heavy emphasis is placed on critically looking at their own lives in relation to *The Merchant of Venice*, so students will be required on many occasions to perform real world application based tasks that will allow them to work with content such as credit card interest rates, current legal strategies that result in unjust justice, and the effects of cyber-bullying and name calling. If the content in a unit such as this isn't consistently being utilized in the context of the student's own life, then it is not proving effective. The goal is that students find 'take-home' information in each lesson over the course of the unit's nine weeks.

Socratic Seminar

Using Socratic seminar as a strategy in this unit will allow for a space to discuss the essential questions raised by the text and unit, organized as a discussion that is student led. Students will share, refute, and redefine their ideas of identity, stereotypes, prejudice, systematic oppression, revenge, mercy, and justice. Since Socratic seminars are clearly defined in their perimeters, the students will know that they should prepare for the discussion ahead of time and have salient opinions with sound evidence to support them ready. As with all Socratic seminars, participation is key!

Dramatic and Visual Comparative Analysis

There are numerous visual representations of *The Merchant of Venice* that can provide a rich resource for comparison in character study, theme, and other literary elements. Take, for example, the characterization of Shylock. If, as a class, we take several film and stage adaptations as well as illustrations of just Shylock and study them individually and collectively, we can examine what character features are being pushed to the forefront and how that affects our perception of the scenes as a whole. We can investigate questions like: Is Shylock being portrayed more as a cruel villain or as a sympathetic outsider? Additionally beneficial for continual buy-in and basic comprehension of plot, clips of selected readings help to catch students up and provide clarification as needed. Lastly, there are several strategies whereby film proves to be a fantastic

medium for teaching students to watch clips with no sound and discuss perceived tone and point of view. The reality is that today's student is a fast-fact consumer who is often highly adept at visual learning, so the use of film as a comparative tool is extraordinarily productive.

Sample Learning Activities

Opening Activity: "Choose a Casket, Chose a Fate"

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia's suitors must pick the correct casket of three to win her hand in marriage. In each casket made of three different metals there are inscriptions to give the suitor hints. As an opening activity to hook students and begin to introduce them to the themes of the text, we will recreate this scene but modify the inscriptions and incentivize them to choose wisely. At the center of the classroom students will find three boxes spray painted gold, silver, and dark gray, respectively, to symbolize the three metals used in the play. Little context will be given. Students will simply be instructed to read each inscription and make a critically thought-out selection using their best decision making skills. They will make their selections one at a time and given a color coded token to match with their casket choice.

Once all students have made their selections, they will be instructed to organize themselves in three groups according to their selection, where all those who selected gold for example will gather together. In their respective groups, they will discuss and compare their reasoning and rationale with others who chose in the same manner and be tasked with choosing a representative who can effectively defend their casket choice against the other two options. Next, the selected representatives will present their best case in defense of their choice in the style of a legal argument. Lastly, the representatives will open the caskets to reveal a prize and explanation, or, if it proves to be the wrong casket, an artifact, such as a skull, also with an explanation. Though the prize will be altered and the inscriptions modernized, the spirit of the casket scenes will still ring true, with the prize in the lead box. The purpose of this activity is to begin to lay the groundwork of the unit, which emphasizes a critical analysis of one's decision-making, the influence of superficial perception and creating a sound argument. Having students defend their choice to the other representatives to mirror a courtroom scene will look forward to the courtroom scene in the fourth Act. When we actually read the casket scenes in the play, students will be able to reflect on their choice and how it aligns or differs with the choice of Portia's suitors. Also, additional comparisons of their casket choice rationale and Portia's reasoning in the courtroom can allow for further critical reflection.

Stereotypes and Prejudice Activity: "What's in a Name?"

With identity, stereotypes, and prejudice all central to text and to the unit, this activity synthesizes the aforementioned themes and creates a simple, but highly effective, platform for rich classroom discussion. First, when students walk in to class, they will be given a blank nametag. They will be instructed to write a label/stereotype they have been called in the past and write it on the label in place of their given name. If they are uncomfortable doing so or cannot think of a label they've been called, they will be instructed to write a label or stereotype they've overheard being used for someone else. Allowing those who wish it to avoid self-reference provides different levels of vulnerability while still assuring full engagement and participation. To model, the instructor should write a label and wear it as well. Once all students have written a 'name', the instructor will need to collect them, shuffle them, and redistribute them so no student has a label he or she

wrote. Students will then have to wear the label they've been given for the duration of class and be addressed only as the label on their nametag. The class will not discuss the purpose of the labels until the end of the period, at which time there will be a critically reflective class discussion on the experience of wearing the labels and being addressed as whatever was written on them. A discussion concerning the power and implication a stereotype holds when it becomes the only identifying quality chosen will be moderated by the instructor. Students should be able to express how uncomfortable the activity made them, and how it made them look at their peers differently. This activity will be carried out on the day the class does a close study of name-calling and prejudice in *The Merchant of Venice* with special attention paid to the use of 'the Jew' as a method of identifying Shylock.

Modern Day Usury Activity: "Take an interest in interest"

Usury is a foundational element in *The Merchant of Venice*, but it is not a concept students will immediately understand as it is not a widely used term, so to make the impact of interest relevant and useful to today's student, a cross-curricular mini project concerning credit cards, check cashing, and student loans will be done. Students will be charged with the investigative task of collecting a credit card offer, the rules/guidelines for a stand-alone check cashing establishment, and the requirements for a private student loan through a bank as well as the regulations for borrowing a subsidized and unsubsidized loan from the federal government. Once all information is collected, students will be tasked with calculating the interest and fees for each respective money lending entity. Next, all students must compile a written risk assessment summary in narrative format, outlining the financial consequence of each. Lastly, each student will be required to embody a financial advisor and create a five minute oral presentation discussing their findings and providing a recommendation on an individual financial situation they will be presented. By taking on the role of advisor, students should feel more confident with asserting their opinion of the characters' decisions to borrow or lend money in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Appendix: Scaffolding Unit Instruction & Layout

To better understand the unit, one must distinguish the four stages the unit will be divided into so a broad outline is provided (please note that at points, stage three and four will occur concurrently):

- *Stage One: Addressing Censorship and Controversial Literature*

Before reading a single line, to be sure our approach is academically sensitive, we will examine NCTE's "The Students' Right to Read," and create a bank of appropriate strategies and vocabulary to use when navigating the controversial reasoning behind the censorship of the play. As a class, we will discuss freedom of speech as well as examine other notable pieces of literature and the reasons why they were banned, paying special attention to *Of Mice and Men* as it will have been read earlier in the year, giving students a familiar area of common ground for the discussion.

- *Stage Two: Acclimating to Shakespearean Language*

Arguably, the hardest aspect of teaching Shakespeare is the task of navigating the language, so a carefully crafted tiered approach to acclimate students is needed. They must feel comfortable navigating his works on their own or they will always be reliant on an instructor or other resource. First, students will see the legacy

and prevalence of his words in modern culture. We will examine his language imprint; pointing out how many of his words and phrases are already familiar to them will reinforce the idea that Shakespeare cannot feel foreign as his words live all around them. Next, we will have an insult battle using a bank of researched Shakespearean insulting words. This may seem like a trivial activity, but it will likely be the first time they are taking ownership of the Bard's words and using them in a clever, accessible fashion. Lastly, as a class, we will begin work on the Shakespearean sonnet. We will first read and analyze Sonnet 130. Students will tweet summaries of their analysis and in small groups begin writing their own sonnets following the Shakespearean convention.

- *Stage Three: Reading The Merchant of Venice*

Finally, we are ready to begin the play! Although it is assumed students will be somewhat comfortable with the language, the class text will be the Barron's edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, with a modern English version side-by-side with the full original text, though there will be an understanding that on all assessments and in all class discussions, only the original text will be referred to. The reading of the play will occur individually, but assigned scenes for homework will be performed in classes led by the instructor, and also acted out in the auditorium. To assess and assist with comprehension, there will be class discussion occurring throughout the reading as well as film and stage adaptations used to create a frame of reference and reinforce the plot.

- *Stage Four: Investigating, Analyzing, and Connecting to Today's World*

The major focus of the unit will be on the relevance this play has to the lives my students lead; therefore, at every possible turn, we will find ways of applying the themes, actions, and characters to modern life them through various investigative means and applicable, cross-curricular study. For example, we will examine today's justice system and find court cases concerning loan judgments as well as scrutinize the defense of disenfranchised groups or individuals. Also, we will do a cross-curricular study involving interest rates with credit cards and student loans, so students understand the nuisances of predatory lending. Additionally, we will look at the destructive power of stereotypes and the platform of social media in relation to cyber bullying.

Appendix: Implementing District Standards- Virginia Standards of Learning

Below are the English 12 Virginia Standards of Learning that will be met throughout the course of this unit. Due to the nine week duration of instruction, many objectives must be covered and will be addressed separately and concurrently depending on the context of a given lesson. Throughout the district, emphasis is placed on analysis of British literature in conjunction with learning about non-fiction texts, and this unit meets that expectation by incorporating non-fiction texts in the beginning of the unit as well as throughout the instruction for the purpose of comprehension and comparative analysis. Also in accordance with district-wide objectives, a consistent focus is placed on connecting the content to the lives of students and a platform for real-world skills is created through cross-curricular study.

12.1 The student will make a formal oral presentation in a group or individually.

- b) Choose vocabulary, language, and tone appropriate to the audience, topic, and

- c) Use details, illustrations, statistics, comparisons, and analogies to support the presentation
- e) Use grammatically correct language, including vocabulary appropriate to the topic, audience, and purpose.
- f) Collaborate and report on small group learning activities.
- g) Evaluate formal presentations including personal, digital, visual, textual, and technological.

12.3 The student will apply knowledge of word origins, derivations, and figurative language to extend vocabulary development in authentic texts.

- a) Use structural analysis of roots, affixes, synonyms, antonyms, and cognates to understand complex words.
- b) Use context, structure, and connotations to determine meanings of words and
- e) Expand general and specialized vocabulary through speaking, reading, and
- f) Use knowledge of the evolution, diversity, and effects of language to comprehend and elaborate the meaning of texts.

12.4 The student will read, comprehend, and analyze the development of British literature and literature of other cultures.

- a) Compare and contrast the development of British literature in its historical
- b) Recognize major literary forms and their elements.
- d) Relate literary works and authors to major themes and issues of their eras.
- e) Analyze the social and cultural function of British literature.
- f) Explain how the sound of a poem (rhyme, rhythm, onomatopoeia, repetition, alliteration, assonance, and parallelism) supports the subject, mood, and theme. g) Compare and contrast traditional and contemporary poems from many cultures.
- h) Analyze how dramatic conventions including character, scene, dialogue, and staging contribute to the theme and effect.

12.5 The student will read and analyze a variety of nonfiction texts.

- a) Generate and respond logically to literal, inferential, evaluative, synthesizing, and critical thinking questions before, during, and after reading texts.

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Notes

1. Ibid
2. All direct textual quotes for *The Merchant of Venice* are from the 1998 Signet Classic edition with Kenneth Myrick
3. All biblical citations are from The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Revised Standard Edition

4. Ibid

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