

## Women in Shakespeare's Plays

### Topic

The role of women in the times and plays of Shakespeare

### Learning outcomes

- Read a text about women in Shakespeare's times and plays and explain key concepts
- Use a range of adjectives to describe personality and character
- Describe the key events in the lives of two Shakespearean heroines

### Age and level

13-17, Adults (B2)

### Time

Approximately 70 minutes

### Materials

- Student worksheet
- Task 5 worksheet

### Introduction

This lesson examines the role of women in England during Shakespeare's lifetime and compares this with some of the female characters in his plays.

Learners begin by reflecting on different female character types in Shakespeare's work, then read a text about the roles of women during this period and in Shakespeare's plays. They learn the meanings of a

range of adjectives used to describe character and personality. They finish the lesson by sharing information about two Shakespearean heroines.

## Procedure

<p><b>1. Lead-in: Women in Shakespeare's plays (5-10 mins)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask learners to say what they know about female characters in Shakespeare's plays. If they mention any names (e.g. Juliet), ask questions to prompt further information: What play does she appear in? Where is she from? What is she like? What happens to her in the play?</li> <li>• You could create a mind map of the information learners give on the board. Alternatively, if learners are quite familiar with Shakespeare's plays, they could make a mind map in pairs or small groups. Learn about mind maps here: <a href="https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/professional-development/teachers/knowning-subject/d-h/mind-map">https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/professional-development/teachers/knowning-subject/d-h/mind-map</a></li> <li>• If your learners are not very familiar with Shakespeare's plays, explain that they will learn more about women in Shakespeare's plays during this lesson.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Task 1: Female character types in Shakespeare's plays (5-10 mins)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain that learners will learn about some typical female character types in Shakespeare's plays. Refer them to <b>Task 1</b> in the student worksheet.</li> <li>• Tell learners they should imagine that they are an actor, and they will play one of Shakespeare's female characters. If necessary, you can inform male learners that male actors played female roles in Shakespeare's time.</li> <li>• They should decide whether they would prefer to appear in a tragedy, a comedy or either, then follow the corresponding arrow to answer the second question. This will lead them to a type (types 1-6).</li> <li>• Tell learners to read about the type that they chose. Descriptions of each type are provided at the end of the student worksheet. Ask them to decide if they think it suits them.</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Task 2: Vocabulary to</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask learners to underline or circle adjectives in the descriptions that describe character: innocent, naïve, pure, chaste, scheming, ambitious, intelligent, powerful, violent, passive, witty, bold, independent, bawdy, cheeky, flirtatious.</li> </ul>

<b>describe character 1 (10 mins)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask learners to guess the meanings of any unfamiliar words by considering the context. They can do this as a whole class or in pairs / small groups. Check that all learners understand the meaning of any new adjectives to describe character and know the pronunciation of these words.</li> </ul>
<b>4. Task 3: Reading (10-15 mins)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask learners to think about the different types of female character in Shakespeare's plays. What does it tell you about the period when Shakespeare wrote his plays? Explain that he lived between 1564 and 1616.  Suggestions: social status impacted on the expectations of women's lives; women didn't have as much power and freedom as men; marriage was an expectation.</li> <li>Tell learners that they are going to read a text about women in Shakespeare's day. Ask them to discuss these questions, either as a whole class or in small groups:  What do you think the ideal woman was like in Shakespeare's day?  What do you think education was like for women?  How do you think Shakespeare's female characters reflected society?</li> <li>Refer learners to the text in <b>Task 3</b> of the student worksheet. They read the text and think about the questions asked before they read. When they are ready, they discuss questions 1-4 (below the text) in pairs or small groups. Invite pairs / groups to share their answers.  Answers:  1. She followed rules set by her father; she was financially dependent on her husband; she was charming and obedient.  2. Formal education ended when girls were young; they learned how to be a wife, mother and manager of a household / farm; girls from wealthier families studied languages, sewing, music and dancing to make them attractive and to marry well.  3. There are some innocent characters who reflect the ideal woman e.g. Cordelia in 'King Lear'; Desdemona in 'Othello'.</li> </ul>

	<p>4. Characters are often strong, rebellious, independent. They use charms to deceive e.g. Goneril and Regan deceive their father to take his power; Lady Macbeth was not obedient and passive; Viola in 'Twelfth Night' was independent and pretended to be a man.</p>
<p><b>5. Task 4:</b>  <b>Vocabulary to describe character 2</b>  <b>(5 mins)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Refer learners to <b>Task 4</b> in the student worksheet. Individually or in pairs, learners find adjectives to match the definitions in the table. They write the words in the table.</li> </ul> <p>Answers: 1. charming, 2. obedient, 3. rebellious, 4. virtuous</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If learners do this quickly or if you have time, ask learners to prepare definitions to review other adjectives which describe character in the text: independent, innocent, bawdy, scheming, passive. They read out their definitions and classmates say the word.</li> </ul>
<p><b>6. Task 5:</b>  <b>Two different heroines</b>  <b>(25 mins)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explain that learners are going to find out more about two female characters. Organise everyone into pairs: Learner A and Learner B. Give <b>Task 5 Worksheet A</b> to all Learner As; and <b>Task 5 Worksheet B</b> to all Learner Bs.</li> <li>Individually, learners complete Tasks 5A and 5B. When they are ready, they check their answers in pairs.</li> </ul> <p>Answers:</p> <p>In the tragedy 'Romeo and Juliet', 14-year-old Juliet refuses to marry the man her parents have chosen for her. Her father is very angry. Her father says that if she does not agree, he will not speak to her again, so she rebels by running away and marrying her lover in secret.</p> <p>In the comedy 'Twelfth Night', the main character is a woman, which was very unusual in Shakespeare's times. Viola, who has been shipwrecked in a foreign land, dresses like a boy so she can get a job as a servant of the duke. Viola falls in love with the duke (but he thinks she is a young man) and the duke's beloved, Olivia, wants to marry Viola, thinking she is a man too.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When pairs are ready, ask learners how they think the stories end for the two characters, or invite them to share the endings if they are familiar with the plays. To make this more creative, you could give words from the endings (e.g.</li> </ul>

	<p>poison, brother) and have learners guess which character they relate to (Juliet or Viola) and the events.</p> <p>Answers:</p> <p>Juliet's secret husband, Romeo, is banished and her father says she must marry another. Juliet takes a potion to fake her death, so she does not have to marry again. A letter is sent to Romeo to explain. Romeo does not get the letter and believes she is dead. He kills himself with some poison. Juliet kills herself with a dagger.</p> <p>There is a love triangle – Viola loves the duke, the duke loves Olivia, Olivia loves Viola. Viola's brother Sebastian arrives. After some mistaken identity, he marries Olivia. Viola reveals she is a girl and marries the duke.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask learners to discuss how Juliet's and Viola's stories reflect what they have learned in this lesson. Suggestions: Juliet is a typical Type 1 character, the tragic innocent who dies after disobeying her father (and not being the ideal woman in that sense). Viola is not typical of the ideal woman of the time. She is bold, independent, intelligent. She ends up married, but it is her choice.</li> </ul>
<b>7. Homework</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learners write a short description of a female character from one of the Shakespeare's plays. They could write about Juliet, Viola or research another.</li> </ul>