

OTHELLO IN THE CLASSROOM

APPROACHES TO TEACHING *OTHELLO* IN GRADE 12

Summary of interview with Professor Thurman

Professor Thurman began by addressing the perennial issues or challenges students encounter when studying works by Shakespeare; namely, the language of Early Modern English and the customs and conventions of Elizabethan England.

Prof Thurman suggested that the worthiness and sanctity with which the texts of Shakespearean plays are often treated in academic contexts is not only unhelpful but misplaced given the historical realities of Elizabethan playhouses. He argued that educators may benefit from adopting a less reverential stance towards the plays and from encouraging students to translate and remix the texts and interpret them in personally meaningful ways.

Prof Thurman proposed asking students to translate scenes and soliloquies into contemporary English and their home languages. He also recommended asking students to present these translations in the classroom for discussion, either through performance or by using their smartphones to create short visual presentations.

Prof Thurman emphasised the importance of performance. He encouraged participation in festivals such as the Shakespeare Schools Festival to gain a practical experience and understanding of the plays. He suggested organising school productions to help students foster a deeper connection with the material. He proposed asking students to visit the Lockdown Shakespeare project (available via YouTube and the website of the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa) for inspiration and then record their own soliloquy or monologue interpretations using their smartphones, again, for presentation and discussion in the classroom.

While acknowledging the usefulness of asking students to watch film versions of a play (especially if a live performance is unavailable), Prof Thurman cautioned against the possibility of these powerful visual interpretations becoming fixed readings of a text in the minds of students. He recommended watching numerous versions to provide students with diverse visual interpretations of a play, even if time permits watching different versions of specific scenes only.

Key Suggestions:

- Adopt a less reverential attitude.
- Encourage translation and remixing.
- Emphasise performance and personal interpretation.
- Welcome diverse interpretations.
- Be playful and practical.
- Challenge the perceived relevance of *Othello*.
- Embrace difficult, complex discussions.
- Confront the ways in which the play by turns challenges and reinforces racial stereotypes.
- Apply a post-colonial perspective.
- Remember to address themes of patriarchy and gender-based violence.
- Focus on provoking open-ended thought, discussion and debate.



IDEA: One approach could be to assign a character or pivotal scene to a student (or group of students) which they must study in-depth and then present to their peers in the classroom; for instance, asking three students to act as Othello at different stages of the play (i.e. the beginning, middle and end) and be interviewed by the rest of the class. Each of the Othellos could be assessed according to how well they interpreted their version of the character, and the evolution of the character through the play could be discussed.

Overall, Prof Thurman encouraged educators to allow students to be playful with the texts and to remix or translate them in personally meaningful ways. From a practical perspective, he suggested that focusing on characters and specific passages and key moments is still valuable if time does not permit the undertaking of an exhaustive analysis of the entire play.

Addressing the play *Othello* specifically, Prof Thurman warned against attempting to draw simplistic conclusions about race and morality from the text and argued that the work does not offer a straightforward moral message nor a definitive commentary on race relations. He cited the observation made by scholar Ayanna Thompson — who describes herself as the ‘Othello whisperer’ on account of her work with various black actors who have been cast in the role — that the play is structured towards the audience implicitly adopting Iago’s hateful and mocking view of Othello or being outraged by Othello’s irrational decisions and barbaric behaviour. Prof Thurman argued that the play does not serve black consciousness or an anti-racist rhetoric in the way that many people assume it does. Indeed, Prof Thurman encouraged educators to be wary of such reductionist views and to challenge such simplistic interpretations of Shakespeare’s work.

Prof Thurman suggested that the play offers a starting point for important, complex discussions in the classroom, in contrast to simplistic, definitive answers. He elaborated on this point by highlighting the need for students to engage with the historical context of the play and its performance history in South Africa, including the problematic tradition of blackface.

Reiterating his belief in the importance of encouraging students to interpret Shakespeare’s work within their own sociopolitical contexts, Prof Thurman recommended educators use the text to confront uncomfortable topics like systemic racism and to deconstruct racial stereotypes. He proposed that discussing the historical context of interracial relationships and the contemporary relevance of the racial themes in the play could help students connect the text to current real-world issues.

Regarding real-world issues, Prof Thurman also encouraged educators to apply a post-colonial lens to the play as part of these discussions because this perspective highlights the agency of the characters within the world of the play, which could lead to discussions regarding our own agency as citizens today as well.

As well as the theme of race, Prof Thurman highlighted misogyny, patriarchy, gender roles and gender-based violence as important themes within the play and urged educators to explore these alongside racial discussions. He suggested that educators could focus on Desdemona and her perspective to facilitate critical discussions regarding these themes, both within the play and in modern contexts.

Prof Thurman concluded by reminding educators of his belief that the text offers a means of provoking open-ended thought, discussion and debate in the classroom, rather than offering a means of imparting specific or definitive moral lessons.

Useful Links:



Shakespeare ZA
(Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa)
<https://shakespeare.org.za/>



The Tsikinya-Chaka Centre (Wits University)
<https://www.tsikinya-chaka.org/>



Speak Me A Speech (CineSouth Studios)
<https://speak-me-a-speech.com/>



A Midsummer Ice Cream (JAM ensemble)
<https://youtu.be/hj2UfKGGZ5Zs?si=dlcoESQwmu8kP8nh>



#lockdownshakespeare (monologues)
<https://www.youtube.com/@lockdownshakespeare4875/videos>



JAM at the Windybrow (monologues)
<https://www.tsikinya-chaka.org/news-events-and-features/jam-at-the-windybrow>



Shakespeare Schools Festival
<https://www.sfsa.co.za/>

Suggestions for applying these approaches:

1

Ask students to create a modern-day skit or sketch that parallels a scene from *Othello*, using contemporary language, music and settings.

2

Assign students quotes from the play to translate into contemporary slang or their home languages, and ask them to explain how their meaning shifts in translation and whether the quotes are relevant today.

3

Challenge students to create humorous memes based on *Othello*, which they present and explain in class. Students could also vote for their favourites.

4

Ask students to devise and record a short visual presentation on an aspect of the play (e.g. using smart-phones), which they present to the class and explain.

5

Host an '*Othello* Slam' in which students perform soliloquies or extracts from the play. Performers explain their choices and what the lines mean to them. Students could also vote for their favourites.

6

Ask students to create a photo essay that connects *Othello* to contemporary South Africa.

7

Challenge students to design/create a potential TikTok post explaining an aspect of *Othello* to their peers. Students could also vote for their favourites.

8

Invite students to suggest a soundtrack or playlist of music for a contemporary South African production of the play, which they present to the class and explain.

9

Ask students to create social media profiles for their assigned characters, complete with posts, likes, and interests.

10

Assign students characters from the play to research so that they can sit in the 'hotseat' in class and explain their actions to their peers and/or be interviewed by their peers.

11

Ask students to research and present case studies from current events that parallel the themes and/or events in the play.

12

Challenge students to design/create an artwork that reflects themes from *Othello* in the context of modern South Africa.

13

Conduct a mock trial in which characters defend their actions (e.g. based on the historical/colonial context of the play).

14

Ask students to conceive alternate endings to the play, which they present to the class and explain.

15

Ask students to create an aspirational, glossy Venetian society magazine, which would have been read by the characters in the play and includes interviews or profiles of key characters and reported descriptions of key events.

16

Invite students to create artworks that represent a specific character's inner thoughts and emotional and psychological struggles.