

# Cymbeline

## PLOT

King Cymbeline of Britain is angry because his daughter Imogen has married Posthumus. Cymbeline's evil second wife wanted Imogen to marry her own stepbrother, Cloten. The king banishes Posthumus. In Rome, he meets Iachimo, who wagers Posthumus that he can seduce Imogen. Iachimo goes to England but sees at once that she can never be won; so he steals the bracelet her husband had given her. Posthumus is horrified that his wife is unfaithful and sends Pisanio to kill her. Pisanio instead persuades Imogen to escape to the countryside disguised as a page. She meets the banished nobleman, Belarius, living in a cave raising his sons (two stolen sons of Cymbeline). Belarius and his "sons" pity Imogen, for whom they feel inexplicable affection. Cloten, dressed in Posthumus's clothing, comes in pursuit of Imogen. One of Belarius' sons cuts off the prince's head. To calm herself, Imogen drinks medicine that is actually poison. The brothers are horrified to find their page apparently dead, and lay her next to Cloten's body. Imogen wakes and, seeing the headless body she believes to be her husband, falls in a faint. Recovering, she becomes page to a Roman ambassador. Meanwhile, Cymbeline goes to war with Rome, and Belarius and his sons join the king's forces. In battle, the three men rescue Cymbeline and capture the Roman ambassador with his page. Posthumus, in despair over Imogen's death, disguises himself as a Roman prisoner of war so he will be killed. Cymbeline learns that his wife has died after confessing her treachery. Imogen then forces Iachimo to confess his treachery to her and Posthumus. She then reveals her identity to her husband, who is quickly recognized and released. Next, Belarius reveals the two princes to their father. Cymbeline pardons both Belarius and the Roman ambassador and makes peace with Rome. (Adapted from Sparknotes.com synopsis)

## THEMES AND ISSUES

- Family relationships: spousal, parental, sibling
- Separation of children from parents
- Deception
- Faithfulness and unfaithfulness
- Retribution / Forgiveness
- Chaos and order
- The triumph of love

## LANGUAGE AND STRUCTURE

- Stories within stories – The play presents both a patchwork of stories sewn together, and a web of interconnected stories that swirl together. Marmion's quote "Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!" comes to mind with this play (*Marmion. Canto vi. Stanza 17*)
- Intertextuality - cf *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Twelfth Night*, *Romeo & Juliet*, *Timon of Athens* [cave]
- opulent settings contrasted with corrupt action
- Stature and status - contrasting of the Queen and her son's high social and political stature with the lowliness of their speech and actions

## EXTENDED RESOURCES

- Online Searchable Text of *Cymbeline*: <http://www.chemicool.com/Shakespeare/cymbeline/>
- Other Shakespeare Plays: *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Romeo & Juliet*, *Twelfth Night*
- Shakespeare Films: *Cymbeline* (1982, BBC) *Othello* (1994) *Twelfth Night* (1996)
- Other Films: *The Bird Cage* (1996)
- Wide Reading: Ovid: *Metamorphoses*; Bettelheim, Bruno: *The Uses of Enchantment: the meaning and importance of Fairy Tales*;

## ACTIVITIES

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|-----|-------|-----------|-----|--|
| SG  | Inf.  | Speaking  | 1.  | Set one of the songs in the play to music for an in-class performance  |
| SG  | Form. | Speaking  | 2.  | Find modern songs that are comparable to the songs in the play to present in class and contrast with the play's songs.   |
| Ind | Inf.  | Writing   | 3.  | Both Cloten and Posthumus claim to love Imogen, but express their love in very distinct fashions. What kind of "love poems" do the two lovers give in the play?  |
| SG  | Form. | Writing   | 4.  | Prepare and present a scene that might take place when Posthumus and Imogen visit their marriage counselor at the end of the play or a scene where Cymbeline and Imogen visit their counsellor. After the performances, discuss the major differences between the two scenes.  |
| Ind | Form. | Writing   | 5.  | <i>Cymbeline</i> establishes a vast social web of interconnecting relationships and plots that can be confusing. Create sociograms that focus on plot or relationships to clarify the relationships explored in the play.  |
| WG  | Inf.  | Speaking  | 6.  | The play features much about love of various manifestations. Discuss what kinds of love are present in the play, and which types affect action the most. What does this suggest about the way we portray love in public? Is this what love is about for you?   |
| WG  | Inf.  | Viewing   | 7.  | The play has many elements of fairytale. How does this fairytale fit with our modern ideas of what is fairytale-ish? If we were to present this as a modern version, how would we "sanitize" it [make it 'socially acceptable' or 'nice']? (look to the fairytales Disney has adapted to see how stories are sanitized – Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty etc.) |
| Ind | Form. | Reading   | 8.  | Posthumus has two major soliloquies in the play (V: i; II: iv) that are vastly different. Contrast the two and discuss reasons for the differences. How do they each help you to understand Posthumus feelings at the time?  |
| WG  | Inf.  | Listening | 9.  | If you were going to set the score to a movie adaptation of this play, what music would you use for each scene? Select appropriate music to share with your group. Discuss where each piece would best fit in developing the plot.   |
| SG  | Inf.  | Reading   | 10. | Working in small groups, select a passage depicting parents and children speaking with each other. Consider what characterizes the parent-child relationship. Present your findings to the whole group.  |
| SG  | Form. | Viewing   | 11. | In small groups, select a character from the play and compare this person to a parallel character from another play using film depiction. Some parallel character examples might include: Iachimo with Iago from <i>Othello</i> , or Imogen with Cordelia from <i>King Lear</i> .  |
| SG  | Form. | Listening | 12. | (Read aloud or play soliloquy recordings for students from a variety of other Shakespeare plays). Identify which character from <i>Cymbeline</i> they find most similar to the one whose lines are read. Be prepared to explain why.   |
| Ind | Inf.  | Viewing   | 13. | View the film, <i>The Bird Cage</i> . What elements of <i>Cymbeline</i> are present in the movie in terms of plot and character development? Consider whether <i>The Bird Cage</i> is a film translation or adaptation of <i>Cymbeline</i> .   |
| Ind | Inf.  | Writing   | 14. | Which character from <i>Cymbeline</i> do you identify with the most? Why?  |
| Ind | Inf.  | Speaking  | 15. | Select a piece of writing [book, novel, article, essay or other ] that is thematically related to <i>Cymbeline</i> . Prepare a brief summary of the piece and share your insights with the whole group.  |
| SG  | Inf.  | Writing   | 16. | As a working journalist, which character from <i>Cymbeline</i> would you like to interview? What questions would you ask? Suggest likely answers. Swap your answers with another journalist in your group and use their notes to write their story as a feature article for a magazine of your choice.   |
| WG  | Form. | Speaking  | 17. | Rewrite a sequence from <i>Cymbeline</i> (you may change the plot and put the  |

text in modern English). Use props, costumes, music and whatever else you need to rehearse and ultimately perform the play for an audience.

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| WG  | Inf. | Reading | 18. Some of the characters in the play speak in verse, and others in prose. Which characters? Suggest why Shakespeare does this? How does it affect our interpretation of the characters?   |
| WG  | Inf. | Writing | 19. Write a line describing [insert character's name] in <i>Cymbeline</i> . Write the last word of your sentence on a line all by itself. Fold the top of the page down so that only that one word is showing. Pass the paper to your neighbor and start a new sentence relating to the play using the word showing. After the pages have made 10 circulations, read through the descriptions that have ensued. |
| Ind | Inf. | Writing | 20. Identify one major character from the play. Collect words that <u>other</u> characters use to describe your character. Use them to develop a caricature of your character.  |

SG – Small Group Activity

Ind – Individual

WG – Whole Group Activity

Inf. – Informal, non-assessed

Form. – Formal, assessed