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Stereotypes in Popular Media and *The Merchant of Venice*:

Learning Objectives

- Students will be able to define and discuss the construction of stereotype, in relation to the play *The Merchant of Venice*.
- Students will brainstorm ways to stop stereotypes.
- Students will discuss persecution.

Introduction to Prejudice in *The Merchant of Venice*

Wink-murder: play one round of wink murder so that everyone knows how to play.

The game: One pre-selected student is "the murderer." Nobody but the murderer knows who the murderer is. The students all mill about the room, looking at people's eyes. The murderer randomly "murders" people by winking at them. Once a student is winked at, he waits for three to five seconds, and then "dies" in a dramatic fashion. The "dead" cannot reveal the identity of the murderer. The living must try to figure out who the murderer is and accuse that person. A correct accusation wins the game; a false one means instant "death."

After round 1, line each student up and give them a bag with a "mask" in it. Most bags should have a simple mask, varying in colour, perhaps, but all generally light shades. One bag (the bag of the murderer) should have a black, "bad-looking" mask. Each bag should also include a tag with the word "innocent" or "murderer" in it (so that all students know their roles). Then they play again. The murderer should be quickly identified.

Afterwards, have a discussion. Did we know the identity of the murderer because of the mask? Or did the murderer have that mask because he was the murderer? In other words, which caused which?

Tie this to *The Merchant of Venice*. Does the audience think Shylock is bad because he's a Jew, or is it the other way around? Is it natural to assume anything about his character because he's a Jew? Perhaps Shakespeare decided Shylock should be a Jew because of all his unfavourable traits...

Shylock, Stereotypes, and Shrek

Intro

Start with a discussion about stereotypes, and have the class give some examples. What examples are present today? Perhaps compare these stereotypes to past expectations. Have they changed?

Ask the class how and why stereotypes started. Eventually, you will get to the point that stereotypes started when we were children, in order to better classify the world and learn about your surroundings. It's just that we've kept this learning curve through our adult lives. More often than not, the stereotypes

are attached to alienation and foreboding. In *The Merchant of Venice*, there are some examples – specifically with Shylock.

Duckling

Ask the students what stereotypes were enforced when they were children. One example of stereotype use while young would be from Sesame Street, when they would play “one of these things is not like the other.” This emphasized separation along with an undertone of “if it’s different, it’s bad.” Also, to learn basic shapes and to process identification, we would label any style of dog “dog,” not on what type of dog it was. This leads into phobias, if one creature could cause a traumatic experience for the child, then that child is afraid of all classifications inside that breed (snakes, spiders).

Relate this discussion to the play. Are there any examples from the play that emphasizes a phobia style stereotype?

Read the Ugly Duckling. Compare this to what has been just discussed. Emphasize that the duckling, because it was not pretty and it was different, that the other animals treated it poorly, without getting to know the creature.

Shrek

Play three selections from the movie *Shrek* to emphasize the issue of stereotypes.

Section 1: (3:30 – 4:50) This selection displays how the villagers see the ogre. They see him as a horrid beast, ready to devour everyone - “A nasty beast.” To compare, this echoes what goes on inside the other characters inside the play. They see Shylock as the money-grubbing Jew and the enemy of the play without giving any chance to get to know the man.

Section 2: (26:54 – 28:05) This section displays the fact that Shrek is like an onion, and that he has many layers. This reiterates that not everyone is the exact stereotype. To compare, Shylock goes on to talk about how he is just like everyone else inside his soliloquy (3.1.)

Section 3: (46:50 – 48:10) This section of the film lets the audience see Shrek’s personal feelings governing Section 1, or how the villagers treat Shrek. This shows how victims of stereotypes feel. This points out that people should not be governed to jump to stereotypes because, most often than not, it’s false and that the victim is harmed because of it.

Activity

Have the students come up with three other examples of this style of stereotype or phobia and have them explain why they chose it.

Have the students write why this view is a poor choice to see the world, and how can we bring about a way to stop it.

Have the students examine the idea of bullying, and how it starts from stereotypes. Is Shylock bullied inside the play?

Does Shylock resort to stereotypes inside the play, and give fuel for everyone else to treat him as such?

Popular Media and *The Merchant of Venice*

Connecting to students’ interests and prior knowledge:

Watch an episode of a popular TV show. (Suggestion – *Friends*)

In small groups, the students take on the roles of the characters from show.

Evaluating stereotypes in popular media:

The student/characters physically line up along a continuum (from the most stereotyped character to the least). Each student/character in the continuum must be able to explain why s/he is in that specific position, using evidence from the TV show.

E.g. Stereotypes in *Friends* include the ditzy blonde, the geeky scientist, and the dumb actor. In doing this activity, students will have an opportunity to critically discuss stereotypes and cultural assumptions within contemporary society and popular media.

Stereotypes within *The Merchant of Venice*:

Discuss the historical perceptions and portrayals of Jews.

Possible film: *Blood Money* – This documentary outlines the Nazi conspiracy to control the fortunes of Jews. This can be related to the perception of Shylock as the Jewish moneylender.

Other stereotypes/conventions to discuss: gender and racial stereotypes

The students again take on the roles of the characters, and again position themselves on a continuum from the most stereotyped to the least. Students should find that some characters require constant shuffling of position depending on the events within the play.

E.g. Portia – She starts off in a conventional female role, being under the control of the patriarch. Later, she breaks out from the female stereotype to assume authority within male disguise in the trial. However, at the end of the play, with her union with Bassanio, she re-assumes her conventional role.

Discuss possible differences in interpretations of the same character:

E.g. Shylock – Is his portrayal stereotypical, or does Shakespeare show him to be more complex?

Parallel study: *Shylock's Daughter* by Mirijam Pressler. This young adult novel is told from the perspective of Jessica and describes her relationship with Shylock and her feelings about going against her father for Lorenzo, a Christian.

Three Caskets and Stereotypes

Scattered throughout Acts II and III is the ritual of the gold, silver, and lead caskets, a sort of moral lottery devised by Portia's deceased father to test the values of her suitors. Participation in this ritual would be a vivid way to draw students into the world of the play, but ritual could also function as a revolving door back to our own world. In asking the students to read the inscriptions and to choose from among the three caskets, the shadow of Portia's dead father would fall upon us all.

Setting the Stage

Arrange three desks at the front of the room, and placed upon each a "casket" in the form a cigar box or any other box. Color-code each casket with gift ribbons and "engraved" with Shakespeare's verse:

- Gold -- Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire.
- Silver -- Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves.
- Lead -- Who chooseth me must give and hazard all.

On the blackboard, write Italy, 1598, an aristocratic family estate. Then list the "cast call" on the board: Suitor 1, Suitor 2, Suitor 3, Portia (Lady of Belmont and the "prize"), Venetian society (the rest of you). Ask for volunteers, clear a space down the middle of the room for the ritual of the three caskets.

Ask three suitors to assemble at the rear of the class, and to approach the caskets separately on cue. Inside each casket I had placed a scroll with the appropriate inscription. Hand Portia an index card, and stationed her by the caskets. Portia read from the card, "You have traveled a great distance and passed many tests to be standing in the presence of three caskets. You must choose one. If you choose the right casket, you will win a beautiful, intelligent, rich young woman (groans and whistles from the groundlings here) and all her possessions. If you choose the wrong casket, you will never be allowed to marry, or to have children." At this point, Venetian society seemed fully engaged in the game-show dilemma.

The first goes directly for the lead casket, and when all three has chosen, take quick poll of the audience -- "Hands up if you think the gold / silver / lead casket contains the prize!" Venetian society leaned in favor of the gold, so fraught with modern connotations of victory and wealth. I then asked the "gold" suitor to read his scroll:

All that glisters is not gold,
Often have you heard that told.
Many a man his life hath sold
But my outside to behold.
Gilded tombs do worms infold.
Had you been as wise as bold,
Young in limbs, in judgment old,
Your answer had not been inscrolled.
Farewell, your suit is cold. (II.7)

The audience become suspicious -- "It's a trap!" Then the "silver" suitor unscrolls his fate:

Some there be that shadows kiss;
Such have but a shadow's bliss.
There be fools alive, I wis,
Silvered o'er, and so was this.
Take what wife you will to bed,
I will ever be your head.
So be gone: you are sped. (II.9)

The winning suitor, who also happened to choose first, reads aloud:

You that choose not by the view,
Chance as fair and choose as true!
Since this fortune falls to you,
Be content and seek no new.
If you be well pleased with this,
And hold your fortune for your bliss,
Turn you where your lady is
And claim her with a loving kiss. (III.2)

Push the desks back into place and ask the "lead" suitor what prompted him to choose the least impressive casket.

Elicit the answer: "I'm a risk-taker, and I figured that people who are willing to 'give and hazard all' for someone or something they love deserve to win, you know, at least in a play."

Reprint each inscription and challenge the students to interpret what now appears to be a moral code embedded in the play.

Activity

Read each inscription. Explain what each choice reveals about the chooser in the mind of Portia's father. While they reflect upon this task, write the words GOLD, SILVER, and LEAD on the blackboard. Brainstorm words associated with the three.

GOLD SILVER LEAD

- * greedy people
- * cautious people
- * risk-takers
- * people fooled by flashy outward appearances
- * wannabees -- people who try to be what they're not
- * people not fooled by appearances
- * materialistic people
- * people who make compromises for comfort
- * spiritual, intellectual people
- * people who sell out for luxury
- * people who sacrifice spiritual health for material wealth
- * people not deceived by false values
- * people who take without giving
- * people who give more than they get

Assignment

Think of a person from the world of politics, entertainment, sports, history, or your own life, who would make a good candidate for the Gold, Silver, or Lead casket. Write a short poem that describes your candidate and measures his/her worth within the context of the three caskets.

Example: Gold am I, my name is Trump,
 A few years back, I hit a slump;
 Some even dared call me corrupt
 But business is better since I went bankrupt.

Gold candidates included several pro athletes. Silvers candidates could include politicians i.e. President Clinton ("...Without the public on my side, Behind Hillary I must hide").

The spectrum of Lead candidates can range from Mother Theresa to Bill Cosby.

Wrap Up

Ask students to think whether the real people they have chosen are portrayed as stereotypes in the media.

Teaching Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*: perspectives on anti-Semitism

Shylock is a stereotyped figure in MoV. His occupation as a moneylender who charges interest on loans is considered anti-Christian. His demand for "a pound of flesh" from Antonio is animalistic, and fits with the portrait of the Jew as a villain. The following activity compares Elizabethan and 20th century anti-Semitism, and shows how Shylock's character is translated onto the screen in post-WW II film versions of the play.

Elizabethan anti-Semitism:

Students should identify in the play text some ways that Shakespeare stereotypes Shylock. Then, in small groups, they may conduct research into how Jews were discriminated against in the Elizabethan era. Some possible answers follow:

- Religious discrimination: Jews were anti-Christian and should convert to Christianity
- Money-grubbers: Jews exhibited anti-Christian behaviour by charging interest on loans; Leviticus states that no man shall charge a fee for assisting another
- Jews will go to any lengths to make money

20th century anti-Semitism:

Students should identify their prior knowledge about discrimination against Jewish people. Research may be conducted or the teacher may give a brief lecture on the important differences between Elizabethan and 20th century anti-Semitism:

- racial discrimination: "He looked Jewish;" people were Jewish by birth even if they had never prayed in their lives
- Jews try to control economy and money; this probably developed from the stereotype of the "stingy" Jew of the 17th century
- Jews are powerless, yet they possess the power of the devil; irony

Producing the play:

Students may view scenes from film or stage versions of the play, paying careful attention to the way Shylock is portrayed as either a victim or a villain:

Olivier – cut "I hate the man, for he is a Christian"

- humanized Shylock
- made Shylock visually indistinguishable from other characters
- stripped stereotypes of Jews – nose, beard etc.
- set in 19th century, pre-Holocaust; perhaps allowed director some remaining freedom with his treatment of the character. Is it possible to make Shylock appear entirely humanized?

Film clips taken from *Shylock*, a film created by the National Film Board of Canada in 1999.