

Focusing on The Outsider in Shakespeare and in Our Own Society: Coalescing Character Education, Film and Filmmaking

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Who is the outsider? Is it you? Is it I? Is it the disenfranchised? Can you be affluent and successful while also being an outsider? Are “inside” and “outside” shifting concepts? Can you be inside today and pushed to the outside next week or this time tomorrow? What does the outsider see and hear that others do not? What is the motivation by the whole to put the outsider “outside?” What is the cost to society as a whole to put any segment of society “outside?”

These and other related questions are the stuff that I would like to see my middle school students chew over – dissect, argue about in discussion, writing and finally come to some decisions about in the creation of their own film scripts and projects that deal with the outsider as protagonist and representative of the larger society.

WHO MY STUDENTS ARE

I teach at an urban middle school of about 1400 students. To give a sense of the makeup of the student body, over 60% of my students are considered to be at risk for failure and/or dropping out of school. About 88% participate in the free or reduced lunch program. Ethnically, the population is about 67% African American, 25% Hispanic, a very small number of whites and the remainder of the population consists of an international array – students from Afghanistan, West Africa, and Eastern Europe. Quite a few in this last group are participating in formal education for the first time.

For the past four years, my school has been a First Things First school. This program divides the larger middle school into smaller communities that are united by theme. Ideally, the students remain in the same community for their entire middle school career. They get to grow together as a group – taught by the same small group of teachers.

A key component of this program is character education under the auspices of a Family Advocate Program designed to provide a link between the student, her teachers and her family. Every teacher, administrator and counselor has a group of anywhere from 5 to 16 students for which we “advocate.” We meet with this group of mentors for 40 minutes weekly. Our goal with the group is to work with them on planning and succeeding in their school careers and also to help them put into action positive attributes of character development. We host an annual Family Advocate night at the school for parents to come out and discuss their children’s school careers and some staff members also establish more informal routes to get to know their parents.

I teach in the Performing Arts community – we are about 300 strong (students) and the focus of our community is on building academic success by incorporating the performing arts into the academic curriculum. Every student in our community is enrolled in a performance class, either band, choir or theater. These classes perform at least bi-annually, participate in competition and hopefully also have a great time while learning. We, of course, think that ours is the best community.

RATIONALE FOR THIS CURRICULUM UNIT

I am troubled by my success or more specifically lack thereof with my mentoring group. Yes, we do have lively discussions from time to time – I am covering the character ed curriculum (integrity, self control, responsibility, etcetera – do it: you should) but I do not feel that I am having a dynamic impact on re-focusing their attitudes and getting them to really see the loss to themselves and to society as a whole when they place others “outside” – when they engage in self-hating behavior that dictates that someone ELSE must be at fault – when they bounce to a territorial imperative that says “Hey – OTHER – you stay over THERE!”

By bullying, middle school students create their own insider and outsider tracks. The student or group of students who is bullied is placed outside by the bully or group of bullies. The ramifications of this situation lead to everything from isolation and despair by the victims to retaliation against the bully. Retaliation can often lead to the creation of two distinct groups, those who were initially set upon and those, who, perceiving themselves as “insiders” set up the initial conflict. What results is an environment that is not safe for anyone.

Bullying in middle and high school has become a national concern over the last decade as the literature attests. A 1999 American Psychological Association Monitor article highlighted three research studies that showed that bullying is widespread in middle school.

Recently, at my own school, (and in my community) one of the assistant principals received a letter from a student saying that she had decided to kill herself because she was tired of being bullied and because she thought that no one would believe her. When I discussed this incident with my advocate group, they were not at all surprised. (“Ms. Kelley, y’all need to wake up and smell the sour straws!”)

This letter, as well as other related incidents, has prompted an administrative imperative to put in place a school-wide bullying education program and to establish immediately a zero tolerance policy on bullying.

In thinking about a way to address this climate of distrust, hostility and alienation at my school, I thought about how the concept of the outsider is addressed in literature. I began to look for examples that would allow my students to learn about the experience of being an outsider, the factors and events that lead to the creation of outsiders and the impact to society when its members place individuals or groups “outside.”

Can middle schoolers understand outsider theory and its impact? I think that they can. One of the successful ways to teach young people about a concept like this is through great literature. Through literature we can illustrate our point removed from the emotional heat and personalization of these issues.

Why I chose the literature of Shakespeare was never better expressed than in the words of his contemporary, poet and dramatist Ben Jonson, writing about Shakespeare in 1623:

Triumph, my Britain, thou has one to show
To whom all scenes of homage show
He was not of an age but for all time...

The brilliance and timelessness of Shakespeare’s plays makes their themes just as relevant for my students today as they were four hundred years ago. The opportunity to study them, moreover, will provide excellent grounding for my students as they go on to high school and college.

But also, very importantly, in the “Shakespeare and Film” seminar, I have discovered a way to make Shakespeare more accessible to my students who are, for the most part, neither strong nor recreational readers. Tackling one of the plays primarily from the script would make it very

difficult to sustain student interest as they struggled with the language and text comprehension. Utilizing cuttings from the script as well as well film sequences will be much more engaging for them.

In my unit I am going to focus on three of Shakespeare's plays – *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *Romeo and Juliet* (as well as parts of its modern day version *West Side Story*.) It is not my intention to do any of the plays in its entirety but rather to utilize cuttings [SCENES] from the scripts as well as scenes from recent films of the plays. At the end of the Shakespearean unit, I would like to give my students an overview of the process of translating a story to film and then have them create their own “outsider stories” to tell – using film as their medium.

My first introduction to Shakespeare was through seeing a film. I saw Paul Robeson portray Othello. I did not even read the play until a number of years later but just the memory – of how the character and the medium grabbed me – makes me think that my students can come to know Shakespeare through these films.

WHY THESE PLAYS WERE CHOSEN

Othello

Othello – fascinating. A black man, a strong man, a man who is a “star” in his society. A man who is affluent – a military champion, accomplished, and articulate. And outside. Othello is “the Moor” – a man of African descent in Venice. He is described as “the Moor” repeatedly, which effectively puts him outside the mainstream. The play addresses the theme of racial prejudice. The Venetians revere Othello as an accomplished military strategist, and they need him in their war with the Turks, the script tells us, but we also read constant references to his race, his differentness, and his otherness. Iago, his subordinate, refers to him as “an old black ram” in describing him to the father of Othello's bride.

In the play, Othello is a brave soldier, who by his conduct in the bloody wars with the Turks has risen to the rank of general in the Venetian service, and is thought to be esteemed and trusted by the state. He falls in love with Desdemona, daughter of the rich senator of Venice, Brabantio. They marry, and when Brabantio hears of the marriage, he brings Othello before the Senate accusing him of seducing his daughter with witchcraft and spells, marrying her without the consent of her father and against the obligations of hospitality. Othello, in front of the Senate, eloquently and humbly speaks of his love for the senator's daughter, and when Desdemona is summoned, she too, affirms that they are in love and the her father should allow her to pursue her duty to her lord and husband. Brabantio soon apologizes and welcomes Othello into his family. This scene clearly delineates how Othello's “otherness” plays into Brabantio's initial outrage. There are repeated references to Othello's being black and to his ancestry – his “Moorishness.”

As the story continues, Othello has recently promoted Cassio to be his trusted lieutenant, and this promotion offends Iago, who hates Cassio and feels that he, Iago, more deserved the promotion. Iago also says that he hates the Moor and even discusses a suspicion that the Moor may have been too familiar with Iago's wife Emilia. Iago plots a revenge that will ensnare Cassio, the Moor and the fair Desdemona.

Iago concocts reasons for Cassio to be in Desdemona's presence while also planting suspicion's in Othello's mind as to Desdemona's unfaithfulness with Cassio. These accusations are groundless, but Iago weaves his plot so skillfully that a tragic outcome becomes inevitable. Othello kills Desdemona and then, when he realizes what Iago has done, kills himself.

Why does Iago choose to destroy Othello? Does Shakespeare spell it out for us? Does Iago feel the threat of the “other” so fiercely that he is compelled to be rid of it? Is he acting in concert with the rest of society to wrest their territory – their property, their woman – from this “Moor?”

Or are his motives more personal? And what does Othello want? Recognition? Family? Revenge? Does Othello want simply to belong? These questions pose a myriad of discussion possibilities for students and opportunities to draw parallels to present day society.

What is the cost to Venice when Othello is lost? What would be the cost to us to lose such an outsider?

The filmed version of the play starring Laurence Fishburne is very well done and would be quite interesting to my students as they are fans of the actor. There are not too many middle school boys in my classes who do not know Morpheus from *The Matrix* movies (“Well, if Morpheus thinks this Shakespeare is cool, there might be something to it.”) We must seize these inroads where we can...

Additionally, the notion of territoriality can be introduced here and updated to reflect students’ own notion of territory. At Streetplay.com, a website about urban play, I found this quote, “Each group is trying to retain its bonds, loyalties and unique identity while also struggling to merge into the mainstream of society.”

Do students feel this conflict? Do they feel that they must exclude others to hold on to their own identity? This conflict can also be linked, vividly, to the modern day Romeo and Juliet fable – Jerome Robbins’ and Robert Wise’s *West Side Story*, which is also included in this unit.

The issue of territoriality and the insider versus the outsider is also explored in a compilation of immigrant interviews from an article entitled “The Insider/Outsider Paradox: Interviews on The Experience of Otherness.” This article was generated in the American Literature Projects Salzburg Seminar at the American Studies Center in Salzburg, Germany, May 1998. One of the article contributors, Vladislav Bajac notes, “There are three kinds of immigrant solutions in general: 1. Forgetting homeland heritage and total accepting of the new culture. 2. Deep connection to the homeland heritage and ignoring the new culture as much as possible. 3. Living in between.”

As an outsider and immigrant to Venice, where does Othello fit in this description? Where do the Puerto Rican kids in *West Side Story* fit? It would appear that within their group they are making varied choices as to how to “be” with the mainstream society.

It might be interesting to have students prepare and perform monologues that dramatize this conflict that the characters feel.

***The Merchant of Venice* – Shylock and Portia**

The historical context of this play might be an interesting point of departure for discussion with students. Though the play has long been accused of being anti-Semitic, Jami Rogers suggests that the question is somewhat more complicated than that in her article “Shylock and History.” She says:

Although Shakespeare wrote possibly the most famous Jew in English literature, there were virtually no Jews in England during his lifetime...It would also be impossible to surmise how detailed his knowledge of the historical facts about Jews in England was, but fact and myth were certainly handed down through the ages, and it is safe to assume that he would have been aware of his country’s historical folklore.

There were several anti-Semitic myths regarding Jews that developed in thirteenth century England. Also, in 1593, a few years before *The Merchant of Venice* was written, Queen Elizabeth had her physician, a Spaniard and a Jew, hung, drawn and quartered (think of your middle school students salivating at that story), alleging that he had conspired with the king of Spain to poison her. Rogers suggests that the physician’s fate and the slurs that he endured on the scaffold, indicate that:

There was a latent anti-Semitism within the English public...at this time, however, all foreigners were regarded with suspicion and distrust – they were seen as a threat to the security of the English nation. There's that territorial imperative again.

As the play opens, we are introduced to Shylock, the shrewd, unpopular Jewish moneylender who is said to have enriched himself by charging his borrowers huge sums of interest. His opposite is the Venetian merchant Antonio, beloved of many and kind and generous to his friends. We are told that these two are sworn enemies – Antonio disdains Shylock for his usurious behavior and Shylock resents Antonio for his criticism and treatment of him.

A young friend of Antonio, Bassanio comes to him for a loan so that he may woo the object of his affection, the lady Portia. Antonio, who is temporarily strapped as he waits for his ships to return from sea, wants very much to help his friend and so reluctantly goes to Shylock to secure a loan. Shylock sees in this an opportunity to exact revenge and tells Antonio that he will make the loan with the proviso that should Antonio default, he will owe Shylock a pound of flesh – from anywhere on his body that Shylock chooses. Antonio, supposing that Shylock is in jest about this part, agrees to the terms.

Bassanio and Portia woo and are wed. Antonio's ships are reported to be lost at sea, and he defaults on the loan. Portia offers to give her husband the money to make the loan good – Shylock is not interested: he wants his pound of flesh.

Meanwhile, Portia tries to figure a way out of this for her husband's friend. She consults a family friend, well versed in the law, and on the day Antonio and Shylock are to go before the Venetian court, she and her maid disguise themselves as men and Portia appears in court as a young judge who then proceeds to play an integral part in the proceedings. She traps Shylock by telling him that yes, he may have his pound of flesh, but as the agreement makes no provision for taking blood as well, he must have his "prize" without shedding one drop of Antonio's blood. Shylock is bested and further, made to give over half of his fortune to the state and half to Antonio. Antonio declines his part and says that it should be given to Shylock's daughter who has been disinherited by her father for eloping with a Christian. And so "justice" is served.

In *Merchant* we are in Venice again and dealing with the spectre of racial prejudice again but Rogers suggests that while Shakespeare perpetuated perceived notions of Jews, he created a Jewish character in the play, "who was flawed, human and oppressed by the humans around him."

The character's humanity and vulnerability would make an interesting portrait to get students thinking and talking. Shylock does not have the superstar charm of Othello, but like him he is very successful. And like him – he is an outsider. As a Jew in Venice, he and others of his religion are separate from the Christian mainstream. They live separately, they do not have access to many professions, and they are reviled by some among the majority population. Shylock speaks of this isolation and separateness in his famous speech from Act 3, Scene 1:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, 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... The villainy you teach me I will execute and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

Portia, of Belmont, is also an outsider according to Professor Ace Pilkington, as he points out in his essay: "*The Merchant of Venice: A Tale of Outsiders.*" Pilkington states, "Shakespeare has

set a generous and clear sighted woman in sharp contrast to a no less unusual, but markedly unsocial man...Both Portia and Shylock use money as a means but to very different ends.”

In Act Four when Portia says, “Then must the Jew be merciful,” Pilkington suggests that she is one alien speaking to another, appealing to their common humanity and arguing that all such souls need compassion. Students might compare and contrast these two. Portia seems to be very much an insider – she is moneyed and a welcome member of the mainstream but of course the role she plays as a judge at the end of the play is not a role a woman would really have been allowed to assume in the society of that day. So, like Shylock, at that point in time, she too is outside.

Romeo and Juliet/West Side Story

Romeo and Juliet entrances adolescents with its tragic love story. Who is outside in this story?

The feuding families of the leads each embrace their territory and their feud and place the other family outside. Romeo and Juliet are outside because their love puts them outside of/against their families. Additionally, the lovers are “bullied” by their parents because of their choices. An angle for students to explore might be the truth of such a story today? What would be the cost to defy one’s family and lose their love and protection? What would be the cost to each side?

The play centers on the son and daughter of two feuding families, the Capulets and the Montagues, who fall in love. Juliet’s father, Senor Capulet, hosts a banquet in the hopes that his daughter will cement a match with the mate he has chosen for her, Paris. Romeo and his friends, uninvited, are present at the banquet. Romeo sees Juliet and is smitten.

Romeo scales the wall of her family’s house to be near Juliet – They profess their love for each other and arranged to be married. When a member of his family is killed by a Capulet, Romeo retaliates and kills Tybalt, a Capulet. Romeo is then banished from Verona. Meanwhile, the Capulets have gone ahead with the scheduling of Juliet’s marriage to Paris, not realizing that she is secretly married to Romeo.

Aided by another character, Friar Laurence, Juliet has decided to take a potion simulating death so that Romeo can take her away. When the Capulet’s discover that Juliet is “dead,” they plan her funeral. A letter sent to Romeo describing the scheme does not reach him, and when he arrives at the church where Juliet lies, believing her dead, he takes poison and dies. Juliet awakes from her simulated death to find her beloved dead and stabs herself to death. The Capulets, Montagues and the Prince of Verona arrive and are told what has transpired. The Prince scolds the two families, who finally end their feud. To end the play, the Prince summarizes this tragic love story.

Jerome Robbins’ and Robert Wise’s *West Side Story* puts the Shakespearean tragedy into “urban play...and war!” Instead of the feuding families, we have two groups – the white kids and the Puerto Rican kids. The Puerto Rican “Juliet” and the white “Romeo” fall in love. The enmity between these two groups is clearly and dynamically dramatized in the film (my students love it!) Each of these groups wants to hold on to their identity – their “turf” – both figuratively and literally. For the Puerto Rican kids, there is the additional conflict of both wanting American assimilation and wanting to hold on to who they are. This conflict is humorously dramatized in the song “I Want to Be in America.”

In my unit, I will include scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*, scenes from the Franco Zeferelli’s film of *Romeo and Juliet* and scenes from the 1961 film of *West Side Story*.

Teaching Storytelling on Film

From the study of the plays and the characters, I would move the students to look at how a film script is constructed. What are the basic components of a film script? How is the drama created? Heightened?

To make this part of the unit, hopefully, both manageable and engaging, I would use the script for *The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street*, a teleplay for *The Twilight Zone* by Rod Serling. I taught the teleplay as a dramatic reading with high school juniors, but I think that it is just as accessible to seventh or eighth graders.

The story demonstrates what can happen in an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust on a normally friendly block of neighbors when people start being perceived as “aliens.” The “outside” status in the story keeps changing from one neighbor to another, and the tension continues as the neighbors begin to “devour” each other. Serling makes the point that this could be any block anywhere – Main Street, USA.

The teleplay begins on a summer evening on Maple Street when a strange light shoots across the sky. The light is seen by several people, and that starts a conversational buzz. This is followed by strange isolated events – everyone’s electricity goes off and then only one neighbor’s lights come back on. All the cars go dead. Then one guy’s car starts. Then his car dies. Then another guy’s car starts. Stories begin about a woman who has been known to stand alone on her porch late at night looking up at the sky. Before long the people on the block are accusing each other of being in league with creatures from outer space, and the conflict finally escalates into violence.

The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street affords the opportunity to continue pursuing the outsider theme while also teaching the form. It is written as a script with all the requisite notations.

I would have the students read the script aloud and, as well, have a student, read the camera notes. Then I would show the actual episode of the story so that students could see how the direction builds the story to a shocking climax on film.

Student Filmmaking

At this point, it will be time for student groups to return to the protagonist that they created at the beginning of the unit. Hopefully, their initial protagonist will have undergone a lot of change based on what they have learned over the semester. They may even have evolved a single character into a group.

Each group needs to begin constructing a story. I usually take time before any story writing to review basic narrative structure because I find that my students need the help

Our goal is to create short 10 – 15 minute films that address one of the outsider issues that we have dealt with through the plays. Now we are going to set the outsider or group of outsiders in our time, in our town and make a statement about his or her life – which is really a statement about all of us.

Students will write their own scripts, cast the parts, rehearse and then record their efforts.

Timeline

I would project this unit as covering three six-week grading periods or one semester. The students meet for 90 minutes two or three times a week.

Logistics/Lessons Plans

To assist students with keeping track of the multiple plays, characters and storylines, a number of methods may be used. Character and event graphs and charts that stay posted up in the classroom for the duration of the unit would be helpful. Students can also create storyboards in teams or groups.

LESSON PLAN ONE: “YOU KNOW YOU’RE AN OUTSIDER WHEN...”

Unit Focus

This lesson will be the kick-off lesson to this unit. The objective of this lesson is to get students thinking about, articulating and illustrating their concept of an outsider.

Materials

Lined paper
Pencils
Butcher paper
Markers

Using a Kagan Rally Robin exercise, students, will, in groups of four to six, generate their own lists of what trait are characteristic of an outsider. Students will be encouraged to argue in favor of the inclusion of a particular trait but the group should work toward consensus, generating a description of eight to ten characteristics. This list will be put on a large sheet of butcher paper (poster size) to be shared with the class.

Each group will then create, on a life-sized piece of butcher paper, the physical representation of their outsider – in pencil. Making the outsider in pencil will enable them to edit the drawing as the unit progresses. These drawings will then become the basis on which the protagonists for the student films are constructed.

Each group will present to the class their outsider characteristics list and their drawings. These drawings will then be hung around the classroom for the duration of the unit. They may be taken down as needed if the group decides to alter them.

I would allow one hour and a half class period for teacher led introduction and discussion of the unit and for students to make their own lists. At the next class session students would create their drawings and present their lists and drawings to the whole group.

LESSON PLAN TWO: “THE OUTSIDER WRITES A RESUME”

This lesson is designed to take place after the Shakespeare plays have been completed. It is immediately followed by Lesson Plan Three.

Objectives

- To have students locate biographical information about a character in a dramatic text or film script
- To reinforce organizational and writing skills
- To give students a brief overview of the job interview process

Materials

Scripts
Film Cuttings
Writing materials

Because this lesson is dependent upon the next lesson, the number of resumes that is generated will depend upon class size and the number of “interviews” that you are going to conduct.

Students will be divided into small groups and will be assigned a particular Shakespearean character, of the ones we have studied. The class will be instructed in a simple one-page resume format. Each group will begin researching the accomplishments of their character from the text and class discussion, with instructor assistance. The final step will be for them to write the character’s resume.

LESSON PLAN THREE: “THE SEARCH TEAM CHOOSES INSIDERS”

The objective of this lesson is to have students role play and evaluate what it feels like to be in the roles of insider and outsider. Some students will be applicants who are applying for positions at the Studio 211(my classroom) Corporation. Others will be members of the search team that must review the applicants.

Materials

Resumes

Note – taking materials

Evaluation/Discussion Form for Student Observers

Each of the following characters – Othello, Portia, Shylock, Juliet, Maria, Bernardo (This list is not meant to be absolute – you can choose your own characters as long as you feel that they meet the criteria of falling into outsider land) – takes turns bringing his resume in and being interviewed.

The four to six person search team must interview the candidate, review the individual’s resume and then discuss among themselves whether or not this person is a good “fit” for the Studio 211 company. They must take notes. They must then choose a successful candidate. Or two.

What is the rest of the class doing? It is probably a good idea, with this age group, to change the search team for every couple of candidates. The rest of the class will be making their own notes on what THEY would do – what questions they might have asked, their choice for a hire... Then, in a full class discussion at the end of the exercise, everyone will have participated in some way.

CONCLUSION

If I achieve my objectives, my students will have a clearer and more dynamic view of what it means to be an outsider. They will understand what things are placed at risk for all of us when individuals are placed outside of society or choose to place themselves outside. They will understand that inside and outside are concepts that can shift from day to day and from moment to moment.

Additionally, I welcome the opportunity that this unit affords me to expose them to the literature of Shakespeare – to combine the richness of the characterization and imagery with the accessibility of excellent film offerings. This will give my students great preparation for high school.

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