

Thought Experiment:

Shakespeare as a School Boy

Part of the Shakespeare 101 Series

at www.lethimroaragain.com



*Shakespeare's Classroom at King Edward VI School
Taken by Amy Perry in July, 2013.*

Step by Step Instructions:

1. Show the class a photo of Shakespeare's classroom at King Edward VI School in Stratford-upon-Avon. (Above is one I took in 2013.) You may like to discuss some of the features of the classroom. It's not clear in this photo but these desks have names and graffiti carved into the soft wood, the mark of students over many years. In Shakespeare's time it's thought that the arrangement would have instead be two benches along the side walls, facing one another.
2. Ask students to imagine what William Shakespeare might have been like as a student. You may throw in some facts here about the types of education at the time if you have them and are enthused by them.

Stimulus 1: You could mention here the description from *As You Like It* that Shakespeare himself wrote about this second age of man:

'The whining school-boy, with his satchel
and shining morning face, creeping like snail
unwillingly to school.'

Stimulus 2: Or perhaps paraphrase his description of the teenaged lover, full of sighs, so obsessed with the object of his affection that he even writes poetry about her eyebrow! Did these descriptions fit Shakespeare himself?

Stimulus 3: Students could imagine what it would be like for William Shakespeare and his friends to watch travelling companies of actors perform plays in the room directly below this one. Would they be asked to move the furniture and arrange the space in anticipation of this? What would they have talked about as they did this task?

Some suggested prompts before improvisation are:

- a. What kind of subjects would Shakespeare have studied?
- b. Do you think he was bullied at school or might he have been really popular?
- c. Would he perhaps have been the teacher's pet?
- d. Would he have had a favourite subject? If so, what would it be? What about his least favourite subjects?
- e. Do you think Shakespeare was a dreamer in class or was he very studious?
- f. Do you think that Shakespeare might have been a bit of a celebrity at school or often alone?

The actual answers to these questions are not important at this stage so resist the urge to correct or even to have the students come up with one 'right answer' as a class. The important

thing at this stage is for the students to engage with the idea that Shakespeare was a young person at some point.

3. Have the students work in groups to improvise and then perform a scene which includes their imaginings of Shakespeare at this age. The scene might take place in the classroom or schoolyard. It might even be a recreation of his first date or playing football with his mates. It's important that the scene includes a student taking on the role of Shakespeare, rather than other characters simply discussing him. It may be that they choose to have William Shakespeare speak in Elizabethan English or in their own contemporary voices. The choice of language is not important, as long as they are beginning to embody William Shakespeare as a human character rather than as an amorphous concept.

Possible adaptation:

In an English classroom you could alter this step by having students write the script as a group or perhaps write a journal entry as Shakespeare in first person. You might also choose to have students write in the role of Shakespeare's Schoolmaster issuing William Shakespeare's academic report.

My preference would be for performance so that students are improvising and voicing to avoid them overthinking writing as Shakespeare at this early stage.

4. Once all groups have performed take some time to discuss the where the students' perceptions of Shakespeare, as presented, overlap and where they diverge. This is a good opportunity to let students know that Shakespeare's plays are often quite risque and based either on other classical works or popular works of the day. He used pre-existing ideas to create something new.