

Key Stage 3 English
SATs Preparation 2006

Richard III

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Unit 2: The character of Richard in Act 1, scene 1

What are we learning today?

How Shakespeare creates the character of Richard in lines 1–31.

What am I looking for?

How Richard behaves, why he says what he does, how he reacts to events, and how he treats other people.

Commentary on Richard's character in Act 1, scene 1

Many of Shakespeare's audience will have seen *Henry VI, Part 3*, which was written and performed before the play *Richard III*. In this earlier play Richard decides he wants to become King. He kills Henry VI, as well as his son Prince Edward. However, it is his elder brother who becomes King Edward IV. So the original audience, or anyone who knows the history of Britain at those times is already aware of Richard's ambitions.

Because of this it is not what he wants to do that is important but rather how he intends to do it and what sort of man he is that interests an audience. The audience already know the story, so their interest is in the way Shakespeare tells it.

Summary

At the start of the scene Richard tells us –

- What he thinks about the end of the war
- About his physical deformity
- He cannot be a lover so he will be a villain instead
- He will create trouble between King Edward and his other brother Clarence. This will clear one of his obstacles to the throne.

He tells us this through a **soliloquy**. This is when a character tells us his or her secret desires and thoughts. It tends to make us interested and sympathetic to a character, even an evil one, because we are invited to share their secrets. Richard's secrets are do with evil, villainy and treachery, but, like many villains on TV or in films, he is fascinating.

Activity: Discussion

- 1 Brainstorm villains you have seen on TV or films. What makes them interesting? Which villains do we like? Why?
- 2 Richard seems a nasty piece of work, but what do you think Shakespeare wants the audience to feel about him?
- 3 Do audiences like evil people?

Characters

We find out about a character through –

- What they say about other people and events – their attitude
- What they say about themselves
- What others say about them
- What they do.



Richard's coat of arms shows two boars. Does it fit his character?

Act 1, scene 1, lines 1–13

In these lines Richard uses opposites to compare war with the peace which now reigns. These opposites compare one thing with another, making the first seem better than the second. The more extreme the opposites, the greater the impact.

For example:

Our stern alarms changed to merry meetings.

This means: 'Our battles have now become pleasant chats.'

Look at these other opposites used in the speech:

- Weapons used in battle
... weapons put on display
- The angry face of war
... a calm and pleasant face
- Mounting war horses
... playing music to ladies

Notice that the last example shows his attitude to the King.

Activity: Oppositions

- 1 Find the oppositions listed above. Why do you think Richard uses oppositions like this in his speech? Bearing them in mind, what do you think is Richard's attitude to the end of the war?
- 2 Make up sentences that uses opposites – for example:
 - Instead of hunting for spies we spend our days knitting jumpers.
 - Instead of competing we sit and chat about sports kit.
 - Now our 950cc Honda has been replaced by a bicycle.
 - I would rather be thrashing the other team than reading a book.
 - The once great and powerful wizard has become a puny teacher.
 - Our triumphant cricket bats are now just museum exhibits.
- 3 What do you think Shakespeare wants us to feel about Richard in this opening section of the play?

Lines 14–31

One of the main things we learn here is that Richard suffers from some physical deformities.

Activity

Using Richard's lines, find or finish these sentences, meaning ...

'I am deformed': *But I that am not*

I am unattractive to women:

I was a premature baby: '.....'

'I do not have sex appeal': '.....'