

Topic: Execution in Shakespeare's time

Level: B2/C1

Time: 60 minutes

Aims

- To develop students' ability to read for gist and detail
- To build students' knowledge of vocabulary associated with crime and execution
- To develop students' awareness of capital punishment in Shakespeare's times

Introduction

This lesson is about execution in Shakespeare's time. It provides students with an understanding of the violent background to Shakespeare's writings and also aims to raise students' awareness of the very public nature of executions in the playwright's lifetime. **This lesson contains explicit reference to violent punishment, torture and death.** It is therefore recommended that you only use this lesson if you are confident that none of your students will be made to feel upset or uncomfortable by its content.

Preparation

As well as this lesson plan and the student worksheets, the following materials are also provided:

- **Execution in Shakespeare's time PowerPoint.ppt** for the **Warmer** and to introduce **Task 2**
- **Crime and punishment cards for Task 5**

Also, for **Task 2**, the newspaper article in the student worksheets is in Lucida Blackletter, an old-fashioned font. If you are concerned that your students might find this difficult to read, print copies of **Alternative version of Task 2 in plain typeface** (page 4 of this lesson plan) to use instead.

Procedure

Warmer – Talking about capital punishment (5 mins)

- **Show slide 2** of the PowerPoint file **Execution_in_Shakespeare's_time_PowerPoint**. Focus students' attention on the picture, and elicit what is going on. (The picture actually shows the hanging of Protestants in Scotland in the reign of Mary Queen of Scots.)
- Draw students' attention to the object on the right-hand side. Ask students if they can tell you what it is and what it is used for. (These are gallows and they are used for hanging people.)
- Tell students that many crimes were punishable by death in Shakespeare's time. Give students a time limit of one minute. Ask them to work in pairs and list crimes which they think might have been punishable by death in Shakespeare's time.
- Conduct class feedback.

Answers: Crimes which were punishable by death in Shakespeare's time include: treason, rebellion, murder, blasphemy, spying, alchemy, witchcraft, begging, forgery, being in debt, adultery, fraud and stealing birds' eggs

Task 1 –Types of capital punishment in Shakespeare’s time (10 mins)

- Tell students that they are going to learn more about the different types of capital punishment in Shakespeare’s time.
- Focus students’ attention on the different types of capital punishment and their descriptions. Students match the descriptions with the type of punishment. Allow students to check their answers with a partner before conducting class feedback.
- Ask some questions to check students’ understanding of what they have read, e.g.
 - *Why was hanging a slow death? (Because you died of strangulation.)*
 - *How were kings and queens usually executed? (They were usually beheaded.)*
 - *Which kind of executions sounds the most horrible in your opinion?*
- Tell your students that in many of these cases executions were public; they served as a warning to the public. They were also a form of entertainment or live theatre. Stress that Shakespeare lived in violent times, and ask your students if they can give you any example of violence in Shakespeare’s work.

Answers: 1 b 2 c 3 d 4 a

Task 2 – Read all about it! (10 mins)

- **Show slide 3** of the PowerPoint file **Execution in Shakespeare's time PowerPoint**.
- Focus students’ attention on the questions and the newspaper article. Tell students that the story they are going to read is based on true events from Shakespeare’s times.
- Ask students to read the article quickly and choose the best headline for the news story.
- Give students the chance to briefly compare notes with a partner before conducting class feedback.

Answer: b

Task 3 – Words and phrases which mean the same (10 mins)

- Students match the words and phrases underlined in the text with their meanings.
- Check answers orally.

Answers:

- | | |
|--|---|
| a. <i>plotted to assassinate</i> | d. <i>tortured</i> |
| b. <i>witnessed the raid on the Arden family home</i> | e. <i>this is not just a one-off</i> |
| c. <i>on charges of treason</i> | f. <i>lunatic</i> |

Task 4 – Checking understanding (10 mins)

- Students read the article again more slowly.
- Ask students to jot down notes to each question before discussing their answers with a partner.
- Circulate as students complete this task, offering support and feedback where necessary.

Answers:

1. *(Suggested answer) I think he probably wasn't a threat because if he really wanted to kill the Queen he wouldn't have been shouting about it in the village square.*
2. *No reason was given.*
3. *He thinks they want the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots on the throne.*
4. *Because they are Catholic.*
5. *Probably because he realised that it was not safe to be a priest at this time.*
6. *They are going to the Tower and will probably not come back alive.*

Task 5 – Talking about capital punishment (15 mins)

- For this task, you will need to print and cut up and keep separate sets of the **Crime and punishment cards for Task 5**.
- Organise students into pairs and give each pair a copy of the **crime cards** (on page 1).
- Tell students to read the situations quickly and decide which of them would have been crimes in Shakespeare's times. Conduct brief class feedback and elicit that all of the people in these situations would have been considered criminals in Shakespeare's times.
- Ask students to predict how these criminals would have been punished. Then distribute the **punishment cards** (on page 2). Students match the crimes and punishments and in doing so check their answers.
- Organise students into groups. Lead into the discussion questions by asking students: which of these people would have been criminals in our time? How would such situations be dealt with nowadays?
- Students discuss the questions in their groups. Circulate as students complete this task, offering support where necessary. Conduct class feedback.

Answers: 1 d 2 c 3 b 4 f 5 a 6 e

Task 2 – Read all about it!

Look at the first page of this newspaper from November 1583. Read the main article and choose the best headline for it.

- a. Plot to kill Queen a “one-off” incident
- b. Crazy Catholic gang “asking for trouble”
- c. “No need to panic” say police

The Olde Worlde News**November 22, 1583****Long live Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth**

Officials have been working around the clock to ensure our Queen’s safety, after a dangerous gunman and known lunatic publicly plotted to assassinate Her Majesty. The alarm was raised after several villagers near Stratford upon Avon saw John Somerville armed with a gun and making violent and treasonous threats in the village square. Somerville has since been moved to the high security prison at the Tower of London with his wife, Mary. Both have been tried on charges of treason and will soon be sentenced to a slow and painful death.

A senior official is leading the criminal investigation and believes that this is not an isolated incident. “This is not just a one-off: it’s a Catholic plot to kill the Queen and put Mary Queen of Scots back on the throne. Well, if these Catholics want to ask for trouble, they’ve got it.”

Operation “Catholic Clean-up” has already started, and several Catholic families have already been arrested. The Arden family is currently being questioned in connection with the incident.

Edward Arden’s neighbour, Edward Greene, witnessed the raid on the Arden family home. “It was a bit of a shock to tell you the truth,” he said. “They took Edward in the middle of the night, then a day or so later they came back for his wife and his daughter, Margaret. The family priest got frightened and dressed up as a gardener, but they saw right through that and arrested him as well. They’re at the Tower of London now; I’d be surprised if I saw them again.”

Greene’s wife, Mrs Anne Greene, sees things differently. “These are terrible days for the Catholic folk,” she says. “It’s not safe for them. Catholic families everywhere are being arrested, tortured and killed. You don’t need to have done anything wrong – it’s enough just to be Catholic.”