



**KENTUCKY  
SHAKESPEARE**

**IRA ALDRIDGE**

*Pioneer of the Stage*

**Study Guide**

**Grades 4th - 12th**

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Dear Educator,

Thank you for choosing Kentucky Shakespeare to enrich your students’ lives with Art Education! We know that the arts are essential to a child’s educational experience and development. It is our object to keep the arts alive and thriving in our schools and communities.

This comprehensive Study Guide includes background information on Ira Aldridge, his life and career, as well as essential information on William Shakespeare.

Please contact us with any questions or need for further assistance. Thank you for supporting the Commonwealth’s largest in-school arts provider and the United States’ oldest, free Shakespeare festival!

All Our Best to You,

Kyle Ware  
Director of Education

Hannah Pruitt  
Education Programs  
Manager

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**Common Core Standards**

- |                |           |
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| RL.4-12.1      | RL.4-12.2 |
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## **Ira Aldridge: Pioneer of the Stage**

Ira Frederick Aldridge was an African American actor born in New York City on July 24th, 1807. Although alive during a time of slavery in the U.S., Ira and his family were considered free men. As a child, he attended the African Free School and as a teen, he began acting at The American Grove Theatre - also known as The African Theatre.

In order to further pursue his theatrical passion without racial discrimination, he left America and immigrated to England. Although the actor was not fully free from racial persecution, he rose above it to share the stage with theatre legends like Edmund Kean.

In addition to his success in England, Ira Aldridge toured to several countries including Ireland, Austria, Poland, and Russia. He is renowned for his portrayals of Shakespeare's leading men in the plays Macbeth, Richard III, Romeo & Juliet, and most notably, as the first non-white actor to portray Othello onstage. He used the stage as his platform to speak out against slavery and support the abolitionist cause.

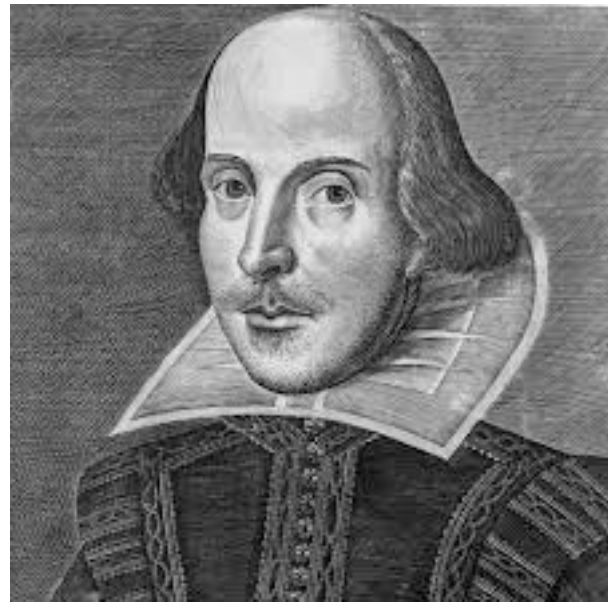
Ira Aldridge died August 6th, 1867 and has since received many honors commemorating his accomplished life in the theatre.

# William Shakespeare

(April 23, 1564 – April 23, 1616)

## His Life

- Born and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon
- Attended grammar school in central Stratford where he learned Latin, grammar, and literature
- Married Anne Hathaway at age 18 and had three children: Susanna and twins Hamnet and Judith
- Between 1585 and 1592, he began a successful career in London as an actor, writer, and part owner of the playing company the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later known as the King's Men
- Appears to have retired to Stratford around 1613, where he died three years later



*William Shakespeare*

## His Works

- An English poet and playwright widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's preeminent dramatist
- Often called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon" (or simply "The Bard")
- His surviving works consist 38 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and several poems
- Plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more than those of any other playwright
- Few records of his private life survive and there has been considerable speculation about his religious beliefs and whether the works attributed to him were written by others
- Produced most of his known work between 1590 and 1613
- Early plays were comedies and histories, genres he raised to the peak of style and artistry
- Next, he wrote primarily tragedies until about 1608, including *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*
- Lastly, he wrote tragicomedies also known as romances and collaborated with other playwrights
- In 1623, two of his former theatrical colleagues published the First Folio, a collected edition of his dramatic works that included all but two of the plays now recognized as Shakespeare's
- Reputation did not rise to its present heights until the nineteenth century



*The Original Globe Theatre circa 1612*



# Shakespeare's Three Styles of Plays

## Tragedy

Shakespearean tragedies were formulaic in style and used traditional conventions. These tenets included:

- A hero(ine) who seeks to avenge a crime committed against a family member or a personal injustice
- A tragic character whose own flaw leads to their downfall
- An end that contains a revelation of self-knowledge by the tragic hero about how his own frailty brought on his and others' downfall

*Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus, Hamlet, Julius Caesar, King Lear, Macbeth, Othello, Romeo & Juliet, Timon of Athens, Titus Andronicus*

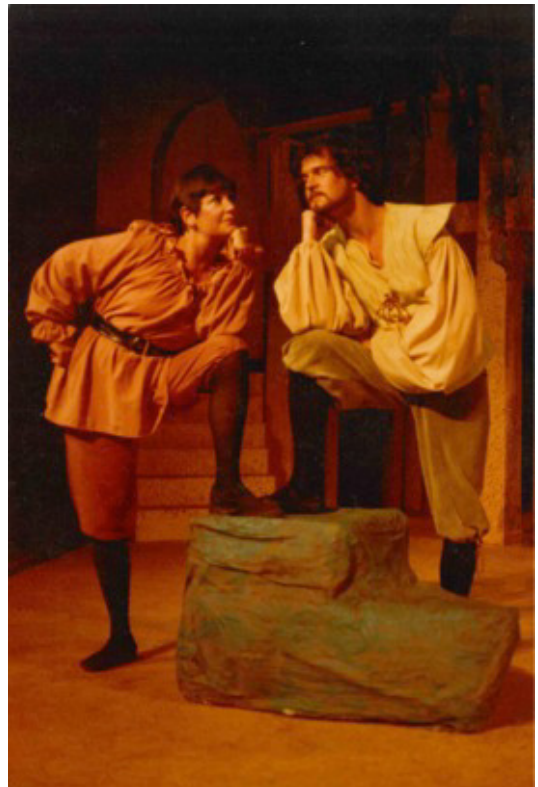


## Comedy

“Comedy” in its Elizabethan usage had a very different meaning from modern comedy. A Shakespearean comedy is one that has a happy ending, usually involving marriage, and a lighthearted tone and style. Shakespearean comedies tend to have:

- A struggle of young lovers to overcome a difficulty often presented by elders
- Separation and unification
- Mistaken identities
- A clever servant
- Heightened tensions, often within a family
- Multiple, intertwining plots
- Frequent use of puns

*All's Well That Ends Well, As You Like It, The Comedy of Errors, Cymbeline, Love's Labours Lost, Measure for Measure, The Merry Wives of Windsor, The Merchant of Venice, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Much Ado About Nothing, Pericles- Prince of Tyre, Taming of the Shrew, The Tempest, Troilus and Cressida, Twelfth Night, Two Gentleman of Verona, Winter's Tale*



## History

Shakespeare's “history” plays are based on the lives of English kings and brought massive audiences to the theatre. These plays are based only loosely on historical figures rather than actual events in history. The 10 plays that are categorized as histories cover English history from the twelfth to the sixteenth century particularly 1399-1485. The histories usually include elements of comedy and tragedy.

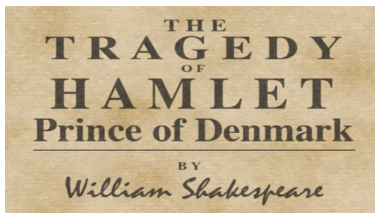
*King John, Richard II, Henry IV Parts I and II, Henry V, Henry VI Parts I, II and III, Richard III, Henry VIII*



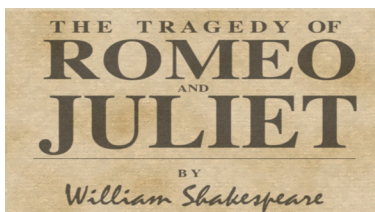
# Aldridge and Shakespeare:

## The plays of Ira Aldridge: Pioneer of the Stage

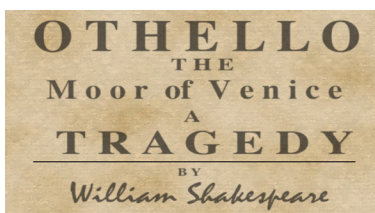
Throughout his storied career, Ira Aldridge played roles in Shakespeare's most well-known and significant plays. Ira Aldridge: Pioneer of the Stage visits some of these great works over the course of his story.



*The Tragedy of Hamlet: Prince of Denmark* is about a Prince named Hamlet who is visited by the ghost of his recently deceased father. The ghost tells Hamlet to avenge the murder caused by the newly elected King Claudius, who happens to be Hamlet's uncle. Unsure of committing murder himself and struggling to cope with his grief, Hamlet contemplates suicide. Eventually, he does murder the King right before he himself falls victim to a poisonous sword.



*The Tragedy of Romeo & Juliet* is about two teenagers in the town of Verona, Italy who fall madly in love against their parents' wishes. The Montagues and Capulets are locked in a bitter feud and the Prince has declared death on whoever starts the next violent quarrel. After Romeo and Juliet are married in secret, Romeo kills Juliet's cousin Tybalt and is banished from the kingdom. Through a series of miscommunications, the lovers commit suicide, shedding light on the needlessness of the families' feud.



*The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* is about an African general in the army who is deceived by his false friend Iago. Iago leads Othello to believe that Desdemona has committed adultery with Othello's lieutenant Cassio. The central object of confusion is a handkerchief that Iago steals and plants in Cassio's room. Driven mad by his jealousy, Othello ends up murdering his faithful wife Desdemona and, after he learns the truth, kills himself.



*The Merchant of Venice* is about a man named Antonio who loses his money when his ships sink at sea. He is in debt to a Jewish man named Shylock who is cruel and unflinching in his request to be paid. The matter is taken to court and Shylock demands one pound of Antonio's flesh. Shylock is then charged with attempted murder unless he agrees to drop his suit, which he



*The Tragedy of King Lear* is about an aging King who divides his kingdom between his three daughters. Because his youngest daughter Cordelia refuses to flatter her father with exaggerated love, King Lear rashly cuts her out of the inheritance. His other two daughters who have taken over the kingdom get entangled in a web of lies, adultery, and poison. King Lear, overcome with anger and grief, finds himself wailing at a storm and losing his mind. Eventually, Cordelia returns to rescue her ailing father but is arrested and hanged. King Lear realizes he has lost his kingdom and family and dies of a broken heart.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a play that contains two sets of young lovers, a gang of mischievous fairies, and a group of amateur actors. One of the actors, Nick Bottom, is the victim of a fairy prank and ends up with a donkey's head for his own.

*Twelfth Night: Or What You Will* is a play about a twin brother and sister who are separated by a shipwreck.

*The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* is about a man named Brutus who leads the assassination of his friend and the ruler Julius Caesar. This action leads to a war between the opposing factions and Brutus is killed.

# IRA ALDRIDGE: PIONEER OF THE STAGE

## CHRONOLOGY

1564 - William Shakespeare is born in Stratford, England.

1603 - Shakespeare writes *Othello*.

1607 - Jamestown is colonized by the English, the first United States settlement.

1616 - William Shakespeare dies.

1619 - Slaves arrive in Jamestown.

1775 - American Revolutionary War begins.

1776 - Declaration of Independence issued to King George.

1783 - American Revolutionary War ends.

1807 - Ira Aldridge is born a freeman in New York City.

1818 - Ira Aldridge begins attending African Free School.

1820 - African Theatre opens. Ira Aldridge makes American stage debut as Romeo.

1824 - Ira Aldridge emigrates to Liverpool, England.

1825 - Ira Aldridge makes European stage debut.

1826 - Ira Aldridge plays *Othello*.

1831 - Ira Aldridge tours to Ireland.

1833 - Edmund Keane collapses on stage while playing *Othello*; Ira Aldridge takes over the role.

1852 - Ira Aldridge tours continental Europe.

1858 - Ira Aldridge tours Russia.

1863 - The Emancipation Proclamation

1865 - The 13th Amendment abolishes slavery in the United States.

1867 - Ira Aldridge dies in Poland at age 60.

1932 - Shakespeare Memorial Theatre opens. Ira Aldridge is honored with a bronze plaque, the only African American out of 33 recipients.

# BASIC THEATRE VOCABULARY

**Actor-** Individual who pretends to be a character in a play; who represents a character in a play.

**Blocking-** The pattern of movement the actors follow while on stage.

**Characters-** The personalities or parts actors become in a play; roles played by actors in a play.

**Climax-** The point of highest dramatic tension or a major turning point in the action of a play.

**Conflict-** The opposition of persons, forces, or ideas that gives rise to the dramatic action.

**Costumes-** The clothing worn by the actors to play the characters.

**Dialogue-** The words spoken by the actors during a play.

**Empathy-** The capacity to relate to the feelings of another.

**Exposition-** The part of a play that introduces the theme, main characters and circumstances.

**Falling Action-** The action after the climax of the plot.

**Interpretation-** To explain or tell the meaning of something; to present in understandable terms.

**Monologue-** A speech made by a single character; often when a character is “thinking out loud.”

**Motivation-** An incentive or an inducement for further action for a character.

**Playwright-** The individual who writes a play.

**Plot-** What happens in a play; the order of events, the story as opposed to the theme; what happens rather than what it means.

**Resolution-** The solution to the problem after the climax in a play.

**Rising Action-** The portion of the play from the beginning to the climax, where the action increases in intensity and excitement.

**Role-** Part/ character/ person written by a playwright.

**Script-** The play in written form.

**Stage-** The area where the actors perform the play.

**Theme-** What the play means as opposed to what happens; the main idea or message within the play.

**Turning Point-** The moment in a play when events can go either way; the moment of decision; the crisis.



# Director's Questions

Shakespeare used very few stage directions, which are clues in the script for the actors and director to follow during productions. An example would be, "*Actor crosses downstage right to table.*" The way that Shakespeare handled stage directions is that he left clues about the characters and scenery in the lines of the play.

Choose a scene from the performance of *Boy Meets Girl Meets Shakespeare*, read it aloud, and use the Director's Questions below to explore the possibilities of the text. Based on your discoveries from the Director's Questions, make decisions about what the set, scenery, and costumes might look like.

## DIRECTOR'S QUESTIONS

### 1. WHO AM I?

How old am I? Am I rich or poor?

What is my job? Am I in school?

What is my family like? Where am I from (country, state, etc.)?

Am I nice? Funny? Smart? Mean? What is my personality?

### 2. WHERE AM I?

County - State - City - Neighborhood - Building - Room

What does the place look like? Do I like it or not?

### 3. WHAT TIME IS IT?

Century - Year - Month - Week - Day - Time

### 4. WHAT ARE YOUR RELATIONSHIPS IN THE SCENE?

People in the scene?

People mentioned in the scene?

The place where I am?

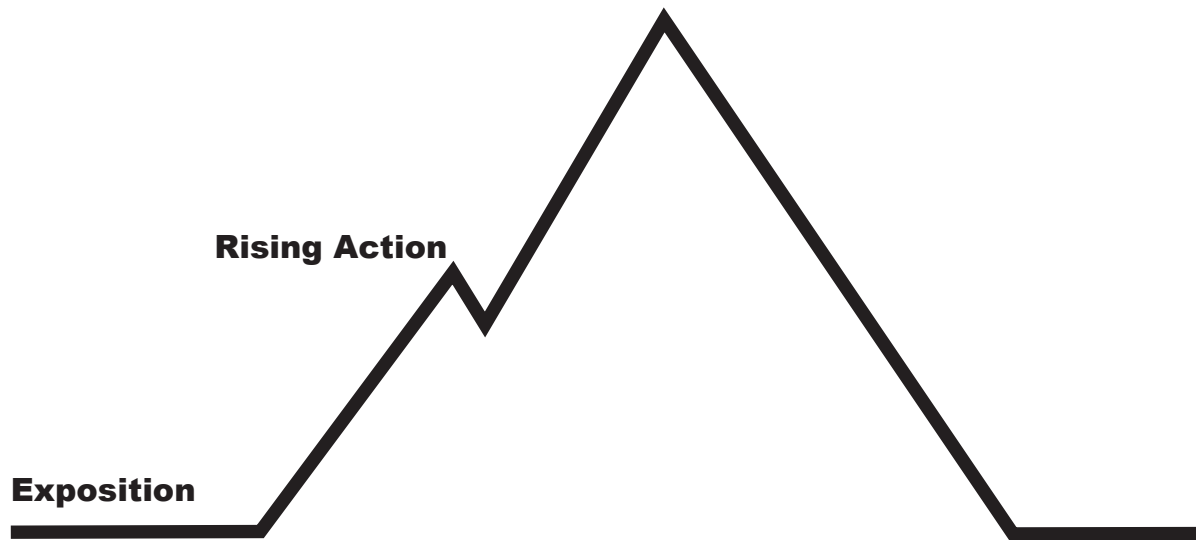
The objects around me?

### 5. WHAT IS WRONG IN THIS SCENE? IS THERE A PROBLEM? A CONFLICT?

### 6. WHAT DO I WANT IN THIS SCENE? WHY CAN'T I HAVE IT?

### 7. WHAT DO I NEED TO DO TO GET WHAT I WANT?

# Dramatic Structure of a Play's Plot

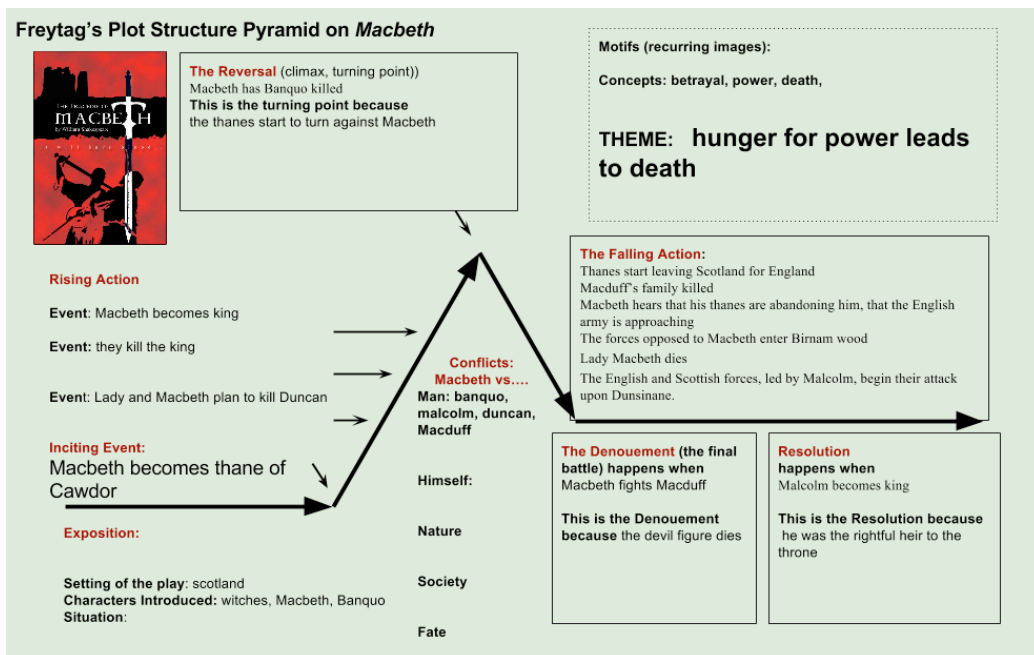


Freytag's Pyramid

**Freytag's Pyramid** illustrates the five parts of the classic dramatic plot: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. This pattern was suggested by Gustav Freytag in 1863 as means to explain the plot of many works such as Shakespeare's collection.

Please use the vocabulary from the previous page for your students to fill out their own Plot Diagram for the plays in BOY MEETS GIRL.

An example for *Macbeth* is provided below:





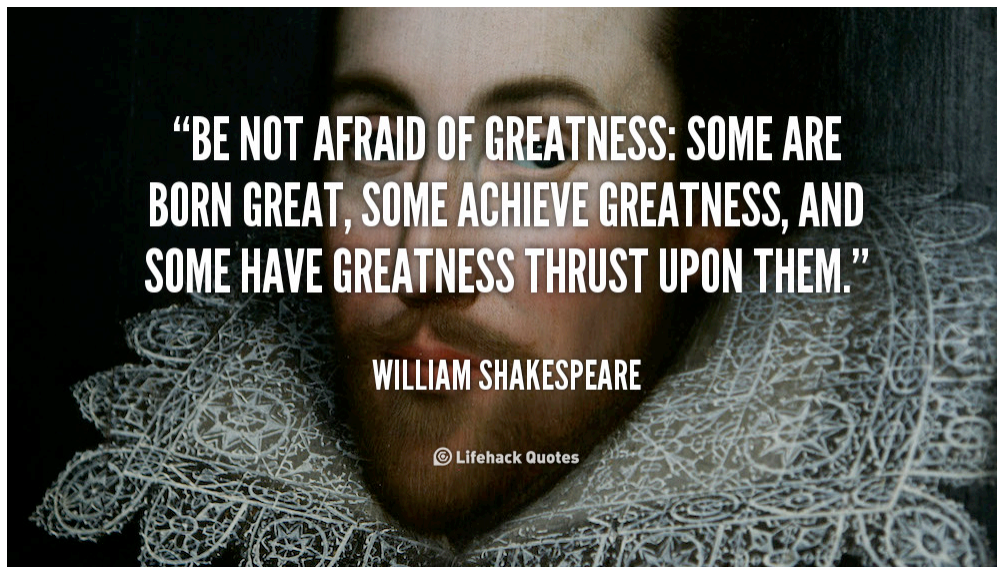
# Shakespeare Links & Resources

Type the word Shakespeare in a search engine and you will find a plethora of information on him, his works and his environment. Show your students that the internet can be a great way to research and gather valuable information - especially when you can't find it at your local library.

[www.absoluteshakespeare.com](http://www.absoluteshakespeare.com)  
*Comprehensive Resource of Works*

[www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=618](http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=618)  
*The Folger Shakespeare Library*

[www.penguin.com/static/pdf/teachersguides/](http://www.penguin.com/static/pdf/teachersguides/)  
*The Penguin & Signet Classic's Teacher Guide*



## Classroom Challenge:

Write a letter to the Kentucky Shakespeare Artist Educators who lead the STAGING SHAKESPEARE performance. Describe what you liked about the workshop and how it helped to see Shakespeare be performed rather than just reading it. Describe what you did, saw, and heard. What was your favorite part?

Mail to:  
Kentucky Shakespeare  
323 West Broadway, Suite 401  
Louisville, KY 40202