About the author
William Shakespeare is the most famous writer in the English language. He was born in 1564 and died in 1616 in Stratford-Upon-Avon, England. In his late twenties, he went to London, where he began to write comedies, tragedies and historical plays and achieved great fame. His plays appealed to all social classes thanks to his vivid characterisations and his masterly use of the English language. Apart from being a playwright, he was also an actor and a brilliant poet.

For more information, see the Introduction.

The Merchant of Venice
Antonio, a merchant of Venice, borrows money from Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, to help his friend Bassanio woo the rich Portia from Belmont. Shylock says he will charge no interest on the money, but will take a pound of Antonio's flesh if the money is not repaid in time. Antonio's ships are lost at sea. He cannot repay the loan and must die paying the forfeit – the pound of flesh – instead. Portia thinks of a plan to save Antonio. She dresses as a lawyer and secretly follows Bassanio to Venice. Portia arrives disguised as a judge and asks Shylock to show mercy. He refuses and she confirms that he wants his rights to be respected. Portia points out, however, that he must not shed blood when he takes the pound of flesh, as this is not in the contract. Portia plays her final card. Shylock, she says, is guilty of plotting to kill a Venetian and his lands and money are therefore forfeited. Shylock is defeated and humiliated.

A Midsummer Night's Dream
Hermia refuse to marry Demetrius, the man Egeus, her father, has chosen for her, because she is in love with Lysander. The two lovers decide to go to the woods outside Athens where the law cannot be enforced. They let Helena know, as she loves Demetrius, hoping that he will love her in return. But Demetrius goes after the lovers and she follows him. In the woods there is a band of fairies ruled by Oberon and Titania. As they have an argument, Oberon orders his servant, Puck, to put some magic juice into Titania's eyes so that she falls in love with the first person or thing she sees on waking. While Puck is fetching the juice, Oberon overhears Helena's pleading and decides to help her. When Puck returns, Oberon orders him to use the juice in Demetrius's eyes. Puck makes a mistake. He puts the juice into Lysander's eyes and when he wakes he sees Helena and falls in love with her. In another part of the wood, an Athenian workman called Bottom is rehearsing a play with other workmen. Puck gives him a donkey's head and makes him be the first person Titania sees. Finally, order is restored and all the mortals believe that it was all a midsummer night's dream and the 'correct' couples get married.

Hamlet
The King of Denmark is dead and his brother, Claudius, has succeeded him and married the widowed Queen, Gertrude. Hamlet, the dead King's son, mourns for his father and hates his uncle for marrying his mother so hastily. But then the ghost of his father appears to Hamlet and tells him to avenge his murder by Claudius. Sure now of his uncle's guilt, Hamlet goes to see his mother and kills Polonius, the king's advisor and Ophelia's father, believing him to be Claudius. Claudius sends Hamlet to England to get him out of the way. Hamlet finds out about there is a plot to kill him and escapes, returning to Denmark in time to see the funeral of Ophelia, who has drowned on hearing the news of her former lover's hands. Laertes, Ophelia’s brother, wants to avenge his father’s and his sister's death and challenges Hamlet to a duel. As he has conspired with Claudius, Laertes’ sword is poisoned and there is a poisoned drink for Hamlet. But the Queen accidentally drinks the poisoned wine and Hamlet stabs Laertes with his own sword, after suffering a mortal wound himself.

Julius Caesar
Cassius envies Julius Caesar’s success and popularity and persuades Brutus, a friend of Caesar’s, that he must be killed for the good of Rome. Brutus in turn persuades the conspirators to spare Mark Anthony, as he poses no danger. Caesar’s wife, Calpurnia, tries to stop Caesar going to the Senate on the day planned for his
assassination as she has had a premonition, but he goes and is killed, Brutus striking the last blow. Mark Anthony cleverly persuades the conspirators to let him speak at Caesar’s funeral and, in his speech, reminds the crowd of all Caesar’s good qualities and actions. Cassius and Brutus have to flee the city when a civil war starts. Mark Anthony finally triumphs, Cassius and Brutus commit suicide and Caesar’s murder is avenged.

The original texts
The plots of Shakespeare’s plays were not invented by the playwright; they were adapted by him from stories which were well known in Shakespeare’s time.

Background and themes

The Merchant of Venice
Forgiveness vs. revenge: What does it feel like when we hurt somebody who has hurt us?
Love and loyalty vs. hatred: What things would you do for somebody you love?
Mercy: Should we claim what we think is right at all costs or have mercy on those who makes mistakes or owe us something?
Discrimination: Is Shylock discriminated against because he is a Jew?
Money: How important are money and possessions?

Hamlet
Revenge: Is it right to take justice in our own hands?
Delay: What are the consequences of delaying action? Can we harm others because of our incapacity to make decisions at the right time? Can we end up making rash decisions as a result?
Free will vs. destiny/chance: Do you control your life or is it controlled by destiny and ghosts?

A Midsummer Night’s Dream
Marriage: Should parents have the right to choose their children’s partners?
Love: Is love blind?
Dreams: Can dreams seem real?
Appearance vs. reality: Do you feel more powerful when you are dressed as somebody else or you pretend to be mad?

Julius Caesar
Order vs. disorder: What happens when you change the order of things in a country?
Loyalty: Are fears of political excesses a justification for treason and murder?

Discussion activities
Before reading
1 Research: Ask students to bring a map of Europe in order to place Stratford-Upon-Avon and London.
2 Artwork: In pairs, have students find information about London in Shakespeare’s times and make a brochure.
3 Guess: Explain to students what a comedy and tragedy mean and have them complete a table with the stories they are about to read by having a look at the photographs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comedy</th>
<th>Tragedy</th>
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The Merchant of Venice
Before reading
4 Guess: In pairs, have students read the title: Where is Venice? What does a merchant do?

While reading
5 Role play: Get students to imagine that princes from Africa and France must visit a psychologist, as they are undergoing a confidence crisis after they have chosen the wrong box and dramatise both sessions.
6 Discuss: Talk about mercy
Have students discuss the following:
Portia says mercy is a wonderful thing. Do you agree with her? Should Shylock show mercy to Antonio?
7 Discuss: Talk about cross-dressing
Have students discuss the following:
How many women does Shakespeare dress like men in The Merchant of Venice? Why? Where are they when they are dressed like men?
8 Discuss and write:
Get students to discuss the following:
Did you like the end? Did it look real? Why/why not? Have students write an ending that could take place in real life.

After reading
9 Write: A Valentine card
Have students suppose they are Bassanio. They write a Valentine card to Portia.
10 Write: A prenup
Explain to students what a prenup is. As a whole class, brainstorm Portia and Bassanio’s prenup and write it on a poster.
Stories from Shakespeare

A Midsummer Night’s Dream

Before reading
11 Guess: Have students brainstorm the ideas that come to their mind when they read the title of the story.

While reading
12 Discuss: Talk about marriage for love
   Have students discuss the following:
   Egeus wants Hermia to marry Demetrius. Do women and men in your country have to follow their parents’ orders? What would you do in Hermia’s case?
13 Predict: The woods are the fairies’ living place. Fairies love magic and jokes. What can happen to Hermia, Lysander, Demetrius and Helena when they are in the woods?
14 Guess: Why does Shakespeare make Bottom, Demetrius, Lysander, Hermia and Helena fall asleep, wake up and remember nothing? Do you like this ending?

After reading
15 Write: Hermia’s diary
   Divide students into three groups and have them write what Hermia is really thinking of (a) before she enters the woods (b) while she is in the woods and (c) after she leaves the woods. Once they have finished, ask them to read their entries aloud.
16 Group work and artwork:
   Have students draw Hermia and Lysander’s and Helena and Demetrius’s wedding albums showing all the events that take place in the woods and at their wedding.

Hamlet

Before reading
17 Discuss: Talk about ghosts
   Do you believe in ghosts? Why/why not?

While reading
18 Write: A character’s thoughts
   Have students write Hamlet’s thoughts after his father died and his mother married Claudius.
19 Discuss: Talk about madness
   Have students discuss the following:
   Is Hamlet really mad or does he pretend to be mad? What can you do when people believe you are mad?
20 Write: An obituary
   Explain to students what an obituary is and have them write Ophelia’s obituary as if they were Hamlet.
21 Write: An article
   Have students write an article about Ophelia’s and Polonius’s deaths from Laertes’s point of view with the headline: WHY I HATE PRINCE HAMLET.
22 Role play: Have students mimic Hamlet’s, Laertes’s, Horatio’s, Claudius’s and Gertrude’s part at the end of the play (on pages 37 and 38). Use a narrator to tell the characters what to do.

After reading
23 Role play: Imagine one of your students is Gertrude. Sit Gertrude on the hot seat and have the rest of the class ask her questions about her role in the whole story.
24 Write:
   Divide students into four groups and have them write Ophelia’s, Gertrude’s, Laertes’s and Hamlet’s last words.

Julius Caesar

Before reading
25 Role play: Have students imagine that a friend of theirs is the president at the students’ council and has great power but still wants more. What will they do? What will they tell their friend?

While reading
26 Discuss: Talk about power
   Have students discuss the following:
   Cassius and Brutus want to kill Julius Caesar because he has too much power. Is having a lot of power good or bad? Why? What would you do in Cassius and Brutus’s place?
27 Predict: Read ‘That night there was a great storm …’ (page 40) and think what may happen next.
28 Read carefully and discuss:
   Have students re-read ‘We only need to kill Caesar (…) It’s for Rome – not because we want to murder everybody.’ (page 42) Who is the head? Who is the arm? Do you agree with Brutus?
29 Role play: Have students role play the murder of Julius Caesar (page 43). The parts in the role play are Caesar, Brutus, Cassius, Mark Anthony, Metullus and another man who stops Mark Anthony.
30 Discuss: Talk about nationalism
   Brutus says over and over again that he had to kill Caesar because he loved Rome more (page 46). Should one kill other people for one’s country? Why/Why not?
31 Guess and discuss: Are large black birds a bad sign? What other things are a bad sign in your country?

After reading
32 Pair work:
   Have students tell each other a dream they had and have the other give his/her interpretation of that dream.
33 Check: Have students check the answers in the comedy/tragedy table (activity 3).
34 Discuss: Talk about tragic heroes
   Have students discuss the following:
   Why aren’t the stories of ‘Hamlet’ and ‘Julius Caesar’ called ‘The Tragedy of Ophelia’ and ‘The Tragedy of Brutus’? Whose tragedy is it in each story?