

THE SHAKESPEARE STEALER

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GARY BLACKWOOD

Teaching Guide

By Liz Morris

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This novel has been selected for use in the junior cycle of secondary schools because it gives an immediacy to life in Elizabethan England. This was an age of promise and adventure, when prosperity and poverty existed side by side and when people took pleasure in the theatre as a means of escape from the grinding struggle of their daily lives. Themes explored in this book include some of Shakespeare's universal themes:

- Loyalty and betrayal
- Love and hate
- Honour and dishonour
- Personal responsibility
- Powerlessness
- Journey
- Dealing with adversity
- Individual in society
- Women

SUMMARY

Born in the twenty-ninth year of Queen Elizabeth I's reign, orphan Widge was without family or prospects until apprenticed to a rector in Yorkshire who educated him and taught him a language of his own devising called Charactery. Now fourteen, he is sold to a stranger and taken to London where he is instructed to use his knowledge to secretly copy the words of Mr Shakespeare's latest play, *The Tragedy of Hamlet*. When robbed of his notebook containing the precious words, Widge decides to join the Lord Chamberlain's men, hoping to successfully complete the task before his master finds him. But when the actors treat him with the affection and

respect so long denied him, Widge finds himself torn between the fear of his master's anger and his loyalty to these men who have accepted him into the theatre family.

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration, the novel has been divided into five units, covering four or five chapters at a time. The pace at which the novel is read is, however, entirely up to the teacher. Possible discussion points and language-based activities are listed at the end of each unit. To facilitate further research and development, useful website addresses are also included.

UNIT 1

SUMMARY

Born in 1587, Widge knew neither mother nor father. Named Widge by Mistress MacGregor and brought up in her orphanage, he dreams that a real family will claim him. That dream becomes a reality when he is apprenticed to Dr Bright who treats him relatively well and teaches him to read and write, not only in English and Latin, but in a curious language of his own devising. Once he has mastered 'charactery', this language of 'short, swift and secret writing', he is sent to copy other rectors' sermons. When the theft is discovered, Widge is blamed and again begins to dream that he will be rescued from his situation. His prayers appear to be answered when a mysterious stranger buys his service

and takes him to Leicester, where he meets his new master, Simon Bass. He is told that he will travel to London to attend a performance of the new play, *Hamlet*, which he is to transcribe and deliver in 'charactery'.

Read pp.3–35.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Institutional care When describing the orphanage, Widge says that 'it was an institution, and institutions are governed by expediency' (pp.3–4). What might he have meant by this statement? Think of other novels, such as Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, which feature a young person in institutional care and explore the treatment of the orphanage in each novel. Would you agree that modern institutions are governed by expediency?
- Role of women 'There was a popular saying to the effect that England [was] a paradise for women, a prison for servants, and a hell for horses' (p.7). Bearing in mind social conditions in England in the late sixteenth century, would you agree? What might have given rise to this saying?
- Growing and changing Widge says that a part of him 'longed for new places, new experiences. But a larger part clung to the security of the familiar'(p.14). Is this feeling unusual?
- Individual destiny When a hare runs across Widge's path, he regards it as a 'bad omen' but Falconer takes 'no stock in omens' saying 'Men make their own fates' (p.35). Discuss the differing opinions of the two and decide with whom you most agree.

ACTIVITIES

1. DREAM PARENT WANTED Describing the dream of every orphan that some day 'a real family' would claim them, Widge says that 'any set would do' though preferably it would be the 'true parents' who would be 'of course, royalty' (p.4).

Write a short, descriptive paragraph listing all the qualifications necessary to be your dream parent and/or formulate the questions you would pose to prospective applicants.

2. CLASS DEBATE Paraphrasing Widge, have a class debate on the motion 'Right is what benefits you and anything which does harm is Wrong.'

3. LITERARY REFERENCES In Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the albatross is regarded as a bad omen.

Think of other examples in literature where animals are regarded as harbingers of doom and list these, naming the author/poet and the piece of writing in question.

4. PREDICTION Consider what you know about Widge to date, as he sets off for London. How do you think he will fare in the city? Write a paragraph predicting the possible outcome of his visit to the theatre.

UNIT 2

SUMMARY

Arriving in London, Widge fears that he is 'a green country woodcock'. Eager to adopt London ways, he listens to the cries of the vendors and watches the traffic and people which throng the streets. Eventually, Falconer leads him to an octagonal building and sends him to join the theatregoers with instructions to take down every word. But so immersed is he in the play that he forgets the world outside and leaves the theatre, his task unfinished. Determined that Widge will complete his task on the next attempt, Falconer conceals him behind the stage. He is seen by the cannoneer who, surprised, misdirects the shot and sets fire to the thatch. In the ensuing panic, Widge is horrified to discover that he has mislaid his pocketbook with the precious words. Challenged by a player about his presence behind the stage, Widge begs

to join the company, seeing this as his only chance to steal the play before being discovered by Falconer.

Read pp.36–72.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Social conditions** We are told that the Lord Chamberlain's men performed 'a different play each afternoon' (p.41). What might this tell us about the leisure interests of people in Elizabethan England? Does it tell us anything about the affordability of attending the theatre in those times? Can you suggest reasons why theatre might be less important in the lives of people nowadays?
- **Women in society** Widge is informed that 'because many considered the world of the theatre immoral, women were forbidden by law to act upon the stage. All women's roles were played by men and boys' (pp.49–50). Discuss the possible moral/political/religious beliefs which gave rise to such legislation. What does it tell us about the position of women at a time when England was ruled by Elizabeth I?
- **Ethnic/religious tolerance** Falconer kills a man in a duel because he had called him 'a filthy Jew.' With 'a short, bitter laugh' he tells Widge that 'There are no Jews in England. Only former Jews' (p.59). In 1290, all Jews who refused to convert to Christianity had been expelled from England. Only a few Jews remained, who had converted or appeared to convert. Their precarious position was endangered by the hanging at Tyburn, on a charge of treason, of Roderigo Lopez (see also p.118). Lopez was a Marrano or converted Jew from Spain or Portugal. Physician to Elizabeth I, he had become involved in the intrigues of the Earl of Essex. What might this tell us about religious tolerance under Queen Elizabeth I?
- **History in literature** The first Globe Theatre was built in Shoreditch, North London, in 1599 and was later re-assembled on Bankside. This theatre burnt down in 1613 after an ember from a cannon fired during a performance of Henry VIII set the roof alight. Re-read pp.61–64 and say how this historical fact influenced the author. Does the detailed description in this novel contribute to your

understanding of Shakespeare's working life?

ACTIVITIES

1. TRAVELOGUE Imagine that, like Widge, you have spent several days travelling. Write the passage in which you describe your feelings and emotions as you first catch sight of your intended destination or write the feature which might appear in a travel/tourist brochure promoting this city or country.

2. ADVERTISING SLOGANS Widge spent several hours transcribing the cries of the street vendors, 'partly because they were so colourful' (p.41). Write the cries of modern street traders as they attract potential purchasers to their stalls. Ensure that the passersby are made aware of the goods you wish to sell and the value you offer. Then write the advertising slogans for similar goods which might appear in shops/supermarkets.

3. LETTER OF PROTEST On his way to the theatre, Widge noticed that some people were heading for the bearbaiting, which he describes as 'a sport in which a bear, with its teeth broken off deliberately, was chained to a post and set upon by a pack of dogs' (p.46).

Write the letter from an animal rights organisation to the promoter of this event, which makes clear your strong disapproval of this form of entertainment. Your organisation might threaten to disrupt this or future events should changes not occur.

4. LINGUISTIC DEVICES The author uses similes (see p.71) and puns or word-play (see pp.54–55) in order to break the tension and introduce humour.

Write a short passage describing some serious incident. Try to include at least one simile or metaphor or pun in your writing.

UNIT 3

SUMMARY

Responsibility for Widge's welfare is accepted by Mr Pope, who takes him home, feeds and clothes him. Torn between his desire to remain among people who treat him with a kindness he has never before experienced and his fear of Falconer, Widge begins to enjoy his new life, though he is still

determined to recover the precious notebook. Although tempted to confide in his new friends, he fears that this would mean burning his bridges. Fate seems to be on his side when he is entrusted with the entire script but, due to his indecisiveness, the opportunity is soon lost. He is alarmed to hear the players discuss his master and is surprised when he learns something of his history but his most immediate fear is that he will fail to deliver his three lines in the next performance. When he is seized on his way to the theatre, it looks as if his fears are justified.

Read pp.73–123.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Coping with bullying** Widge tells us that he had ‘invariably burst into tears’ when taunted at the orphanage. But he had learned ‘to refrain from tears, whatever the provocation’ (p.87). Do you agree with him that tears or other obvious signs of unhappiness are ‘an invitation to further abuse’? What advice might you give to Widge or to other victims of bullying?
- **Understanding the bully** Defending him, Sander says that Nick isn’t ‘truly mean at heart. He’s just going through a bad time.’ He explains that Nick will soon ‘have to begin playing a man’s part’ (p.88). Does Nick’s unhappiness justify his treatment of Widge? Do you accept Sander’s excuses for Nick’s behaviour? Can you think of any situation in which bullying and abusive behaviour is acceptable?
- **The key to success** Speaking of the trainee players, Julian tells Widge that ‘the only ones who succeed are the ones who want it so badly that nothing will keep them from it’ (p.101). Could this maxim be applied to other areas of life? Do you agree with Julian or do you think that other factors contribute to success?
- **The power of praise** When praised by Mr Armin, Widge says that he is ‘as unaccustomed to praise’ as he is to ‘having a friend, or being one’ and he describes the ‘pleasant feeling’ on hearing praise as ‘unaccustomed too’ (p.113). What does this tell us about Widge’s previous experiences? Do you think the support and encouragement of the company

affected his character in any significant way?

ACTIVITIES

1. DESCRIPTIVE WRITING Widge uses many colloquialisms from his native Yorkshire (see examples p.74). Is the term ‘cobweb day’ effective? Does it describe the weather conditions? Write a short passage in which you use Irish or other colloquialisms to enhance the descriptive power of your writing.

2. THE PLAY’S THE THING Consult a website, such as www.elizabethan.org or www.shakespeares-globe.org for information about life in Elizabethan England and photos of stage and play performances at the Globe. Then write your own broadside, ballad-sheet or playbill in the style of those which papered the walls of Sander’s room.

3. POSTCARD WRITING Write a postcard to a friend or relation, describing the famous landmarks of some city which they have never visited. Try to convey your impressions of the buildings, in much the same way as Widge does on p.93.

4. SECRET LANGUAGE With a friend, invent your own ‘short, swift and secret’ language. Then write a message in this language and see if your classmates can decipher it.

UNIT 4

SUMMARY

Made more nervous by Falconer’s insistence that he get the script, Widge is encouraged and supported by Julian as he rehearses his swordplay and the all-important three lines. But the dilemma remains and he chooses to betray his new friends rather than face Falconer’s dagger again. His plan to steal the play fails when he is inadvertently locked in the theatre. Questioned the next day, he is amazed to find that his lies are believed and that the company will pay to release him from his master’s bond. Widge now throws himself into rehearsals for the forthcoming royal command performance, but during a routine swordfight, Julian is injured and is revealed to be a girl. Aware now that he is not the only person to have kept

secrets from the company, Widge is reluctant to benefit from Julia’s misfortune, but accepts the part of Ophelia.

Read pp.124–175.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Decisions, decisions** Widge admits that all his life he had done what he was told to do ‘without thinking about the right or the wrong of it’ (p.132). What might have caused him to question his actions now? Re-read his thoughts as he ‘ponders his dilemma’ and say if you agree with his decision.
- **Censorship** Examine the text of *Richard III*, available on shakespeare.mit.edu/richardiii/index.html, and say if you agree with the queen’s decision that no-one should perform the play as it showed ‘a ruler being deposed’ (p.156). What does this tell us about her political judgement?
- **Sticks and stones** During a quarrel, Nick states that he has ‘no fear of blows. They’re braver than words’ (p.166). Did Nick really believe this or was he proving his physical courage? Do you agree with Nick’s opinion? Give your reasons.
- **As others see us** Julia says that ‘we play the roles others expect of us’ (p.172). What did she mean by this? Is it necessarily wrong to play the roles expected of us? When might this be positive?

ACTIVITIES

1. WHAT IF? The conclusion of the novel depends on certain characters making certain decisions throughout. What might have happened had Widge decided to take the company into his confidence or had Julian’s secret remained safe? Take one of these options and re-plot the novel.

2. WORD-PLAY The players constantly make jokes by using the double meanings of words such as board/bored, fetching/fetched and comely/come (see pp.131, 163). Write your own dialogue and, without making the speech appear contrived, include some puns.

3. MISTAKEN IDENTITY Widge says that looking back he ‘could see a dozen clues’ that would have led him to discover Julia’s secret. What are these clues? Can you list at least ten?

4. SHAKESPEARE'S BIRTHPLACE TRUST

The players discuss Shakespeare's private life and possible love affairs (pp.151–152). Consult www.stratford.co.uk for information on Shakespeare's hometown in Stratford-upon-Avon and write a short passage detailing your findings.

UNIT 5

SUMMARY

With Julia's help, Widge practises day and night for the performance at Whitehall and, contrary to his expectations, finds that the lines flow from him as though he were in truth Ophelia. The queen compliments him and says he will make a name for himself but when Nick is seen speaking to Falconer, Widge realises that his secret is out. He redeems himself only when he discovers Nick has stolen the play and puts his life at risk to save it. As Falconer lies dying, Widge learns of yet another secret with far-reaching consequences. On hearing the whole story, the Chamberlain's Men show leniency, permitting Widge to stay on as an apprentice and he finally understands the importance of loyalty and friendship, family and home.

Read pp.176–216.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Theatre traditions** 'A bad rehearsal means a good performance...You may as well say that a bad cook makes a good meal' (p.178). Do you think there is any basis in fact for such superstitious traditions?
- **Stereotypes** When Falconer's disguise is removed, he is revealed as Simon Bass. He admits that the dark skin and hooked nose were merely 'everyone's idea of what a Jew looks like' (p.209). Why did the Jewish Simon Bass feel the need to portray such a stereotyped caricature? What does it tell us about prejudices based on racial characteristics?
- **Friendship** Widge says that the 'business of friendship was a curious thing' (p.214). Is he right when he says that one is at times 'expected to tell the truth...other times what was wanted was a lie, a bit of disguise.' Should one always be truthful with friends or are there times when one should lie to protect their feelings?
- **Parting is such...** In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* we learn that 'parting is such sweet sorrow' yet Widge disagrees and discovers that parting can be 'as bitter as gall' (p.215). With whom would you most agree?

ACTIVITIES

1. DIARY-ENTRY Julia helps Widge to practise his role, a role that she had made her own and for which she had led a double life. Write her diary entry for the night in Whitehall as she watches Widge 'become' Ophelia.

2. WANTED: PLAYERS Between Julia's disappearance and Nick's desertion, the company needs to hire new players.

Write the list of qualifications necessary to become an actor in the time of Shakespeare. Don't forget the manual chores listed on p.80.

3. CHARACTER ANALYSIS In the final paragraph, Widge tells us that he at last understands the importance of friends, family and home. Write an analysis of the events which led to this change in attitude.

4. FURTHER READING Widge was born in 1587, the same year Red Hugh O'Donnell was captured and imprisoned in Dublin Castle.

For information on the Ireland of the period, read *Red Hugh* by Deborah Lisson (ISBN 978-0-86278-604-5). Summarise what you have learned about social conditions of the time from the reading of these novels.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, GARY BLACKWOOD



GARY BLACKWOOD grew up and was educated in Western Pennsylvania, USA. His first book, *Wild Timothy*, was published in 1987 and since then he hasn't looked back, publishing six other juvenile novels, many non-fiction books on a wide variety of subjects (including UFOs) and half-a-dozen stage-plays.

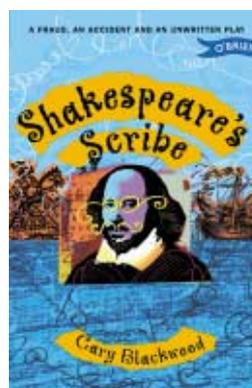
REVIEWS FOR *THE SHAKESPEARE STEALER*

'A clever backstage mystery.'
RTÉ Guide

'An adventurous romp that keeps you turning the pages furiously to find out what our hero does.'
Cracker

'A dramatic, exciting story.'
Sunday Independent

Also by Gary Blackwood:



Shakespeare's Scribe

ISBN 978-0-86278-706-6 pb.

Widge and William Shakespeare's company tour a country terrified of the plague, encountering old enemies and new dangers.