

CHAPTER 5 ANALYSIS OF THE SELECTED ENGLISH PLAY

SHAKESPEARE'S RICHARD II

Introduction

In this chapter, we will study Richard II which is one of Shakespeare's historical plays. Remember that while some stories are imaginary stories, some are real life stories. In such stories, most of the events described really took place. Although Shakespeare modified the character and actions of some of the actors to make the work interesting, Richard II was an English king that ruled from 1377 to 1399. The play is believed to have been written around 1595.

Playwright's Background

Nobody is sure when William Shakespeare was born but his birthday is celebrated every 23rd April. It is believed that he was born at Stratford-upon-Avon in England on 23rd April 1564. He attended Stratford Grammar School also known as the King's New School founded in 1553.

In 1582 at the age of 18, Shakespeare married a 26-year-old woman called Ann Hathaway. The marriage was blessed with three children.

Shakespeare was a successful actor and writer. His first play, **Henry VI Part 1** was written around 1589. Today, he is known as the greatest writer in English language. He wrote about 38 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems and several other poems. His works have been translated into every major living language and are performed often almost all over the world. His works include Hamlet, Julius Caesar, Merchant of Venice, Twelfth Night and the Tempest. He died on 23rd April, 1616.

The Plot of Richard II

Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Hereford, had accused Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, of committing crimes against the country. Bolingbroke said Mowbray killed the Duke of Gloucester, embezzled the king's money, and was the source of all plots of treason for the past eighteen years.

The two dukes exchanged insults in the presence of the king. It was decided that the case would be settled by combat at Conventry on September 17 that was St Lambert's day.

On the day of the combat, King Richard decided to stop the fight and banished the two men from the country. Thomas Mowbray was banished for life while Bolingbroke was banished for six years.

News came about a rebellion in Ireland and the king decided to go there in person to stop it. He needed money for the war so he taxed the people. This made him unpopular. Before departing for Ireland, the king visited Bolingbroke's father (Gaunt) who was very sick. Gaunt accused the king of murder and other crimes. He warned

the king of the danger of allowing himself to be influenced negatively by his friends. When Gaunt died, King Richard seized all his wealth and this made the Duke of York angry. York spoke vehemently against this but the king did not listen and left the country in York's care while fighting in Ireland. Many noblemen were unhappy about this and started withdrawing their support for the king.

When Bolingbroke heard that the king had seized his property, he decided to come back from exile to face the king.

Bolingbroke's men forced King Richard to step down as king and Bolingbroke was crowned King Henry IV. King Richard was imprisoned in Pomfret Castle where he was killed by Sir Pierce Exton. King Henry IV banished Exton and planned to make a trip to the holy land to wash off the blood from his hands.

Themes

Shakespeare made many important statements in this play. From the events of this play we learn many useful lessons that will help us in our own lives. These are some of them:

- **Human beings can never be God no matter how highly placed**

In this play where the king had the power to banish and even order people to be killed, his own position was also lost. Nothing in life is permanent, not even the post of kings. Richard II changed from a magnificent and selfish king to a humble suffering person just before he died.

- **Evils of flattery or sycophancy**

The king listened only to his friends who praised him and would not correct him when he went wrong. They were only interested in the gifts the king gave to them. He would not take his uncles' advice but took laws into his hands. All these helped to pull him down.

- **Double standards**

In banishing Bolingbroke and Mowbray, the king was partial. He did not treat Mowbray the way he treated Bolingbroke. Why should two people who committed the same offence received different punishments? One got only six years while the other was to stay away all the days of his life. This judgment is one of the mistakes that would eventually lead to his overthrow and death. Even King Henry IV banished Exton and others but forgave Aumerle.

- **Loyalty or support for those in power**

Most of the nobles deserted the king in his time of trouble but people like Aumerle, Bushy and Green were loyal to him till the end. Shakespeare is quietly hinting or telling us to choose our friends carefully.

- **Revenge**

Both the Duchess of Gloucester and Bolingbroke were out to revenge the death of Gloucester.

- **Divine right of kings**

In Shakespeare's time, kings were taken as God's representatives on earth and must be obeyed or face the wrath of God. This is opposed to what happens in modern times when people express their opinions on every topic. Gaunt refused to attack King Richard about the death of Gloucester (his brother) and left judgment for God. The Duke of York also kept supporting King Richard II even when the king did wrong things believing the king was appointed by God and must be obeyed.

- **All that glitters is not gold**

We should not be deceived by the outward appearance of people or situations. Richard actually had a hand in Gloucester's death but he pretended otherwise. Both King Richard and Aumerle hate Bolingbroke in their hearts but they kept pretending and hid their real feelings from people.

As you read this play, you may identify more themes like vanity, self knowledge, appearance and reality, we should trust only God and man's life is uncertain.

Setting of the Play

The play is set in 14th century England with brief mentioning of events that took place in France. The Queen Isabella is from France and when her husband lost the throne, he advised her to go back to France. Mowbray also died at France.

Structure

Richard II is divided into five acts. There are two plots running at the same time. While one is describing the fall of Richard II, the other one is describing the rise of Bolingbroke. Act one has four scenes. Act 2 has four scenes, Act 3 has four scenes, Act 4 has only one scene and Act 5 has six scenes. Altogether, the play is made up of nineteen scenes.

Language

Use of language is formal. The play is written almost entirely in verse. Shakespeare used long verses, metaphors, similes and soliloquies to paint Richard's character and moods.

Dramatic Devices

Shakespeare made extensive use of figures of speech like metaphor, simile, personification, pun, soliloquies and symbols. He used the crown to represent the king, garden to represent England and a lion and the sun to represent the king.

Characterization

The following are the characters of the play:

King Richard: He is the son of Edward, the Black Prince. He surrounds himself with greedy men who flatter him and whose interest is in the profits they make from seizing people's property, illegal taxation and fraud. He refuses to listen to advice from his elderly uncles. This makes him step on many toes and as a result, he is deposed by his cousin, Bolingbroke.

Henry Bolingbroke: He is the duke of Hereford and Lancaster. He is wrongfully banished from England by King Richard. All his family land and wealth are claimed by Richard after Henry's father dies. With the support of some noblemen, he returns from exile and dethroned King Richard. He becomes King Henry IV.

York: He is Richard's uncle and his most powerful supporter. When Richard goes to fight in Ireland, he leaves the country in York's charge. York is honest and good but is forced to change sides and support Bolingbroke because of Richard's bad behaviour.

John of Gaunt – Duke of Lancaster: He is Richard's uncle and father of Bolingbroke. The king refuses to heed his advice and prefers the company of sycophants who push him into many bad decisions. When John of Gaunt dies with his son Bolingbroke in exile, Richard claims all the duke has. This makes Bolingbroke come back to claim his inheritance and depose King Richard.

Duke of Aumerle: He is York's son who remains loyal to Richard throughout the play. This loyalty threatens his relationship with his father. He is involved in a plot to kill Bolingbroke but while his fellow conspirators are punished, he went scot free. His mother pleads on his behalf. His father is a staunch supporter of Bolingbroke while he himself is a staunch supporter of Richard.

Queen Isabella

She is King Richard's queen who is devoted to him. After her husband leaves for Ireland, she starts feeling uneasy even before she hears of her husband's fate. She meets him on his way to prison and urges him to "fight like a lion which thrusts forth his paws and wounds the earth with rage before it is overpowered."

Thomas Mowbray: Although it is clear he has a hand in the murder of Gloucester, he denies it to the end. His exile may be Richard's way of hiding his part in the murder of his uncle, Duke of Gloucester.

Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland: He goes over to Bolingbroke and plans Richard's surrender. He has a hand in the death of many noblemen.

Percy: He is Northumberland's son. He supports Bolingbroke throughout the play.

Duke of Surrey: He defends Aumerle when Fitzwater accuses Aumerle of taking credit for Gloucester's death.

Earl of Salisbury: Richard leaves him in charge of the military forces when he goes to fight in Ireland.

Lord Berkeley: He is in charge of the troops guarding Bristol castle.

They are both Richard's favourites who run away at the approach of danger. Bolingbroke kills them.

Sir Henry Green }
Sir John Bushy }

Sir John Bagot: He goes over to Bolingbroke's side although he is Richard's friend/flatterer.

Lord Ross: A follower of Bolingbroke

Lord Willoughby: A follower of Bolingbroke

Lord Fitzwater: A follower of Bolingbroke

Bishop of Carlisle: He is loyal to Richard.

Abbot of Westminster: He plots with Aumerle and others to kill Bolingbroke.

The Lord Marshal

Sir Stephen Scroop

Sir Pierce Exton: He kills Richard to please Bolingbroke.

Duchess of York: She defends her son Aumerle.

Duchess of Gloucester: She wants vengeance on those who kill her husband.

Other very minor characters include:

A Lord

They are not given names

A Welsh Captain

Two Heralds

A gardener

A Keeper

They are not given names

A Groom

Two Ladies

Lords, Soldiers, Servants

Summary of Acts and Scenes

Act 1 Scene 1

Bolingbroke accuses Mowbray of treason and challenges him to a trial by combat. He claims that while Mowbray is in charge at Calais, he has improperly kept funds for the soldiers and that Mowbray is responsible for Gloucester's death.

Mowbray defends himself by denying the charges. He hints that he is told to kill Gloucester by King Richard. He says he keeps the money because the King owes him the money he spends when he goes to fetch the queen from France. He says the only crime he commits is that he once tries to kill John of Gaunt which he has confessed and apologizes to John himself for. He claim he has received John's pardon. King Richard and John of Gaunt try to settle the quarrel without bloodshed but both of them refuse. This makes the king decide to settle the case by combat at Coventry on September 17 which is St Lambert's Day.

Act I Scene II

The widow Thomas of Woodstock, Duchess of Gloucester visits John of Gaunt and asks for vengeance for the death of her husband Duke of Gloucester who is Gaunt's brother. Gaunt explains to her that it is only God who can punish a king because a king is God's deputy. She wishes that Bolingbroke would defeat Mowbray in their combat. She resigns herself to grief.

Act I Scene III

King Richard asks the Marshal to tell the two noblemen to introduce themselves and the cause of their combat. Richard II embraces his cousin (Bolingbroke) and bids him farewell in case he dies.

Just as they are about to start the fight, King Richard stops them and explains that he would not allow his kingdom to be soiled and that he wishes to keep the peace. The king decides to banish two of them. Mowbray is banished for life while Bolingbroke is banished for ten years. His ten years is later reduced to only six years.

Bolingbroke's father laments his son's plight and feels that before his son returns from exile that he (Gaunt) may die.

Act 1 Scene IV

Richard II asks Aumerle where he leaves Bolingbroke on his way to exile. Aumerle explains that he does not go far as he has no love for his cousin.

Green directs the king's attention to the rebellion in Ireland. The king resolves to go to Ireland in person to stop the rebellion. This leads to his taxing the people and this makes the king unpopular. Bushy, another of the king's favourites, announces that Gaunt was very sick. The king responds by wishing Gaunt die soon so that his resources will be used in fighting the Irish war.

Act 2 Scene 1

York and Gaunt are talking about their displeasure with the King as they are waiting for the king to visit the sick Gaunt before Gaunt dies. The King arrives with his queen and starts offering words of comfort to Gaunt. Gaunt on the other hand accuses the king of murder and other crimes. The king leaves his uncles in anger.

Gaunt's death is announced by Northumberland and the king reveals his plans of seizing Gaunt's wealth and property for the war. York speaks out against this and reminds the king that he is undermining his own right as a king. The king leaves for Ireland and makes York the regent. Northumberland announces that what the king does to Bolingbroke is bad and that Bolingbroke is coming to fight the king. He also expresses the dissatisfaction of most of the nobles.

Act 2 Scene II

The queen expresses to Bushy her sorrow. Green arrives to announce that Bolingbroke has landed at Ravenspurgh and that some nobles have joined him.

York hears that his son Aumerle has gone to join the King. York finds it difficult to raise money with which to fight Bolingbroke. Green and Bushy flee to Bristol, and Bagot goes to Ireland to join the king.

Act 2 Scene III

Bolingbroke claims he has come to claim his inheritance. York sent Berkeley to find out the intention of Bolingbroke. York scolds Bolingbroke for invading the country as the king's wrong doing should not lead to the uprising. Although he called Bolingbroke a traitor, he later joins Bolingbroke and his men.

Act 2 Scene IV

Welshmen led by Glendower who are supporting King Richard suddenly decide that the king is dead. They say they have seen bad signs like the moon looking bloody, bay trees withered, etc. Glendower told Salisbury that the Welshmen are pulling out.

Act 3 Scene I

Bolingbroke addresses the captured Green and Bushy. He accuses them of offences against King Richard and the country. He hands them over to Northumberland for execution. Steven Scroop is also executed. Bolingbroke gives instruction that the queen be treated kindly.

Act 3 Scene II

Richard II has landed in England from Ireland and is speaking to the land because he believes in the divine right of kings. Bishop Carlisle assures him that God will save him. Salisbury informs the king that the Welsh army have joined Bolingbroke. Scroop tells the king that Green and Bushy have been executed.

Act 3 Scene III

Bolingbroke scolds Northumberland for being disrespectful to King Richard. Bolingbroke repeats that he is loyal to the king as long as the king will return his inheritance and repeal his banishment. He says that if his requests are not granted, he would resort to violence against the king. The king readily agrees to Bolingbroke's conditions. Privately talking to Aumerle, Richard regrets giving this concession to Bolingbroke. Aumerle cautions the king to be patient until they get help or reinforcement. Richard dislikes lifting the banishment because he knew that Bolingbroke's popularity would continue to grow.

Act 3 Scene IV

The queen hears a gardener talk about the events in the country. They make use of the weed imagery or symbol. They imply that Green and Bushy do not keep the garden well. The queen challenges the gardener who tells her that the king is being held prisoner in London by Bolingbroke. The queen then decides to go to London.

Act 4 Scene I

Bolingbroke calls Bagot and demands to know the details of Gloucester's death. Bagot suggests that Aumerle knows the answer. Aumerle throws his gage and challenges Bagot, Lord Fitzwater and others who join in accusing him to a fight. Surrey calls Fitzwater a liar and also challenges him to a battle. Fitzwater explains that Mowbray says that Aumerle has sent two men to Calais to kill Gloucester. Aumerle has to borrow a gage to challenge Mowbray if he ever comes back from exile. Carlisle tells him that Mowbray has died in Venis as a crusader for Christ.

York arrives and tells Bolingbroke that the King has agreed to surrender the scepter and kingship to Bolingbroke. The bishop of Carlisle speaks out against this and predicts that future ages would groan for this act. He is arrested by Northumberland for saying this but he is later released.

Northumberland presents Richard II a paper to sign. Bolingbroke sends Richard to the tower and plans his own coronation for the following Wednesday. Abbot of Westminster invites Carlisle and Aumerle to have dinner with him so that they will plot how to kill Bolingbroke.

Act 5 Scene I

The queen encounters Richard II as he is being led away. Richard wants his queen to go to France and regard him as dead. The queen advises him to be more defiant. King Richard predicts that Northumberland's wickedness and ambition would challenge Bolingbroke and corrupt the land. The king and queen tenderly part with kisses and Northumberland refuses to allow the king to go with the queen to France.

Act 5 Scene II

The Duke of York is relaying to his wife how King Richard and Bolingbroke ride to London. Bolingbroke is received warmly while the people throw dirt at Richard. York's son Aumerle arrives and York discovers a plan to

kill the King (Henry IV). York decides to report his son but his wife begs him. He refuses and insists on going to tell King Henry IV. His wife advises Aumerle to go before his father and ask for pardon from King Henry himself.

Act 5 Scene III

Henry Percy tells King Henry that the King's son Henry is living a desolate life. At this point, Aumerle rushes in and begs for mercy. Henry accepts but Aumerle's father also rushes in and tells the king about the plot to kill the king. York's wife also comes in to beg for her son's life. After much argument, Aumerle is forgiven but the other conspirators are adequately punished.

Act 5 Scene IV

Sir Pierce Exton hears the King (Henry) wonder aloud who would rid him of King Richard II. He takes it as an order from the King that he should assassinate King Richard II.

Act 5 Scene V

Richard thinks out aloud. The king's former stable groom speaks sympathetically to Richard. Richard is not happy with his horse Barbary for not being loyal to him (Richard) but allows King Henry to ride it. A prison keeper sends the groom away and offers King Richard some food. Richard tells him to taste the food as is the custom but he refuses. Sensing dangers, Richard kills the keeper. Exton and his men burst in and Richard defends himself valiantly before Exton kills him. Exton decides to take Richard's body to King Henry IV.

Act 5 Scene VI

Henry IV learns that rebels against him have burnt down the town of Ciceter in Gloucester shire. Northumberland arrives to say that Salisbury, Spencer Blunt and Kent have all been executed. Fitzwater arrives to announce that Brocas and Seely have been killed and their heads sent to London. Percy announces the death of the Abbot of Westminster and brings the Bishop of Carlisle to be punished by the king. The king sends him into retirement from public posts.

Exton arrives with the body of Richard II in a coffin. Henry is distressed that Exton translates his wishes into action. He says a slander has been brought on his (Henry's) head. He banishes Exton and plans to make a trip to the holy land to wash off the blood from his hands.

Conclusion

We have done a study of Richard II. A thorough reading and understanding of the text itself will be very useful. Without thoroughly reading the text itself and understanding it, you cannot answer context questions on the book. A thorough knowledge of what the different characters say, when they say it and what makes them say it is very necessary for a student to be well prepared and ready for the examination. Always apply the steps taken in this study to any other play you have to study and success will be yours. Here are some essay and multiple choice questions for practice.

Revision Questions

1. Read the following extract from Richard II and answer the questions on it.
Even in condition of the worst degree.

In gross rebellion and detested treason
Thou art a banished man and here art come
Before the expiration of thy time.
In braving arms against thy sovereign

- (a) Who is speaking?
 - (b) Who is he speaking to?
 - (c) When did he make this speech?
 - (d) What is the relationship between these two people?
 - (e) What does this speech show about the speaker?
2. Mention three sons of Edward III that were mentioned in this play.
 3. What two offences did Bolingbroke accuse Mowbray of?
 4. Discuss the two unfair judgments made by King Richard II and King Henry IV.
 5. What is the full name of the playwright of this play?

Objective Questions

1. At what age was Mowbray banished?
 - A. 33
 - B. 40
 - C. 25
 - D. 50

Answer questions 2 – 4 from the following quotation:

“The ripest fruit first falls and so doth he”

2. What does the word ‘fruit’ here stand for?
 - A. food
 - B. person
 - C. man
 - D. woman
3. What does the word ‘falls’ refer to?
 - A. dies
 - B. lives
 - C. succeeds
 - D. survives
4. What literary device is used in that line?
 - A. simile
 - B. metaphor
 - C. personification
 - D. alliteration
5. King Henry IV banished Exton for _____?
 - A. killing Surrey
 - B. killing the King
 - C. killing Richard
 - D. killing Green
6. How many ships and men did Bolingbroke have when he landed in England to fight King Richard?

- A. 3 ships and 800men
 - B. 8ships and 3,000men
 - C. 8 ships and 8,000men
 - D. 3ships and 8,000men
7. The first uprising against Henry IV was the
- A. Surrey Attack.
 - B. Combat Trial.
 - C. Oxford Conspiracy.
 - D. Abbot Conspiracy.
8. That uprising was headed by _____?
- A. Aumerle
 - B. Abbot of Westminster
 - C. Sir Scroop
 - D. Earl of Surrey
9. Mowbray has something in common with _____?
- A. York
 - B. Northumberland
 - C. Gaunt
 - D. Exton
10. One of the symbols used to represent England in the play is _____?
- A. The sun
 - B. The moon
 - C. The Lion
 - C. The garden
11. When was Richard II written?
- A. 1395
 - B. 1495
 - C. 1595
 - D. 1695

Answers to Objective Questions

1. B 2. B 3. A 4. D 5. C 6. B 7. C 8. B 9. D 10. D 11. C