

Shakespeare Comes Alive

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INTRODUCTION

This curriculum unit is designed to introduce students to William Shakespeare, his works, Elizabethan England, and to the rich and poetic language and verse of the Renaissance era. Throughout my teaching career, I have attempted to challenge and encourage my students to discover the beauty of Shakespeare's language and poetry. Whenever I teach *Romeo and Juliet* or *Macbeth*, I have insisted that the students read orally the plays in class so that the beauty and power of the words will move the students to feel the full impact of Shakespearean drama. The primary purpose of this unit is to incorporate a more thorough study and analysis of Shakespeare's language and verse, Shakespeare's life and times with the study of two of Shakespearean plays, *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night*, in my twelfth grade English classes. In the past, I have usually approached the plays primarily from a thematic point of view, which has not been as effective as I anticipated. Most students are intimidated by the Elizabethan language, and are reluctant to approach Shakespearean drama because of the archaic words, obsolete grammatical features, and unusual sentence structures (Foster 102). We, as English teachers, must discover new approaches to teaching difficult texts such as Shakespearean drama to reluctant learners. We should give students the tools to help them decipher the archaic language and awkward grammar and sentence structures.

Based on my research, I feel that English teachers should introduce and teach Shakespearean drama from a performance-based curriculum, instead of the traditional thematic approach. Therefore, this unit focuses on presenting different strategies into the traditional canon, which will help students to understand, appreciate, and speak Shakespearean language. In addition, I would like to extend the study beyond the classroom setting by creating a Shakespearean festival at my school, which would improve the students' knowledge and appreciation of Shakespearean drama. In other words, make Shakespeare come alive within my students' hearts.

OVERVIEW OF THE UNIT

Objectives

This curriculum unit is designed to accomplish several objectives; however, my primary objective is to treat Shakespeare's plays as they were originally intended—as performances. Before we begin this exploration of Shakespeare's drama and verse, I will introduce the students to William Shakespeare and his world, his works, and the Elizabethan times and theater. I think it is essential for teachers to provide background information about the life in England and the Elizabethan era, because so many of our students view history and literature from the past as an alien and inaccessible subject. By performing specific scenes from the tragedy, *Hamlet*, and the comedy,

Twelfth Night, students will gain a deeper appreciation for Shakespeare's dramatic genius as a storyteller, playwright, and poet. If students are given a variety of techniques and tools for decoding Shakespeare and Elizabethan language, they will unlock the meaning of the plays and foster an appreciation for the language and poetry of Shakespearean plays.

Elizabethan Era – A Day in the Life of an Ordinary Youth

In order for the today's youth to understand and become familiar with Shakespeare's world, it is imperative that I begin the unit with background information about the Elizabethan era and Shakespeare's life. I usually begin by telling the students that we are about to embark on a journey through time. I ask the students to pretend that they have been transported back in time to the year 1595. In an effort to help students to comprehend life during this time period, I have them pretend that they are either a young man or woman, who at the beginning of the narrative is living with his/her family in the countryside. Their father is a yeoman farmer or a "husbandman" who has less property but supplements his income by earning a wage. As I tell a tale from the opening chapter of *Shakespeare Alive!*, the students will complete an assignment which illustrates major points about everyday life in the countryside and in London, including information about education, employment, lifestyles, food, medical knowledge, and entertainment (Papp and Kirkland, 1-14).

London and the Theater

As the tale continues, I ask students to imagine visiting London during years when there were occasional outbreaks of bubonic plague, and the theaters in and around London were forced to completely shut down to control the spread of disease. When the threat was over, the masses were thrilled to return to the theater, because theater going was a very popular pastime among the Elizabethan people. People of all classes and professions would pack into open air venues, such as Shakespeare's famous Globe Theater, for a chance to see the most recent play. The poorer audience members or "groundlings" were forced to stand in front of the stage, while the richer audience members could relax in the covered gallery seats. During this presentation, I will present a drawing of the Globe Theater and ask the students to imagine how a "groundling" would feel standing for approximately two hours viewing a play. This is an excellent time, to provide more information about the rowdy Elizabethan audiences and their behavior during performances.

Since our students love entertainment, I will introduce to the students the following forms of Elizabethan entertainment: dancing, gambling, and drinking at the pubs, board games like chess and backgammon, tennis, lawn bowling, hunting, singing, holiday festivals, and even a spectacle called "bear-baiting," where people would crowd to watch a pack of angry dogs attack a chained-up bear.

As the narrative continues about everyday life, I will mention the type of foods that the Elizabethan enjoyed. The students will discover that many of the foods that we eat everyday were not popular in Shakespeare's time. Potatoes and tomatoes had not been introduced. Tea, coffee,

and chocolate were extremely rare, used only for medicinal purposes. A typical Elizabethan England meal might consist of bread, stewed meats and vegetables, wine and a fruit pie or sweetcake for dessert. Common ingredients for cooking, included almonds, cinnamon, honey, apples, plums, turnips, parsnips, beef, chicken, venison, and fish. People generally ate two meals a day: noontime, and supper in the evening. At the end of the narrative, I will ask students to write a journal account of how they felt as we traveled through the life of an ordinary youth, who travels from a village to London during Shakespeare's time.

Shakespeare and His Life

To introduce Shakespeare and his world, students will view a 45-minute film, *Shakespeare in the Classroom*. This informative video will engage the students, because it introduces them to the movie, *Shakespeare in Love*, which tells a fictional account about the young William Shakespeare's early career and how he came to write the tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*. The video combines archival images and excerpts from the movie *Shakespeare in Love* with on-screen narration by cast members and the production staff. As students view this videotape, they will become acquainted with Shakespeare's life and times, Shakespeare's stagecraft, language and dramatic artistry. The video provides an excellent overview of Elizabethan England by focusing on the colorful world of the London theaters where Shakespeare performed and worked during the 1590s.

Before the students view the video, I will ask students to identify their prior information about Shakespeare's life. Then, after the students view the video, I will ask them to compare their facts to the ones presented in the video. Many of the students are amazed that the video presentation only states a few basic facts about the genius' life: the year and place of birth, the year he married Anne Hathaway, the years of his children's births and their names, his membership in the acting company known as the "King's Men," a rival playwright's comment that he was an "upstart crow," his death on April 23, 1616, and his final resting place, Holy Trinity Church in Stratford. The students are captivated by this presentation, which creates an excellent springboard for engaging students in a lively discussion about many different elements of Elizabethan life and culture, the theater, and Shakespeare's language. In addition, I will divide the students into groups and have them complete activities on analyzing stagecraft.

Language and Verse

Shakespearean Language

Not only is Shakespeare a great dramatist, he is also one of the greatest poets of Elizabethan language. Since the Elizabethan theater lacked sophisticated scenery, sets, lighting, and sound effects, Shakespeare had to rely on language to create mood, emotions, and atmosphere for his plays. Shakespeare used the principles of word-patterning or language arranged for effect, which is known as rhetoric. In the sixteenth century, rhetoric was the arrangement of works in certain patterns, known as tropes or figures of speech to achieve results of beauty or power. These rhetorical devices shaped the language and helped to create richer and fuller dialogue between characters. Shakespeare's characters used rhetoric to argue, debate, persuade, and exchange witty statements. Also, puns in his time were considered signs of stylistic elegance and were excellent forms of good argument (Papp and Kirkland 164-65). A pun is a play on words that sound the same but have different meanings. For example, in the tragedy, *Hamlet*, when Claudius refers to Hamlet as his son and asks him why he is so moody, Hamlet responds that he is "too much in the sun." Hamlet plays on the meaning of "son" and "sun" (I.ii.69).

How to Make Sense of Shakespeare's Language

When students first encounter Shakespeare's language, they are surprised to discover that his language is considered as Modern English. Students need to realize that he was writing during the Renaissance, a time of rapid cultural change. Between 1500 and 1600, the English language changed dramatically; actually it was almost completely revised. During this time period, the English rediscovered the ancient Greek and Latin texts, and these new words and meanings entered the English language. Shakespeare participated in this rapid change, and he added a large number of new words into his plays and therefore into the English language. There is unfamiliar vocabulary in his plays because he wrote just as the old words were dropping out of the English language. Words, like *doth* which means "do" and *quaff* which means "drink." Some words took on new meanings, like *habit*, which used to mean "clothes." Also, Shakespeare coined his own words, such as *conflux* which means "a coming together" (Literary Cavalcade 10).

Words from Shakespeare's Day

'a – he

clown – a country bumpkin

fantastic – 1) magical 2) superhuman

prithee – used to express a request (literally, "I pray thee...")

sith – since

hast and *hath* – have or has

hereafter – in some future time

Is't – is it

art – are

dost and *doth* – do or does

fie – used to express disgust

thee and *thou* – you

thy – your

I'faith – indeed

knave—1) A deceitful person 2) A servant
together with 2) nevertheless
zounds – Christ’s wounds!

wanton – 1) undisciplined 2) lustful
withal – 1)
yon – over there

Since Shakespeare wrote his plays chiefly in **blank verse**, unrhymed iambic pentameter of five beats per line, I feel that it is essential to teach students how to read and perform or speak in blank verse. Many students have difficulty understanding Shakespearean language, and as a result, they do not try to decipher the language. I will present to the different reasons why Shakespeare used this type of verse. First, the rhythm of the poetry helped the actors to memorize their lines, and blank verse represented the speech patterns of the Elizabethans. Through verse, Shakespeare was able to delineate character and to show different meanings of his characters. He created a variety of rhythms of music. For example, in the comedy, *A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream*, he created an air of magic and fantasy by using the four beat verses of the fairies. In *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*, he composed music of tragic intensity with powerful rhythms and sounds that carry the verse forward. Othello’s final speech, “Soft you; a word or two before you go,” is an example of sounds that carry the verse and gives the character control of his emotions. When reading blank verse, students should be shown that not every line conforms exactly to the iambic pentameter pattern. We speak in **prose**, language without metrical structure. Shakespeare used both prose and poetry in his plays to capture the mood and attitudes of his characters. He deviated from the iambic pentameter pattern to capture the rhythms and tensions of regular speech patterns. By shifting the stressed syllables, Shakespeare was able to create rhythms that produced a broad range of emotions, energy, and passion. Students should be provided with examples of the following variations to help them to comprehend the language and verse of Shakespearean drama:

Caesura - a natural pause that falls in the middle of a line instead of at the end.

An example of a caesura occurs in *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 1, scene 1. Tybalt speaks to Benvolio and states, “Turn thee, Benvolio, look upon thy death.”

This line is also an example of an **alexandrian**, which is a six foot line.

Shared Line – a single line of iambic pentameter is shared between two speakers, creating a fast-paced sense dialogue. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the following scene between Romeo and Benvolio is an excellent example of a shared line:

Benvolio. Good morrow, cousin

Romeo. Is the day so young? (1.1. 163-164)

Short Line – two or three feet; a short line feels the line with a purpose.

King Lear states, “Nothing will come from nothing said again.”

Feminine Ending – a weak, extra syllable. Hamlet states, “To be or not to be, that is the question.” The weak syllable ending reflects the character’s uncertainty. In other words, Hamlet is saying, “Should I kill myself or not? I’m not sure. In the comedy, *Twelfth Night*, Olivia

responds to Viola with a line, “Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions, and spirit” (Dr. Berger’s lecture notes).

Couplet – an alternative to blank verse is a couplet, which consists of two lines of rhymed iambic pentameter. Shakespeare used couplets to emphasize a point or close a scene.

After introducing blank verse and the different variants, have students analyze different passages from his plays to see how he used descriptive language to compensate for the absences of scenery, lighting, and special effects.

Craft of Reading *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night*

Before students begin their classroom performance project, I will provide an example from each play on how to decipher the language and discover the deeper meanings of both plays. I will provide a basic synopsis of each play and show students how to annotate a scene. The purpose of annotating a scene is to analyze the words that are chosen by a writer. Writers use words to move the story along and create a deeper level of meaning. In order for students to gain a deeper level of understanding, students must learn to read symbolically. That means they must make connections with the text and infer the meanings of the words. Therefore, students need to learn the process of unlocking the meaning of references that are hidden in the text of a play written hundreds of years ago. I will use a famous scene from *Hamlet* to demonstrate to students how to find analyze and interpret the hidden meanings of the text.

In order to capture the students’ attention, I will briefly introduce the tragedy *Hamlet* to the class. I will relay this tragedy to the students in their language and from a teenager’s viewpoint. I want the students to make a connection with this young man, who has just returned from college. There is now a cloud hanging over Denmark since Hamlet’s father, the king, was murdered. The king’s brother Claudius is now the new king, and he has married Gertrude, Hamlet’s mother. So now, Claudius is Hamlet’s uncle and new stepfather. To make matters worse, Hamlet’s girlfriend, Laertes has just broken up with him because her father has instructed her to do so. Hamlet is in deep despair, and even his father’s ghost has appeared to him and asked him to avenge his death. His father’s ghost has informed Hamlet that Claudius murdered him, in order to seize the crown and his wife. How can this young man deal with so much pain and misery? What would you do if you were faced with this problem and dilemma? I will begin an open discussion with students to discuss Hamlet’s dilemma. After the students have listened to this summary and discussion, they are more willing to read and analyze the play, *Hamlet*.

In Act III, scene 1 of *Hamlet*, Claudius and Polonius have set a trap to discover Hamlet’s true intentions. Ophelia has been instructed to distract Hamlet in conversation while Claudius and Polonius hide and eavesdrop in order to figure out why Hamlet’s behavior has been so strange. Hamlet’s famous speech reveals his confused state of mind and uncertainty about ending his life.

Hamlet: To be, or not to be, that is the question:
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
 And by opposing end them. To die—to sleep,
 No more; and by a sleep to say we end
 The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
 That flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation
 Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
 To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub:
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
 Must give us panic—there's the respect
 That makes calamity of so long life.

Since students have already learned about the different variations of iambic pentameter, and how those variations reveal the emotions of the characters, they should be able to recognize the type of ending in the line, “To be, or not to be, that is the question.” They should be able to recognize that this line is a feminine ending, which has a weak, extra syllable. The weak ending reflects his uncertainty about what he should do. He is asking, “Should I kill myself or not? The extra weak syllable which appears in the first four lines is a signal to the reader that Hamlet is very confused and indecisive about committing suicide (Berger’s lecture notes).

In addition to analyzing the versification, students need to see the symbolic meaning of these lines. For example, this famous speech reveals the process of our minds. People, who are indecisive and confused, turn things over in their minds, just like Hamlet. In order to aid students in unlocking the means of words, I will ask students to complete a Dialectical Journal. In this journal activity, I will ask them to identify three key words from Hamlet’s speech which reveal his desire for death. In the left-hand column, the students will list the words that relate to death, and in the right-hand column, they will state the significance and meaning of these words.

I selected this scene from *Hamlet* because I think that it reveals a crucial part of Hamlet’s personality. Also, I feel strongly that students can relate to Hamlet’s behavior and indecisive nature because they, as teenagers, are also experiencing many obstacles and dilemmas. In spite of his intense pain, Hamlet is an excellent speaker. Throughout the play, he responds to very difficult questions with a clever remark, usually a pun. In the following scene between Gertrude and Hamlet, Hamlet reveals his witty intellect.

Queen: Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die,
 Passing through nature to eternity.
 Hamlet: Ay, madam, it is common.
 Queen: If it be.
 Why seems it so particular with thee?

My master, not myself, lacks recompense.
Love make his heart of flint that you shall love,
And let your fervor, like my master's, be
Placed in contempt. Farewell, fair cruelty. *She exits.* (I.5.284-93)

Classroom Performance

Since students have been given background information to help them understand Shakespeare's world and language, the students are now ready to begin their major group activity of forming individual acting companies. Each group will select specific acts and scenes from *Twelfth Night* and *Hamlet* to direct, edit, and present to the class. They will create a prompt book, which contains the stage directions, the parts of each participant, the list of characters, etc. In addition, I will teach a method often used by actors called scoring and imaging to help students to unlock the meaning of difficult language and verse. This method involves deciphering what each work means, and deciding what the characters want and figuring out the obstacles for the character. Students will follow the steps listed below and the teacher should provide a chart to help students complete their actor's notebook (*Literary Cavalcade*, March 2001).

- Step 1: Read the text aloud. Focus on the meaning and not on understanding everything that is said.
- Step 2: Look up key words. Many of the Shakespearean language has unexpected meanings. For example, the line from *Romeo and Juliet*, "O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?" Many students think that Juliet is asking, "Where are you Romeo?" However, "wherefore" really means for what reason or purpose or why, not where. Students should make a note of these definitions in the text of their score.
- Step 3: Paraphrase the scene. After the students have researched the definitions, they should rewrite the lines in their own words under the original text.
- Step 4: Divide the lines into sections and analyze each section as they relate to the objective and obstacle. The objective is what the character wants. The objective is whatever prevents him or her from achieving that objective.
- Step 5: Explore your personal experiences. Have you ever felt like the characters in *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night*? Have the students complete the personal source column with anything (such as lyrics, poetry, words, quotes, photographs) that will help them make connections with the Shakespearean language. As the students read aloud, the image that they have chosen and its corresponding feeling will inform the students on how to say the line, instead of simply reciting words by Shakespeare.

The students' Prompt Book will also include research about the various costumes, background about the plays, and a brief synopsis of summary for each act and scene. Students will be given time during class, and I will assist them with the project (Foster 92-93).

LESSON PLANS

Shakespeare's Drama

Introduction

Shakespeare's plays are still popular today because he was an expert on human nature. He wrote about different kinds of people from all walks of life, and these people encountered all types of situations – dramatic, tragic, exciting and magical. Just like these people, Shakespeare's characters encountered similar situations, and Shakespeare presented their lives in his plays, which fall into three categories: comedies, histories, and tragedies.

Objectives

Provide students with the definitions and examples of these types of plays. Have students complete the writing activities which follows each description. The following activities should help students to distinguish between the different types of Shakespearean drama.

Shakespearean Comedy

Shakespeare's comedies consist of similar "recipe":

Mix together characters from many levels of society such as dukes, merchants, fools, etc. Add a mixture to an enchanted place such as a forest or madcap kingdom. Throw in a few mistaken identities, mismatched loves, and surprises. This is a great time to read a brief summary of *Twelfth Night* to the students and discuss the mistaken identities, mismatched loves and disguises.

Assignment

List comedies you know from books, TV, or movies. How are today's comedies different from Shakespeare's? Now, write your own "recipe" for a favorite funny show or movie.

Shakespearean Histories

Shakespeare wrote histories explaining the royal line of kings in England to impress the reigning Queen Elizabeth and to entertain audiences with facts and legends about historical figures. Today, we can use the same elements as Shakespeare to recreate stories of famous historical leaders.

Assignment

1. Name a hero or important leader. Describe your leader's heroic achievements.
2. Discuss the struggles he or she experienced while achieving these goals.
3. Explain how your hero overcame these struggles.

4. Explain how his or her achievements affected society and made the world a better place.
5. You have just written your own historical story just like Shakespeare!

Shakespearean Tragedies

Shakespearean tragedies are stories of honorable people who are unable to deal successfully with their problems. The central tragic character possesses one “fatal flaw” such as jealousy, indecision, or hunger for power, which keeps him from attaining his desires. His problems get so out of control, he can’t go back and fix them. Toward the end, the character learns something valuable, but it is too late, and he must face his own downfall.

Assignment

Can you think of one of today’s “tragic heroes”?

1. Write a short article about this person as if you were a newspaper reporter. Include information such as what initially made this person honorable or great, the obstacles or problems this person faced, how he or she dealt with these problems, and the story’s conclusion.
2. After telling the story, give your opinion about what you think this person’s “fatal flaw” was. In other words, what weakness brought down this person?
3. Explain why you feel sad about his or her downfall? What could he or she have done differently?

Shakespeare’s Syntax

Introduction

In order to help students to decipher the strange or complex sentence structures, have students complete an activity, which will help them to comprehend the difficult passages.

Directions

Have students select a difficult sentence from *Twelfth Night*, Act 1. Using that difficult sentence, complete the following two activities:

1. Have students to write the difficult sentence, and then have them rearrange the sentence, without changing or omitting any of the words, in order to make it clear in meaning for a modern-day reader. For example, “So in love with you am I” becomes “I am so in love with you.”
2. Now, tell the students to translate the sentence into modern-day English, changing the words but retaining the meaning. For instance, “So in love with you am I” becomes “I’ve got a huge crush on you” or “I love you so much.”

3. Ophelia is buried by her brother, Laertes and Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, who scatters flowers on her grave in *Hamlet*.

Laertes: Lay her in the earth,
And from her hair and unpolluted flesh
May violet spring....

Gertrude: Sweets to the sweet, farewell!
I hoped thou shouldst have
been my Hamlet's wife.
I thought thy bride-bed to have
decked, sweet maid,
and not have strewed thy grave.

State the expression and its meaning today:

Stagecraft Activity

Students need an activity to help them understand the Elizabethan Stagecraft. The purpose of this assignment is for the students to analyze the stagecraft by marking the passages in which Shakespeare sets the scene, either through extended descriptions or with a single line. Have students work together in their assigned groups for their classroom performance project. The students will mark the passages in the acts and scenes that they have been assigned to present to the class. Have the students answer the following questions:

1. How does Shakespeare use songs to set the mood, especially in *Twelfth Night*?
How are massive battles created, while having a few survivors race on stage to report the action?
2. How does he carefully arrange to have corpses carried off the stage since there is no curtain to conceal the "dead" actor who springs back to life?
3. How does the playwright use various locations on the stage to create specific atmosphere?
Consider the locations on stage such as the inner space, the space above, hiding places, pillars, the trap door, etc.
4. Now it is your turn to develop and craft stage directions for your scenes from *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night*.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Callum, Albert. *Shake Hands with Shakespeare*. New York: Scholastic, 1968.

This book contains scripts of eight Shakespearean plays, edited for performances in elementary schools.

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This book presents engaging and humorous facts, trivia and insights into Shakespeare's life and plays.

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Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. New Folger's Shakespeare Library Edition. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992.

Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night*. New Folger's Shakespeare Library Edition. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992.

Videos:

Hamlet, starring Mel Gibson. Warner Brothers. (1990).

Students will love this updated version of this intriguing tragedy.

Shakespeare in the Classroom. Miramax Films. (1999).

This video provides students with a summary of Shakespeare's life and times. It is quite informative and entertaining. The actors from the movie, *Shakespeare in Love* narrate this video presentation.

Shakespeare in Love. Miramax Films. (1998)

Twelfth Night. Renaissance Films. (1996).

A highly acclaimed film adaptation featuring Helena Bonham-Carter and Ben Kingsley.

Internet Sites

<http://www.barbweb.net>

A Shakespeare Resource Center which contains a guide to William Shakespeare and his works.

<http://www.folger.edu>

The Folger Shakespeare Library is an independent research library.

<http://www.libraryspot.com>

This site has excellent resources for teachers and students. It includes sites for literary criticism, lesson plans, and encyclopedias.

<http://www.renfaire.com>

This web site contains information about Elizabethan accents.

<http://www.shakespeare.com>

This is an interactive, hypermedia environment dedicated to increasing the comprehension of Shakespeare's plays and other works.

<http://www.shakespearemag.com>

A great source of in-depth and current information from Shakespeare scholars, teachers, and theater professionals.

http://www.shakespeare_monologues.org

This Forum is an area for discussion of Shakespeare's works. For actors, directors, teachers, students, and literary buffs.