

**Truth in Jest:
Critical Questions about Shakespeare's Use of Humor**

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INTRODUCTION

To Laugh or Not to Laugh: The Essential Question

If ever a “teachable moment” exists, it is when a teacher tells students like mine that they are going to be reading Shakespeare. Half of the class laughs hysterically and half of them look like they are about to cry. Responses range from “Yeah, right” to “No! Please! Anything but that!” It is the perfect opportunity to assure them that with their laughter and outrage at the mere mention of Shakespeare’s name, they act like masters of his work already. At the very least, they prove that they possess the two things that any real critic of Shakespeare needs most—a sense of humor and a willingness to admit to feelings of pain and fear.

Upon hearing that laughter and outrage are useful because most of Shakespeare’s work, like that of many playwrights, can be described as either a comedy or a tragedy, students’ responses are usually less divided. They tend to shout en masse, “So, we’re reading the comedies, right?” My answer to them is that, yes, we will read some of Shakespeare’s comedies and we will analyze the devices and tropes that he uses to create them. I do not mention that I cannot guarantee that they will find all of it to be funny, nor do I tell them right away that a major component of our study may in fact leave us incensed, because there are people for whom Shakespeare’s humor draws attention to a socio-political reality that is laughable, but grim.

People often look to comedy as a form of entertainment and escape, but slapstick comedy aside, a genuinely humorous text, even something as seemingly flippant or inane as the script for an episode of *The Simpsons*, is of the same substance as those novels and plays which are considered the richest, most studied, and timeless works of literature. Humor reveals life’s seriousness, complexity, and horror as much, if not more, as it does life’s absurdity and lightness, especially as one moves further from the place and time and culture of its creation. Consequently, it is through a study of humor that students can most easily and enjoyably begin to recognize what it means to be a trenchant reader, a deliberate and poetic writer, and a devoted observer of human nature, sensitive to the nuances of language and the extent to which literature presents a challenge or perpetuation of social stereotypes and norms.

A study of humor also invites increased attention to the complexity of human emotions, their elicitation in others via writing, and the very diverse range of motivations, ideas, and agendas that lie behind the evocation of laughter in response to various

situations. Laughter can come as quickly out of nervousness or disdain as it can when one recognizes common flaws, sees foolish behavior, or notices amusing idiosyncrasies. It can carry hatred, disgust, anxiety, or a bitter and cynical satire; or it can express joy, lightness, understanding, and camaraderie, affirmation that someone's banter is appreciated and in good sport.

The serious issues present in comedy are often raised intentionally, as in the case of satire, but often they are not. This is particularly true as one considers questions of the influence, celebration, and applicability of Shakespeare's work in today's social and political world. It would be erroneous, and it is not the intent of this curriculum unit, to suggest that Shakespeare's humor is always or necessarily taboo in today's world. The intent of this curriculum is to help students see that Shakespeare's comedy, both for its poetic genius and its inclusion of characters from all walks of life, demands a close attention to language and invites an intense scrutiny both of human behavior and its representation in literature.

Shakespeare's comedies offer room to explore not only literary and dramatic conventions, but the careful use of rhetoric and tone—the tools of effective prose—while drawing students' attention to the cornerstones of literary criticism: issues of universality, class, race, gender, and sexuality.

BACKGROUND

High School and Shakespeare's Real World Value

There is no doubt that the purported purpose of high school in the United States is to prepare students to assume responsibility for the future of our nation's economy, healthcare and education systems, and security. Whether their immediate post-high school plans are to enter a college, junior college, or university, or to enter the workforce, just about anyone would agree that a high school graduate in today's world must be able to participate in an information-driven economy in which communication skills are absolutely vital. These include effective speech and writing skills, command of the English language, experience with computer technology, and an ability to read critically and accurately. Of course, in addition to mastering those skills and skills dictated by other subjects such as mathematics, high school students have four years to begin to make sense of society and their relation to it in order to develop the appropriate coping strategies, modes of behavior, citizenship, and vision for what personal contributions might be made to our collective future. Students are striving to understand or question gender roles, the relationship between race, class, and the American dream, and what it means to live a happy or a just life.

As with the majority of the essential skills and questions that a student must acquire and pursue in high school, questions of mores and social roles fall in the lap of the English teacher, for whom writers of fiction and non-fiction alike give students room to

explore the life-long questions they so desperately need and want to consider during their teen years. Shakespeare's work offers students a chance to explore these essential questions and, with its complex language, give students who are reluctant to share their personal "issues" of embarrassment or frustration due to stereotypes of poverty, homosexuality, racial, and gender a good excuse to keep asking exactly what Shakespeare means, and whether what he is saying makes any sense, thereby learning their peers' views on the issue in question. Dealing as he does with the hottest topics known to high school love, social obligations, social roles, power and marginality, Shakespeare is able to inspire persistence with challenging texts.

In the school where I teach, 79% of the students are Hispanic, 20% African American, and 1% Vietnamese, European, Hindi, Native American, Chinese, and other; 73% of them are at-risk. Roughly 10% are gifted and talented, at least 74% qualify for free lunch, and most are among the very first in their families to attend school in English, graduate from high school, and actively consider attending college. Shakespeare's work is of particular use in raising and "grounding-in-text" discussions of race, class, and gender, discussions which seem all the more pressing for minorities of very low-socioeconomic status. To be frank, my students often ask to read works by white people, because they want to know how white people think and act. Shakespeare's almost uncontested notoriety and esteem in the European canon makes his work particularly compelling and interesting to my students. They frequently ask whether all white people believe what he believes and try to find connections between ideas conveyed in a white writer's work with their own experiences with the "white world."

Shakespeare in the Real World: A Question of Power

Within the context of what is in many respects a very challenged school population—low socioeconomic status, native language other than English, lack of social support, cultural dissonance, relative homogeneity and segregation of neighborhoods, exposure to drugs, teen pregnancy—I teach in two distinct programs whose focus is on students who truly see education as a means of accomplishing concrete post-high school goals. One program is the International Studies Program (ISP), an Houston Independent School District (HISD) Magnet that serves academically accelerated students, but often extremely at-risk ones, from all around the city of Houston. I have been in the International Studies Center (ISC) for three years and will continue to teach junior-level Advanced Placement (AP) language and composition there next year. The other program is new and is being developed by a team of teachers to strengthen the academic rigor, coherency, and integration of courses taken by students in the co-op and school-to-work programs currently in existence at our school. Our new academy is called Academic, Career, and Technology Training (ACTT) Academy; its focus will be on communication and technology skills.

In teaching Shakespeare as part of AP and Pre-AP courses in the International Studies Center, there is of course the need to address the essentials of any college-preparatory, or,

in the case of AP, college-level English course: poetic language, conventions of drama, character development, rhetorical strategies, plot and theme development, tone and mood, and theories of interpretation. Teaching Shakespeare in the ISC makes it imperative that a great deal of attention be devoted to the last component mentioned, theories of interpretation. It is the goal and intention of the ISC to provide students with an acute devotion to a constant and critical analysis of world cultures, social norms, intercultural relations, the power dynamics governing our increasingly globalized and increasingly Americanized world. It is the particular responsibility of the English teachers in our program to assist students in analyzing the representation of such things in literature and the arts, and to consider the implications of various works, aesthetic ideals, and representations of various peoples and places.

Shakespeare, then, is an obvious choice when supplementing the curriculum for an ISC course. This is because the sun never sets on a community of readers that is exposed, schooled, made to revere, compelled to challenge or adapt the works of Shakespeare. As a poet and playwright who has held Britain's esteem as the greatest of writers, Shakespeare penetrated and came to dominate aspects of life in the colonies almost as completely as the English language. He was held as a cultural and linguistic icon, as he set and reinforced dynamics of cultural imperialism. He is still such an icon in many countries; in others he is an object of resentment, another relic of colonial authority, but for my students in the International Studies Center, he is a writer who has been read by people in every corner of the globe. He is a writer who raises questions of intercultural relations, universality, social values, and the global significance of various works of art and literature. Since many of my students are immigrants from nations who know too well the reality of cultural imperialism, interest in considering British ascendancy is genuine and high. In exploring Britain's colonial empire and its impact on the world we live in now, students recognize and better understand the processes at work between their own countries and those that are more powerful or less powerful.

For the students in the ACTT Academy, Shakespeare is likely to seem like a horrendous and impossible challenge in many cases. This is exactly why his work is so perfect for that population. One of the major objectives of the ACTT Academy is to encourage a work ethic and a spirit of belief which makes students determined to rise to any challenge, no matter how daunting. Preparation to succeed in the workplace must include the development of such an attitude, because students will be forced to adapt to situations they have never faced or heard of, and they will be forced to acquire and demonstrate skills they might think themselves incapable of mastering. Shakespeare's work is also useful for these students insofar as it focuses attention on nuances of language and issues of social class. As I have mentioned, communication skills are a top priority in our program, so students need a keen sensitivity to language use and tone. As for issues of social class, just as the ISC students are asked to think critically about culture, I would like my ACTT students to think critically about social class and particularly its representation in literature, the arts, and the media. I believe that this is an issue about which many students think and need room to explore while in high school.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

Adding Humor to Traditional Curriculum

The play that I believe works best for the objectives of this unit, *The Merchant of Venice*, is not the one that teachers in HISD are expected to teach at the eleventh grade level, but it serves as a needed complement to the recommended text, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. These two literary works contain humor at its lightest, most fanciful, and most appealing. It is humor even as it exposes the darker sides of human nature. They each also contain humor that masks people's feelings and reinforces or plays on social stereotypes, many of them very seriously damaging.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a play that presents a wide range of comedic situations and offers opportunities to explore a diverse array of literary techniques used in the creation of humorous situations, but it is misleading to suggest to students that *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with all of its variety in literary devices and comic elements, is a text that fully demonstrates what comedy meant to Shakespeare. Comedy to Shakespeare was any story that ended happily, any story that is not a tragedy or history. In order to explore the very different tones and forms that are present in Shakespeare's humor and comedy, the very serious undertones that it contains and the various uses and purposes for which humor can be used, it is necessary to show students a second, darker comedy. For these reasons and others, I have designed this unit with *The Merchant of Venice* in mind.

The Merchant of Venice will be used to raise questions of social and cultural stereotypes, of Shakespeare's use of caricatures and the implications of their use, and as the focus of seven distinct theories of literary and cultural criticism: liberal-humanist, psychoanalytic, structuralist, feminist, post-colonial, Marxist, and queer theory/lesbian/gay critique. In the course of exploring Shakespeare's representation of various characters, the students will analyze language use and differences in the language used by characters of different social positions, cultures, and genders, as well as the ways in which different types of language are suited to different types of humor.

Skills over Content

English, as a discipline and as the responsibility of an English teacher, is centered on skills, not content. Focusing on Shakespeare's work helps students acquire and develop their reading, writing, and thinking skills. Similarly, a discussion of literary and cultural theory relies on and reinforces these skills. The outcome of a successful unit on Shakespeare is not a chronology of his life and work, a set of quotes or memorized lines, or an answer to how he might feel about questions of marriage, love, racism, or social caste. A successful unit on Shakespeare should leave students asking questions about all of those things, and it should equip them with techniques and approaches that can be applied to any text. Below is an outline of the skills and techniques that Texas Education

Agency (TEA), HISD, and the College Board have deemed essential for students in college-prep and advanced placement courses. Additionally, I will present the core ideological foundations of the various and distinct critical perspectives to which students will be exposed as well as a glossary of comedy terms.

TEKS and AP/Pre-AP Skills Targeted in This Unit

Writing

AP/Pre-AP	TEKS
<p>Student will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Develop individual voice and style ➤ Move beyond formulaic writing ➤ Explore and discover meaning in a text using writing as a mode of knowledge ➤ Use models to emulate stylistic excellence ➤ Compose for both personal and public purposes and audiences ➤ Sustain and develop a clear, well-organized essay using both effective choice of detail and a wide range of commentary ➤ Recognize and use effectively various levels of discourse for specific purposes 	<p>Student will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Write in a variety of forms using effective word choice, structure, and sentence forms ➤ Organize logical arguments with clearly related definitions, theses and evidence ➤ Write with voice and style appropriate to audience and purpose ➤ Employ literary devices and precise language to enhance style and to communicate ideas clearly and concisely

Reading

AP/Pre-AP	TEKS
<p>Student will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Identify an author’s bias and purpose in writing challenging texts ➤ Infer the tone of a complex piece of writing through an analysis of its author’s use of rhetorical strategies and stylistic devices ➤ Perceive narrative structure, themes, and underlying archetypes in a piece of complex writing ➤ Apply a variety of critical approaches (i.e. feminist, formalist, psychological, humanist, deconstructionist, post-colonial) to aid in the understanding of a complex text ➤ Interpret figurative symbols credibly ➤ Practice close reading of texts to discover layered meanings ➤ Determine connotations of images, details, and figurative language in complex texts ➤ Analyze use of diction, imagery, detail, language/literary devices, and syntax in creation of tone, irony, paradox, etc. 	<p>Student will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Establish a purpose for reading ➤ Draw upon own background to provide connections to texts ➤ Monitor and modify reading strategies ➤ Draw inferences

Listening and Speaking

AP/Pre-AP	TEKS
<p>Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Lead discussions that analyze and evaluate texts ➤ Critique model papers orally ➤ Recognize and use for effect verbal and dramatic irony ➤ Determine and apply criteria to critique presentations ➤ Use oral presentations of drama to facilitate understanding of tone ➤ Engage in class discussions using analysis, evaluation, and synthesis ➤ Read aloud both assigned texts and own/peer compositions to produce effective tone and dramatic effect with attention to the rhythm of diction, syntactical balance, and the musicality of language ➤ Speak for a variety of purposes including persuasion, narration, description, explanation, classification, and entertainment ➤ Present dramatic readings from sophisticated texts ➤ Deconstruct film, concerts, and books orally ➤ Interpret and perform dramatic or poetic selections with an effective reading 	<p>Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Listen and respond appropriately to presentations and performances of various works ➤ Apply valid criteria to analyze, evaluate, and critique informative and persuasive messages ➤ Identify and analyze the effect of artistic elements within literary texts such as character development, rhyme, imagery, and language ➤ Evaluate persuasive, informative, and artistic performances ➤ Focus attention on a speaker's message ➤ Demonstrate proficiency in each aspect of the listening process, such as focusing attention, interpreting, and responding ➤ Use effective strategies to evaluate own listening such as asking questions for clarification, comparing/contrasting interpretations with those of others, and researching points of interest or contention ➤ Use effective listening to provide appropriate feedback ➤ Use language effectively for a variety of occasions, purposes, and audiences ➤ Choose valid proofs from reliable sources to support claims ➤ Interpret literary texts in ways such as telling stories and interpreting scenes from narrative or dramatic texts or poems

Viewing and Representing

AP/Pre-AP	TEKS
<p>Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Use films as texts for the study of irony, philosophy, symbolism, and other literary elements ➤ Determine cultural and historical context, including the use of different appeals for different ethnic and socioeconomic groups, in advertisements, shows, and films ➤ Determine publisher/artist’s purpose or bias ➤ Compare and contrast films with novels, focusing on how and why imagery, characterization, plot, narrative, structure, and point of view may differ ➤ Determine tone, meaning, and theme using photographs and paintings as texts ➤ Detect and interpret symbols, irony, imagery, point of view, narrative structure, characterization, figurative language, and visual puns using photographs and paintings as texts ➤ Detect and analyze bias, use of argumentation techniques, persuasion, symbols, narrative structure, point of view, logical/emotional appeals, and connotation ➤ Explicate filmmakers’ creation of complex, ambiguous, and ironic tones showing how setting, camera angles, music, images, dialogue, special effects, and other techniques determine tone ➤ Compare cross-cultural film versions of the same texts; analyze for cultural differences, biases, and similarities 	<p>Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Describe how meanings are communicated through elements of design, including shape, line, color, and texture ➤ Analyze relationships, ideas, and cultures as represented in various media ➤ Distinguish the purposes of various media forms such as informative texts, entertaining texts, and advertisements

Key Language Terms and Literary Devices

Alliteration, allusion, antithesis, aphorism, apostrophe, assonance, caricature, connotation, denotation, detail, diction, dialect, euphemism, figurative language, hyperbole, imagery (include concrete, abstract, visual, tactile, auditory, gustatory, olfactory), irony (including verbal, dramatic, and situational), juxtaposition, literal language, metaphor, metonym, onomatopoeia, oxymoron, parallelism, personification, pun, repetition, rhyme (internal- and end rhyme, rhyme scheme), running jokes, sarcasm, sensory language, synecdoche, syntax (including loose-, periodic-, protracted-, and telegraphic sentences, inversion), understatement.

Elements of Comedy

These definitions are adapted from those contained in Holman's *A Handbook to Literature*.

- **Black Humor:** use of the morbid, grotesque, angry, bitter, or absurd for darkly comic purposes; often deals with suffering, anxiety, and death.
- **Burlesque:** use of ridiculous exaggeration and distortion of accepted definitions of reality; sublime may become absurd, honesty may be turned to sentimentality, serious subjects may be treated in a flippant manner or frivolous things may be treated seriously.
- **Carnavalesque:** use of crude, vulgar, scatological, and/or ribald imagery and language for the purpose of social satire.
- **Commedia Dell'arte:** form of Italian low comedy dealing with the very early times in which the actors improvised their dialogue.
- **Double entendre:** use of deliberately ambiguous statements, one of which is usually risqué or suggestive of some impropriety.
- **Litote:** use of understatement in which a thing is affirmed by stating the negative of its opposite: "He was not unmindful" means "He gave careful attention."
- **Irony:** includes situational, dramatic, and verbal.
- **Meiosis:** intentional understatement for humorous or satiric effect and occasionally for emphasis.
- **Parody:** use of imitation for satirical purpose.
- **Pun:** play on words based on similarity of sound between two words with different meanings.
- **Sarcasm:** form of verbal irony in which, under guise of praise, a caustic and bitter statement of strong and personal disapproval is given; sarcasm is personal, jeering, intended to hurt and is intended as a sneering taunt.
- **Satire:** literary manner which blends a critical attitude with humor and wit for the purpose of improving human institutions or humanity. True satirists are conscious of the frailty of institutions of human devising and attempt through laughter not so much to tear down as to inspire a remodeling. If critics simply abuse, they are writing *invective*; if they are personal and splenetic, they are writing *sarcasm*; if they are sad and morose over the state of society, they are writing a *jeremiad*.
- **Slapstick:** low comedy involving physical action, practical jokes, and such actions as pie-throwing and pratfalls.
- **Vignette:** a sketch or essay or brief narrative characterized by great precision and delicate accuracy of composition.
- **Wit:** modern definitions reflect eighteenth century conceptions: apt association of thought and expression, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness; usually intensive, rapid, and sharp.

Critical Approaches

These definitions are adapted from Barry's *Beginning Theory*.

- **Liberal-humanist:** Critics focus on the timelessness and universality of a work of literature; further, they believe that the truths contained in a particular text are truths that exist irrespective of socio-political context, literary-historical context, or the personal ideology, idiosyncrasies or experiences of the author. Texts reveal the “truth” about human nature, and such truth does not vary by culture, continent, or time.
- **Structuralist:** Nothing exists in isolation. Everything is part of a larger whole, and must be viewed in relation to it. Furthermore language constitutes reality; it does not merely or precisely reflect it. A text is used as a foundation for a study of the society, language, culture(s) of which it is a part; structuralists begin with a text and move outward into the structures that produced them or influence their interpretation. Parallels, patterns, mirror images of plot, characters, structure, and language are of utmost significance; similarly, grounded in a Western cultural perspective, structuralists look for the enactment of an underlying, “universal” narrative structure.
- **Post-Colonial:** Notions of “universality” tend to reflect the norms, biases, and experiences of a politically and economically empowered, eurocentric minority. Cultural, regional, social, and national differences do influence the structure, power, form, and purpose of a text. Representations of non-European people and norms should be questioned and challenged. Cultural hybridity and polyvalency must be recognized and celebrated; evidence or support for colonization and imperialism and/or their attendant attitudes and ideologies should not be casually overlooked. Marginality, plurality, and “otherness” can be seen as a source of energy and potential change.
- **Psychoanalytic:** (Freudian) Psychoanalysis explores the interactions of the conscious and subconscious mind in an attempt to resolve mental problems such as anxiety and neurosis. It is based on Freud's theories of the mind and of sexuality. A key component in psychoanalysis is dream interpretation, and this is what is most useful to literary critics. Freudian psychoanalysts treat dreams as expressions of repressed wishes and desires; repressed urges are expressed symbolically in dreams, and can be discovered with attention to the various images and their relationships to each other in a dream. Literary critics apply Freud's methods of dream interpretation to literary texts. Some critics have attempted to psychoanalyze the author of a text; more commonly, the text is treated as a dream, and analysis is based on careful attention to diction, juxtaposition, imagery, symbolism, and recurring character traits. Psychoanalytic critics strive to examine the conscious and subconscious motives in or behind a text, be they the author's or a character's. These critics also tend to examine ways in which Freud's theories of sexuality and desire are evident in the actions and behavior of the characters in a story.

- **Feminist:** Representations of women in literature reveal and influence the social and political position of women. Critical attention to images of women in media and the arts, particularly literature, was a key component of the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to exploring representations of women in literature, the media, and the arts, feminist critics promote inclusion and recognition of female writers in the literary canon; some also explore the patriarchal underpinnings of the English language. They question the depiction of women in subordinate, evil, histrionic, and other roles which society has assigned women to play, and they draw attention to ways in which language (diction, syntax) naturalizes or obfuscates the inferior status to which women are relegated.
- **Queer Theory/Lesbian/Gay:** Several distinct types of criticism fall under this category, including lesbian feminism, libertarian lesbianism, queer theory, and criticism that focuses on the gay male perspective. Commonalities include an attempt to identify a canon of lesbian and gay writings that communicate or speak to the lesbian/gay experience, recognizing lesbian/gay episodes in mainstream work, exploring episodes of conscious resistance to or difference from established norms, exposing homophobia in mainstream texts, exploring representations of masculinity and femininity and the role of literature in forming or perpetuating socially-constructed gender norms.
- **Marxist:** Grounded in the theories of Karl Marx, but including variations in Marxist thinking including the work of theorists such as Althusser, Marxist theory examines the extent to which literature reveals or reinforces bourgeois ideology and the relationships between economic conditions and social and ideological “reality.” Marxist critics recognize that beneath the overt content of any text lies the hidden reality of class struggle. Marxists note the relationship between the content of a text and its author’s social class; they also consider various literary genres in relation to the social period in which they are produced and/or the social periods in which they are read.

LESSON PLANS

Although this unit is designed for students who have had some prior exposure to Shakespeare and his language, Shakespeare’s texts are still more challenging and complex than most others they encounter; basic comprehension of the language and content alone is a tremendous task for high school students. Consequently, in hoping to advance students’ appreciation of Shakespeare’s work beyond the comprehension level to the level of critical interpretation and questioning, it is necessary to spend quite a bit of time on the concepts, vocabulary, and questions essential to the appreciation of comedy, various critical perspectives, and to literary devices, long before a play is ever opened. This is one reason why much of the attention given to teaching strategies in this curriculum guide will focus on the introduction and teaching of elements of comedy, and literary theory. Ideally there would be equal attention given to strategies for developing students’ appreciation of literary devices, but space and time do not allow for that in this unit.

There are two other reasons, however, why ideas about the teaching of comedy and theory take precedence here over a discussion of a single text or two. One reason is that, as mentioned above, English is a skills-based, not a content-based discipline. Students need to acquire skills that can be applied to a variety of texts. The second reason is that I do not believe that is possible or advisable to suggest a particular sequence or linear syllabus for this unit; these are all skills and lessons that must be taught recurrently if they are to be taught at all. Below, then, I will first present the methods I use in teaching comedy and criticism in general. I will then detail the daily strategies and two projects that I think are uniquely suited to a study of comedy, as well as the application of various critical perspectives to *The Merchant of Venice*.

Lesson Plan 1: Introducing Comedy

Objective

Students recognize different types of comedy and the techniques that distinguish them.

Materials

Films, texts, cartoons, songs, and pictures that feature different types of comedy; list of comedy terms (see **Elements of Comedy**).

Just as a small child or a second-language learner tends to comprehend more than he or she can express, students have an intuitive sense of different types of comedy or situations that cause laughter even if they lack the vocabulary to explain such distinctions. Building on what students already know is not only effective in helping them to develop a sophisticated bank of comedy terms, but also in empowering them with the confidence and skills they need when working with Shakespeare's texts. Students learn to internalize a Socratic approach when attempting to tackle new and challenging questions of meaning and thereby tap and apply prior knowledge and experience in an attempt to make sense of unfamiliar situations.

An effective way of introducing specific types of comedy is to present students with examples of various films, texts, cartoons, songs, and pictures that are widely considered funny. As students examine each text, have them write down observations about what makes the text funny. Encourage them to be as specific as possible. I would begin by presenting several texts whose humor is very obviously based on completely different elements of comedy. For example, you might present a clip from a black-and-white slapstick film (i.e. Charley Chaplin or *The Three Stooges*) or an episode of *America's Funniest Home Videos*, followed by an episode of *The Simpsons* or a clip from a Woody Allen film. Be sure to include, at some point, a sketch from *Whose Line Is It Anyway*. As students view each example of comedy, have them note the things that they believe make each text funny.

Divide students into groups of three or four, have them compare notes and, still in groups, generate a list of different types of comedy, using their own terms. Then, ask each group to contribute ideas to a bank of comedy terms on the board. Discuss the list as a class, and build on it as students view texts of an increasingly complex nature, such as satires and parodies. Once the class has compiled its own bank of comedy terms, introduce the students to the terms that are commonly used in critical discussions about comedy (see the section of this paper entitled **Elements of Comedy**). Help them to reclassify the texts they have examined so that their categorizations of the types of comedy in each text fits with conventional terminology.

Lesson Plan 2: Introducing Comedy’s Darker Side

Objective

Students evaluate significance, impact, and suitability of different types of comedy; recognize different motivations for laughter; and analyze relationships between humor and social reality.

Materials

A satire or parody such as *The History of White People in America*; examples of various types of comedy, an example of “comedy” or a “joke” that is not funny (something that contains “humor” that relies on caricatures or stereotypes, or is demeaning to a particular individual or group).

This curriculum is centered on two of Shakespeare’s plays that contain comedic elements which are not necessarily funny to everyone or to every group of people. Thus, it is of utmost importance that particular attention be given to the extent to which comedy is not always fun for everyone that it involves. In the course of introducing comedy—and only after the initial introduction via slapstick, cartoons, improvisations, etc.—a good choice for examining the more complex types of comedy (such as satire and parody) is *The History of White People in America*. This film will help to prepare students for a discussion of the darker side of comedy, ways in which jokes are based on stereotypes, or succeed at the expense of a particular group of people. Students can work in small groups to generate a list of the stereotypes that they recognized at work in the film.

Return to a few more examples of light comedy, such as slapstick, and tell students that this is for the purpose of a review of jargon and terms. But this time include in your set of examples something that people often laugh at but is definitely not acceptable as funny. This is for the purpose of showing students that comedy can have some very serious consequences, and the activity must be handled with extreme caution.

I show the students a photo of someone in drag. Most of them will laugh, but the teacher must not. Engage the students in a serious discussion about the real horror of “jokes” such as jokes about race, gender, sexuality, or social class; discuss with them the fact that laughter is sometimes a nervous response, but that quite often when we laugh at

certain things, we are hurting someone else's feelings, or their character and reputation, without a justifiable reason. This lesson will be of key importance in preparing the students to tackle the question of whether racism, patriarchy, class bias, or anti-Semitism is a part of Shakespeare's humor in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Lesson Plan 3: Introducing Critical Perspectives

Objective

Students develop intuitive sense of how different people's interpretations of a text may be, depending on gender, race, social class or position, education, sexuality, cultural and linguistic heritage.

Materials

Photos and sound recordings of people of various genders, races, social classes and positions, education, sexuality, cultural and linguistic heritage; books, photos, articles that can be used to introduce Shakespeare's language and world (see **Annotated Bibliography**).

Introduction

Begin with a photo of people of various genders, races, ages, and body types or a sound recording of people of various ages, races, language groups/ethnicities, and both genders. Ask students to choose two or three of the people in the photo or sound recording, and have the students speculate on these people's lives – their hobbies, their jobs, their dreams, the kinds of books they read, etc. Share comments and note similarities/differences in people's perceptions of the individuals in the picture and the sound recording.

Next, present students with several quotations, problem situations, lines of poetry, or a short story or news article. Ask them how the various people they have been thinking about might respond to the "text" in question. Share responses.

Finally, ask the students to consider which people they expect read Shakespeare, and which people Shakespeare might have expected would read his work. Ask who they think is most likely to hold a Masters' degree in Shakespearean literature, or to be highly esteemed as a Shakespearean scholar and why. Using this general introduction, you will be able to gauge your students' ability to recognize that not all readers are the same, and not all people form the same impressions of a single text. Many students will be well aware of this fact, but even these students (if they are like my own) may never have been given an opportunity to consider multiple "right answers" to an interpretation of Shakespeare, or any text.

At this point, begin to discuss Shakespeare's world and audience using materials such as those mentioned in the annotated bibliography. Once students have a sense of who the bard might have been and what his life may have been like, ask them to begin thinking

about what led him to become a writer. What might his goals have been? Further, how did he become such a famous author? Was he just some kind of genius? Why might his work be held in such high regard? What distinguishes his work from that of other playwrights? At this point, it is important to ask – and equally important *not* to answer – these questions.

Lesson Plan 4: Liberal Humanism

Objective

Students apply a liberal-humanist perspective to an analysis and evaluation of a text. Students analyze and evaluate the assumptions of liberal humanism.

Materials

Film version of *Hamlet* or any Shakespeare play that includes Elizabethan language and follows Shakespeare’s text.

Liberal-humanist criticism

It makes sense to begin with this, since liberal-humanist criticism is often heralded as “the criticism before criticism” and its approach is the one that people tend to take naturally as readers, as most people feel that they have some idea of life’s basic “truths” – no matter how differently we might each define them.

An effective and empowering way to begin is to ask students what they consider to be the “basic truths” about life, things that are universal in human experience. Have them compare their ideas; there will no doubt be some debate.

Next, explain that they will be studying various types of criticism, different ways of looking at a text, and that one of these types of criticism, in which people look for expressions of the “universal” and “true,” is called liberal-humanist criticism. Tell the students that they will practice being liberal-humanist critics and will gain some exposure to Shakespeare’s language and his own vision of the “universal” and “true” by watching the film *Hamlet*. Note: It is obviously possible to use another “text” or film for this exercise, but I would choose *Hamlet* because it works as a lead-in to the activity I will recommend for introducing post-colonial criticism. If you do not choose to teach post-colonial criticism or you choose not to teach it next, then any film or text would work.

As students watch the film, have them note anything that seems to them to express a fundamental or universal truth about human nature or experience.

Additionally, have them write a brief summary, a description of Hamlet’s personality, an evaluation of Hamlet’s behavior, and any ideas that they have about the theme or message that Shakespeare is trying to develop.

There will likely be a lot of agreement among the students as to plot, essentials of Hamlet's character, and major themes.

The lesson now moves into an introduction of post-colonial criticism.

Lesson Plan 5: Introducing Post-Colonial Criticism

Objective

Students apply a post-colonial perspective to an analysis and evaluation of a text.
Students analyze and evaluate the assumptions of post-colonialist theory.

Materials

Notes and reflection on liberal-humanist interpretations of one of Shakespeare's plays (see **Lesson 4** above), "Shakespeare in the Bush" by Laura Bohannon, a couple of famous fairy tales, readings that represent non-mainstream perspectives on the history of the Americas (see **Annotated Bibliography**).

Post-Colonial Criticism

Suggest to the students that their summaries are consistent with what most critics say about *Hamlet*. Show the students two or three summaries of the play such as those in *Sparknotes* or the *Cliff Notes* and even a critical article or essay that tells about the play from a liberal-humanist perspective. Discuss the issues of universality and "truth" that the authors recognize, and show how well this fits with what the students themselves said. Generally, it will fit very well.

To convince students that what you have concluded about *Hamlet* is "correct," be sure to do a quick lesson in evaluation of sources, showing them that the summaries you have provided are credible – i.e. they were written by people who hold doctorates in Shakespearean studies or by professors at highly-esteemed universities.

You can even go so far as to have students write a "quiz" for next year's classes on the main elements, characters, and plot of the play.

Then, read Laura Bohannon's essay "Shakespeare in the Bush." The essay shows that once *Hamlet* is taken to West Africa, every summary we've just written, read, and discussed hardly seems remotely relevant to the play. The essay will expose the radical differences in interpretation of the play when the audience is of the Tiv.

Introduce post-colonial criticism's essential questions. You might practice doing a post-colonialist interpretation by taking a famous fairy tale such as "Little Red Writing Hood" and having students consider different ways to tell the story from the perspective of its marginalized or stereotyped characters. You can then compare students' re-writes with those in *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*. Alternatively, you can consider bringing the question of colonial criticism "home" by examining the colonization of the

Americas using writings by Christopher Columbus, Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchu, and historian Howard Zinn (whose *People's History of the United States* tells the story of colonization from the perspective of the Native American peoples). Of course, if your classroom looks like mine, your students will have no problem relating to the questions raised by post-colonial critics.

Lesson Plan 6: Introducing Feminist Criticism and Queer Theory/Lesbian/Gay Criticism

Objective

Students apply feminist and lesbian/gay/queer theory perspectives to an analysis and evaluation of a text. Students analyze and evaluate the assumptions of feminist and lesbian/gay/queer theory.

Materials

Photos of different types of women, Annie Leibovitz's *Women* (see **Annotated Bibliography**), famous fairy tales such as "Little Red Riding Hood."

Feminist Criticism and Queer Theory Criticism

Issues of marginality and the representation of different types of people that are raised in an introduction to post-colonial theory prepare students for both feminist criticism and queer theory/lesbian/gay criticism. This is because all three approaches, in addition to their own unique questions, focus on the portrayal of people that have traditionally held subordinate or alienated positions in society. In introducing feminist criticism, it is useful to present students with photos of different types of women, ranging from 1950s housewives to Olympic athletes to CEOs. You might also include clips of movies and TV shows featuring for example housewives, helpless victims, histrionic and/or manipulative mothers, or promiscuous females. Have students write down the first words that come to mind as they view each picture or clip, and ask them not to censor their comments. It is just as important, more important, really, to bring the less flattering and harmful comments to the forefront as it is the pleasant and polite ones. Most students will agree that representations of women are often harmful or unfair, and often so subtle or commonly accepted as to go unnoticed. The same is often true of the portrayal of lesbians.

In discussing the critical questions that feminist and/or queer/lesbian/gay critics employ, focus on the importance of diction, language, and imagery, and the ways in which these are used to naturalize the marginal or "evil" status to which different types of people are unfairly relegated. In practicing the application of this type of criticism, you might try using a famous fairy tale such as *Little Red Riding Hood* to guide students in developing the types of questions a feminist would ask about the story and the types of clues/details that a feminist critic would notice in evaluating the portrayal of women in the text

Lesson Plan 7: Introducing Psycho-Analytic Criticism

Objective

Students apply psychoanalytic perspectives to an analysis and evaluation of a text. Students analyze and evaluate the assumptions of psycho-analytic criticism.

Materials

Freud's *On the Interpretation of Dreams*, books that provide interpretations of various signs and symbols (see **Annotated Bibliography**).

Psycho-analytic

In introducing psychoanalytic criticism, an effective and engaging strategy is to do some basic dream interpretation with students. Freud's essay on dream interpretation is a compelling tool in showing students how dream interpretation works, but I am careful not to have the students read the entire essay, as some of what it contains is not necessarily appropriate for discussion with all students. I edit the essay so that the students read the introduction, the dream, a few key examples of interpretation, and Freud's conclusion.

Help students to outline Freud's method of psychoanalysis, then invite them to try it out on their own dreams. Discuss their findings, then ask how a similar method might be applied to a novel, and for what purpose. Barry offers excellent explanations and points of discussion in *Beginning Theory* (see **Annotated Bibliography**).

Diction and imagery are key elements of study in this process, and students usually develop a genuine appreciation for the importance of word choice, imagery, and literary elements such as allusion, repetition, parallelism, metaphor, synecdoche, and symbolism.

Lesson Plan 8: Introducing Marxist Criticism

Objective

Students apply Marxist perspectives to an analysis and evaluation of a text. Students analyze and evaluate the assumptions of Marxist criticism.

Materials

Photos of a businessman and farmer of the same race, a businessman and farmer of another race, readings on Marxist thought (see **Annotated Bibliography**), news stories of the students' own choosing.

Marxist Criticism

Students will benefit greatly from reading selections of Marx's writings, but if the language is too dense or time is limited, there are many web sites which offer introductions to and summaries of Marxist thought. An effective opening activity is to

present students with photos of an Asian businessman, a female Asian rice-farmer, an expatriate with a thriving tour business in Costa Rica, and a male Costa-Rican farmer. Ask students which two people have the most in common, and are mostly likely to share the same opinions about various topics. Gender and race issues may arise, and that is useful. Push students to consider all possible reasons for shared perspective until they get to the issue of similarities in occupation and/or social class. Apply Marxist theory to this question and guide students in formulating the essential questions of Marxism. Ask students to consider how a Marxist approach might be used in an analysis of a literary text. What would a Marxist critic consider, and which literary devices would he/she pay attention to? Levels of language, diction, syntax, local color, code-switching, and non-standard usage are key tools in Marxist analysis; present students with poems and stories illustrating differences in the ways in which people of different socioeconomic classes use language. Shakespearean texts are an obvious choice, but I would use something simpler to start, such as news articles that the students select on their own.

Lesson Plan 9: Introducing Structuralism

Objectives

Students apply structuralist techniques to an analysis and evaluation of a text. Students analyze and evaluate the usefulness of structuralist criticism.

Materials

Romeo and Juliet (Act 1, scene 5); a rainbow or color spectrum.

Structuralism

Moving closer to a study of Shakespeare's texts, and in preparation for recognizing the poetic quality of his plays, structuralism can be introduced with a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*. In Act 1, scene 5, the famous balcony scene in which Romeo and Juliet declare their love for each other, Shakespeare asks the oft-quoted question, "What's in a name?" Explain to students that structuralists are asking the same question. Specifically, what is the relationship between the names we give things and reality itself? By calling Romeo a Montague, we are creating a "reality" for him that did not exist when he was a nameless masked man. The "reality" that is created when Juliet learns he is a Montague carries the biased perspectives of the Capulet family.

Show the students a color spectrum and ask them to break it down into the seven colors of the rainbow. Compare the points at which students draw the lines of delineation. Question what they consider to be the beginning and end of the color "green" or "blue." Help them to see that there is an infinite amount of lines that could be drawn on the spectrum, but that our language makes us content to draw six.

Finally, present students with two sets of words. The first can be a random array of terms, organized into *stanzas*. Tell the students that these words are a poem, and ask them to interpret it. They will come up with some of the most plausible explanations, and they

will defend them tenaciously. Admit to them that the words are as unrelated as they can be; explore with them the ways in which the structure that they thought they were observing – the structure of a poem – led them to create relationships, associations, and meanings which did not exist. Next, show them the following words: hovel, shed, hut, house, mansion, and palace. They should recognize that the meanings and significance of each of these words is relational; if the same words appeared in another list, as for example if the word “shed” appeared among a list of items on sale at a hardware store, the significance of each word might change dramatically. For students with sophisticated reading skill, Roland Barthe’s essay “Wrestling” provides excellent examples.

Daily Strategies

The types of theories that appeal to individual students vary greatly. In terms of daily strategies for relating different critical perspectives to Shakespeare’s work, I would do two things: (1) ask that students keep a dialectical journal in which they apply various critical perspectives to each scene that they read, and (2) choose one critical perspective for which they could construct a series of character interviews to be conducted (inserted) mid-scene in key points in the play.

Dialectical Journals

The term “journal” has almost as many applications as there are English instructors in the United States. I was first introduced to the concept of the dialectical journal by a colleague named Trayce Diskin, and for my purposes here, when I refer to a dialectical journal, I am referring to a two-columned reading diary in which students respond to striking quotes and passages with questions of various “levels.” Diskin uses three different levels of questioning. Level I questioning is at the level of comprehension. There is a definite answer to be found in the text. Level II questioning asks a reader to make inferences, informed predictions and educated guesses about character motivation and events in the plot. Level III questioning is reflective and abstract; it takes the reader to the level of criticism or that of considering a theme or idea in a text as part of a larger reality. Here is an example of the type of journal I am talking about:

Dialectical Journal on Ngugi’s *A Grain of Wheat* (pp. 1-10)

Quote from Text	Questions
p. 1 “Mugo felt nervous. He was lying on his back and looking at the roof. Sooty locks hung from the fern and grass thatch and all pointed at his heart.”	p.1 Level 1: Who is Mugo? (main character; freedom-fighter; Mau-Mau) Level 2: Why is Mugo lying on his back staring at the roof? (He seems depressed.) Level 3: Is this experience common among the Mau-Mau freedom fighters? Level 3: How much torture can a human being take?

In working with *The Merchant of Venice*, we will read each scene together as a class at least twice. The first time that we read the scene, we will simply read for comprehension. Then students will be asked to generate dialectical journal questions of the three commonly used levels. Typically, the questions students generate in a dialectical journal are not guided or prompted, but in addition to the questions students raise of their own volition, I will ask them to raise at least two questions from the perspective of a particular type of literary critic (i.e. a feminist or a Marxist) and to raise at least one question about elements of comedy and language in the scene. We will then re-read the scene as a class and share our questions and comments. For students who need some assistance in practicing critical approaches, I would offer suggestions about which types of criticism might work best with each scene. My suggestions are printed in the table that follows, entitled **Scenes to Question**.

Scenes to Question:
Scenes from *The Merchant of Venice* Paired with Critical Approaches

Critical Approach	Scene
Liberal-humanist	All scenes, but particularly Act 1, Scene 2
Post-colonial	Act 1, Scene 3; Act 2, Scenes 1 and 7; Act 3, Scenes 1, 3, and 5
Feminist	Act 2, Scene 1; Act 3, Scene 2; Act 4, Scene 1
Queer Theory/Lesbian/Gay	Act 1, Scene 1; Act 3, Scene 2; Act 4, Scene 1
Marxist	Act 1, Scene 1; Act 2, Scenes 1 and 2; Act 3, Scene 2; Act 4, Scene 1
Psycho-analytic	All scenes
Structuralist	Act 4, Scene 1; mirror images and/or parallels between Bassanio and Shylock throughout

Assessment: Final Project

Materials

Video camera, text of *The Merchant of Venice*, films such as *Kiss Me*, *Petruchio*, *The Laramie Project* and *Looking for Richard* (see **Annotated Bibliography**).

As much as this final project is an assessment, it is also an opportunity for synthesis and application of the skills and approaches that students have been developing during the course of this unit. As I have said, the real objective of this unit is to empower students with a bank of skills and questions that they can apply to a variety of literacy experiences and to the analysis of language and culture, in general. Anything that is taught or practiced here must be re-taught and practiced again if it is to be taught or practiced at all.

Thus, the assessment that I think works best for a unit of this type is an assessment that leaves students and teacher with new and unanswered questions of meaning.

Models for the type of project that I have used successfully in assessing my students' understanding of both Shakespeare's texts and literary criticism include the documentary film *The Laramie Project* and Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard*. The project will include the re-enactment of a scene from *The Merchant of Venice* and interviews between a literary critic and each of the characters, or each of the actors in the scene and the scene's director.

Students will work in groups of four to six, though they may need to borrow additional classmates to play the roles of characters in the scenes they re-enact. The first thing that students need to do is select a scene from *The Merchant of Venice*. Have them discuss with each other why they have chosen the scene that they chose and what they think Shakespeare is trying to say in that scene.

Next, have students select a type of literary criticism that they think offers unique or interesting perspectives on the characters, language, events, or themes contained in their chosen scene. Students should generate a list of questions that their selected method of criticism would ask about a text (any text). For example, if students choose to study feminist criticism, they might ask things like: What kind of language do female characters use in this scene? What kind of language do male characters use? How does this impact an audience's perception of women and men? How often do female characters speak? What kinds of actions do the female characters take? How does a particular female character respond to a particular situation? Are females victims or leaders in this scene?

Using their bank of questions, students should then think critically about the scene that they are studying, then develop additional sets of questions – interview questions aimed to address issues that a feminist critic (or whichever type of critic they choose) would consider in evaluating the text. The students will interview the characters or actors and the director of the scene. They will do this at key points in the re-enactment of the scene. That is, they will pause the action of the scene and bring in their interviewer to inquire about word choice, actions, and reactions, of the various characters. The students should close with an evaluation of the scene by their interviewer(s).

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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General background information including who Shakespeare was (or who he might have been), the language he used, and the society in which he lived.
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This text is very accessible for high school students and presents a valuable introduction to the questions, motivations, and techniques of post-colonial criticism.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. New York: Manchester University, 1995.
Essential for this unit. Provides an overview of each critical approach featured in this curriculum, including a set of essential questions asked by each. Includes an excellent, annotated bibliography.
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. New York: New York University, 1986.
The essay "Wrestling" offers a fantastic model of structuralist theory by examining the narrative of suffering and struggle between good and evil that is reenacted in a wrestling match.
- Bohannon, Laura. "Shakespeare in the Bush." In *Natural History* (August/September 1966).
Ideal for introducing post-colonial theory. Bohannon shares Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with members of a remote village in the Tiv and realizes that her interpretation (which is probably very similar to many Western readers' interpretations) is radically different from the one that the people of the Tiv offer. Both Bohannon and the villagers offer text-based support for their ideas, and their conversation reveals the drastic extent to which interpretations differ among people of different cultural contexts.
- Durband, Alan, ed. *Shakespeare Made Easy: The Merchant of Venice*. New York: Barrons, 1984.
Complete text of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* paired with modern translations. Includes ideas for lesson plans, character analyses, and discussion questions.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. New Haven: Mass Market Paperback, 1983.
This needs to be included in introducing and modeling dream interpretation, but it also needs to be carefully edited since parts of the book contain explicit sexual references and details.

- Garner, James Finn. *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*. New York: MacMillan, 1994.
This text is useful for introducing satire and social stereotypes. The text helps with practicing application of various critical perspectives.
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Useful guide for literary terms, particularly elements of comedy.
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The essential background on Marxist thought.
- Menchu, Rigoberta. *I, Rigoberta Menchu*. New York: Berso Books, 1987.
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These classic fairy tales and children's stories are useful in providing students with evidence about the ideological underpinnings of our society, and for allowing them to practice critical analysis from a variety of perspectives.
- Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*. Baltimore: Penguin, 2000.
This book is useful in introducing structuralism (see **Lesson Plans**).
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. New York: Penguin, 1988.

This book is essential for any discussion of feminism. Shows how women's and men's language and interactions are influenced by gender expectations and socialization.

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States*. New York: Harper, 1980.

A book which retells the history of the United States from the perspectives of Native Americans, the working poor, slaves, and oppressed women. It provides an essential background for students as they begin to consider the implications and need for literary criticism that questions the world's literary canon from a variety of minority perspectives.

Filmography

Kaufman, Moises (director). *Laramie Project*. HBO, 2002.

This documentary about the murder of Matthew Shephard and his community's response presents a helpful model for students' final assessment. The film begins with the "TV news" version of the murder, but then shows that there is always more to a story than we might hear on the news. Kaufman's crew interviews the town mayor, religious figures, hospital workers, and the police officer who found Shephard's body, showing that a single event is subject to an infinite number of diverse and seemingly valid interpretations.

Kiss Me, Petruchio. VEC, 1984.

Useful for modeling the format of the final assessment. Documentary based on the New York Shakespeare Festival's production of *The Taming of the Shrew*. The video goes behind the scenes, interviewing the actors who play each character regarding the messages and emotions that the actor is trying to deliver.

Miller, Jonathan and John Sichel (directors). *Merchant of Venice*. 1973.

A film version of the play which is well-paced, easy for students to follow. Useful for helping students clarify understanding and/or question various interpretations of the text.

Pacino, Al (director). *Looking for Richard*. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 1996.

I found this useful for modeling character analysis required in the final assessment. Traces the thought process of an actor/director in developing and interpreting a character. Pacino makes Richard's character believable and relevant to a modern audience; he shows what the liberal humanist critic might call the universality of Shakespeare's characters and work, but he also shows that interpretation of characters has a lot to do with an individual reader's life experiences and world view.

Shearer, Harry (director). *History of White People in America*. 1985.

Parody of mainstream documentaries of American history and satire of American culture. Reveals social stereotypes about white and non-white American culture, and

demonstrates the ways in which comedy relies on or expresses painful social truths and stereotypes.

Zefferelli, Franco (director). *Hamlet*. 1990.

I recommend using this film to orient students to Shakespeare's language, and as a starting point for a discussion of universality and liberal-humanist perspectives.

Zefferelli's films follow Shakespeare's texts very closely.