

American Literature with a Shakespearean Twist

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INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare's plays have long been a part of the general curriculum in the high school classroom. His timeless themes have a way of bringing to mind issues that many teenagers may face throughout life's journey. During the first and second courses of literature in the modern high school, ninth and tenth grade, students study two popular tragedies—*Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar*. However, the third course of study centers around American Literature. Because I believe that William Shakespeare's work is sophisticated, humorous and worthy of study in the third course of English, I propose that a unit be dedicated to his work so that it may be used during the third course of literature study in high school to go along side of American Literature. Moreover, I am certain that devoting the last portion of the American Literature course to Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* will not only give students the opportunity to engage in a play about love, humor, and lies but it will also serve to prepare them for the forth and final course of study in which students will be expected to be familiar with Shakespeare's work as they begin to study British Literature extensively. Finally, this unit will create continuity among the four courses of study whereby the student can appreciate the works of William Shakespeare having read two tragedies and a comedy before entering the fourth course.

Issues and Goals

The two Shakespearean plays studied in the first and second courses along with the play in many of the fourth course textbooks, *Macbeth*, are tragedies and it would be unfair for students to graduate from high school believing that Shakespeare's most popular plays center around death and destruction. Furthermore, it would be most unfortunate to have them conclude that William Shakespeare had little sense of humor. This unit will serve as a beacon to the students about his great sense of humor and that elements of his manner of expressing humor can be found throughout the countless American writers that his work influenced. Students will hopefully learn that *Much Ado About Nothing* has characters whose motives are to find love and happiness in the midst of mistaken identity and misconception. This is the hook that will have students itching to read through to the final act.

One of our goals as educators in the field of English is to foster an appreciation for language and literature while developing life-long critical thinking skills that can be applied to any task. William Shakespeare's work does just that while engaging students on a number of levels. His writing style and voice challenges even the most gifted students.

The American Literature course begins with a creation myth translated from the Iroquois nation of people in Unit One and moves through units on the first colonies, the American revolution, the Civil War and onward to what is deemed the Modern Age. It is not uncommon to find students unengaged at first believing that the course is closely related to an American history course and therefore dull. This must be taken into consideration upon committing to this project. All learning material therefore must be presented in a new and exciting way. I include projects, discussions, oral tests, performances and film viewing as part of the curriculum for all of the units in the American Literature course of study. The same will be the case for this curriculum unit that I intend to introduce to students towards the end of the spring semester.

As a refresher for this curriculum unit, I plan to show a film clip of Romeo and Juliet's initial meeting in *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* before we discuss the notion of love at first sight. Students will be given a chance to respond in writing to what they have viewed. They should be asked to compare and contrast this scene to what they believe would occur today. Similarly, they will view a clip of Petruchio's proposal to Katharina in *The Taming of the Shrew* to set groundwork.

A curriculum unit of this nature is important for two reasons: 1. It allows students to study a lighter, more humorous Shakespearean play and 2. It gives students the opportunity to study themselves and gain insight on love relationship that we all know supersede most other relationships in their young lives. Young people in this course would gladly choose to discuss their romantic love relationships on any given day. This is an opportunity to hold their interest by zeroing in on a subject with which they are most familiar.

In early American fiction, women are often the passive, love sick creatures who live and die by the rules of love. Their role is one of a giver and they live by the premise that love is the root to all happiness. They are controlled and committed by the belief that they are loved and in love they are "safe."

Shakespeare's Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* challenges the role of the female in love that we meet in fiction. She rejects the wooed woman in waiting. Instead, she is a match to any man's wit while professing that she would "rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me."

Beatrice seems to understand the ramifications of love and uses her wit to joust with Benedick to express this. One must question, however, how much of what she says is really what she believes. As a maiden, Beatrice can match wits with whomever pleases her. Yet upon falling in love, she knows full well that her wit and will must yield to that of her lover.

A Brief Summary

The plot is complicated, but students will love it. It reflects the twists and complications of their own love lives. Set in Messina, the play begins at Leonato's home after a victory in a battle where both Don Pedro and Claudio have shown themselves brave. In Act one, Claudio admits to Don Pedro that he had a heart-felt interest for Hero but having to go to war, he had no time to get to know her. He now intends to pursue her with her father's blessing. Beatrice and Benedick cross paths and immediately they show disdain for one another. Although Benedick announces that he will never love a woman, Don Pedro decides that he will make Benedick reconsider his position. Meanwhile, Conrade discloses to the evil Don John that there will soon be a wedding and they immediately set a plan to ruin the happy event.

In Act Two the plot thickens with a masked ball or party where Don Pedro woos Hero for the sake of his shy friend Claudio. However, Don John misleads Claudio into believing that Don Pedro woos for himself. When that confusion is cleared up, Don John and Borracio make further plans to spoil Hero and Claudio's wedding. The next day Leonato and Don Pedro deceive Benedick into believing that Beatrice is pinning away for him. Hero, and her gentlewomen join Leonato in baiting Beatrice into becoming Benedick's love. They make certain that Beatrice overhears a conversation concerning Benedick's love for her. All goes well until later that night when Don Pedro and Claudio meet with Don John at midnight and observe what appears to be Hero making love with Borracio. Later Dogberry and Verges, the local law enforcement, overhear Borracio and Conrad talking about how they staged this deception to mislead Claudio. They arrest the men immediately and next morning meet Leonato to tell hem of their discovery.

Just when it appears that all will be well, we run into a language barrier. Dogberry and Vergas simply cannot relate their tale to a hurried and impatient Leonato. The scene is hilarious and illustrates the vast separation of classes in the Renaissance. At the wedding ceremony Claudio denounces Hero as a whore and walks out. Leonato is furious with his daughter, but a good friar devises a plan with the support of the two brothers L to test the honor and intent of Claudio. It is announced that Hero has killed herself, though she has actually just taken a powerful sleeping potent. Further, Dogberry and Vergas finally explain what they have seen. Don John flees and Claudio is the picture of guilt and remorse. Leonato asks Claudio to marry his niece who is "like" Hero in an effort to make amends for the disrespect he has brought to the family by falsely accusing Hero. Nevertheless, at the ceremony, Hero, who has conveniently awakened, is unmasked as she stands next to Claudio. The ecstatic couple is happily married along with Beatrice and Benedick and all ends well.

A number of occasions for students to share their personal experiences will emerge throughout this process. In the play *Much Ado About Nothing* Beatrice and Benedick play the bickering lovers who are destined it seems to be together. On the other hand, Claudio

falls in love with Hero upon first seeing her. What I'd like to do is get the eleventh grade students started on this unit by having them view a clip of Romeo and Juliet's first meeting. We will discuss their thoughts about love at first sight.

A few questions to explore include the following: Has anyone ever been in love? How do you know that you are in love? Does the general public believe that love at first sight is a reality? Do your friends believe in this concept? Can someone who has never experienced a love relationship be content with the idea of never opening his/her heart to love? We will begin the play using a couple of these and other questions as a center for discussion. As the unit progresses, they will have a variety of activities to help them analyze and evaluate love in their lives and in the media. My hope is that they will gain insight about themselves as well as others.

Student Activities

Reading and Responding

It is important to have students read and respond to this play during class time. I have found that assigning the play for homework does very little to promote comprehension. Take as many days as necessary to assure that the class understands the plot. I suggest having students volley for parts each day. Students love the competition of it all. Try to start by posing a controversial question that relates to the events forthcoming in the act to be read and discussed for the day. Students then could respond to questions in reading journals. Once students begin to feel comfortable with their audience, they are more open to taking the risks that they will have deal with as they get closer to finishing the play. Another good idea is to have a sign up sheet posted so that at the beginning of each class, students sign up for the part they would like to read. (This may also help to alleviate the straggler who comes late to class since parts will be issued on a first-come-first-serve basis.)

Journals

A number of activities will be explored throughout this unit. Of course, all of the play will be read and discussed in class in a seminar type setting. There will be a number of occasions to write journals at the beginning of each act as it relates to the plot, character motives, and setting. Journals will also be employed as a closure exercise so that students hold forth on what he/she gained from either reading the act or engaging in discussion. Other activities follow and build upon these journal entries. Some of the journal topics to ponder: Do you believe in love at first sight? Why or why not? Is it possible for two people who strongly dislike each other to end up in love with one another?

Study Questions

To help students understand and summarize each act, study questions can be used. Any number of questions lend in setting the purpose for students. Included are a list of questions with which to start.

1. In what town does the play begin?
2. Draw a family tree to show the relationship of the major characters.
3. What is Don Pedro's plan for Beatrice and Benedick?
4. Describe in detail the plan of Don John and his followers.
5. If you were Hero, how would you respond to Claudio's behavior at the wedding? Why?
6. Do you believe that Claudio is justified in his actions? Why or why not?
7. How would you respond to Claudio's behavior at the wedding if you were Leonato?
8. Discuss your thoughts on the union of Beatrice and Benedick.
9. Who are your favorite/ least favorite characters in the play? Why?
10. What ideas have you on what should become of Don John?

In addition to study questions, you may use matching, multiple choice questions, true/false statements as well as having students memorize certain passages that are noteworthy. Many students balk at the idea of memorizing things to recite in class and educators have moved away from this practice; however, it is important that students illustrate the ability to recite Shakespeare's work after intensive study.

Word study is rarely emphasized at the high school level anymore. Students will find it interesting to look at the origin of some of the words in this play. Cudgeled, quip, conjecture, and requite are among the 30-40 words that students will be responsible for both defining throughout this unit.

Students will define the words with the parts of speech. In addition, students will write out the origin of the word and use either magazines or newspaper to find an illustrated example of each word. Those students who are artistically inclined may draw illustrations free hand. The point here is to help students expand their reading/writing/speaking vocabulary. This happens when students have several times to manipulate the word and definition. They will also get to do a bit of word study as they discern the origin of each word. I may have them tally the place of origins and make a pie graph to illustrate their findings.

Creative Writing: Act V, scene v

Students in collaborative groups will have an opportunity to create a scene for the ending of this play. The topic of this scene will be how John the Bastard will be handled after the truth comes out about his malicious intentions. Groups of two work best, I have found,

for creative projects. Teachers can employ the mix- pair- share strategy to get students to move out of their comfort zones and take risks throughout the writing process. This strategy uses music to get students moving around the room. When the music stops, the nearest two people grab hands and when given the signal each take turns in an exchange about what the scene should include and what should be done about John the Bastard. Each group will be responsible for a script and a production of that scene before an audience of peers. Because we have the component of exhibition and portfolio to meet graduation requirements on our campus, some students decide to video record their efforts and use this project in the exhibition process.

Short Writes

Collaboratively, groups of two or three students will be asked to create a wanted poster for John the Bastard to include a monetary reward, a description, and a sketched drawing or photo of the villain. The sketch will accompany a short news article which outlines the details of his crime. To do this, I will give students a short lecture on the major parts of a news article including the headline, byline, the lead and the manner in which to write the article.

The Benedick and Beatrice Comic Strip

Students should read comic strips from the daily newspaper along with magazine comic strips before delving into this assignment. Irony and satire should be discussed as a means to make comments on social issues or for the purpose of entertaining others. Students should review the rhetorical battle of wits between Beatrice and Benedick in an effort to get ideas about the comic strip that they will create. Each strip must be at least four boxes and must have vivid color. For publication, students will be asked to enjoy reading/responding to the original comic strips for the first 30 minutes of class. A requirement that each strip use one line from the play makes the strip even more worthwhile. This will give students yet another opportunity to manipulate Shakespeare's humorous language. The more that students manipulate Shakespeare's language the more at ease they become about it. Hopefully this activity will pique students' interest in newspaper and magazine reading.

Masking

Each student will get construction paper, markers, scissors, a hole puncher, string, and glue to create masks that may have been worn in the first and final acts of the play. They should have creative license and the sky is the limit. Students should be asked to avoid creating a carbon copy of a popular mask or the face of a character from popular culture. The teacher may want to create one him/herself as an example to model for students as well as to encourage them to take risks with this assignment. A mock masquerade could be something that students save masks for at the end of the play. A party of sorts where

students can eat snacks and participate in a mask contest will encourage students to do their best work. Make certain that there are prizes in every category to match the number of students so that every student is a winner and gains from the assignment.

Mimes

Another engaging assignment for kids is to have them collaborate in groups of two to develop a two to three minute mime portraying the scene that they liked most. Give them one half of the period to practice and the other half to perform. With mimes, students should be told that they may use no words or props. The results will be delightful.

Students enjoy acting without words however apprehensive they are when this is assigned. If students are given too much time to prepare, they lose the nerve to perform. It will be easier if students are allowed to choose their own partners with this assignment. Remind students that this is a school project and that vulgarity in any form will not be permitted. Students should bow when they have completed the mime and give the student-audience an opportunity to guess which part of the scene was performed.

Sonnet Writing

Students will get an opportunity to read and discuss a few of Shakespeare's sonnets which may include Sonnets 2, 18, 24 and 130. There must be some discussion about the style and format of a Shakespearean sonnet. Students are to analyze Shakespeare's characterization of Benedick and Beatrice's using this information to create sonnets that express their amorous feelings one for the other. Each student will write two sonnets. One from Benedick's point of view about Beatrice and the other from Beatrice's point of view about Benedick.

Character Profiles

After reading and discussing Act I, students will be asked to create a profile for Don John the Bastard. Creative license is given to students to use once again to develop a hard luck story for Don Jon. Students enjoy analyzing the antagonist in stories especially those who are nonconformists whose modus operandi is to find ways to cause mischief to the do-gooders in the economy of a story or novel. There may be some students who will find it challenging to create a life story for some character that they know little about. Those students can be encouraged in a short writing conference where they should be promoted to think of some of the profiles that they have read in comic books or seen on television. . Students should take notes about characters while reading the play. Profile criteria could include the character's birthplace, age, occupation, role in the play, motives, and outlook on life. Once completed, each student should share and respond to each classmate's profile. This is most interesting for students because they get an opportunity to hear how other students are affected by the play.

From Stage to Station

Each student will be asked to do a character sketch of two couples in modern fiction or on television that represent the love at first sight smitten Hero and Claudio and the bickering lovers Beatrice and Benedick. Some examples are the couples in *The Jeffersons*, *Martin*, *Good Times*, *All in the Family*, *The Brady Bunch*, *The Cosbys*, and *Happy Days*. Students will offer more modern examples. They will describe each couple's relationship while comparing/ contrasting them to the two couples in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson 1

Vocabulary/Word Origin Study

The purpose of this vocabulary lesson is to give students the opportunity to define and analyze words taken from each of the five acts in this play before it is read to give them some familiarity with the type of language used by William Shakespeare in the play *Much Ado About Nothing*. There should be some discussion concerning the evolution of the English language from Old Norse (Old English) to Middle English and then to Modern English. Students need to understand the English language has borrowed words from other languages in its evolution. The goal is to expand each student's vocabulary in an effort to further develop reading comprehension and establish background information about the English language. There are 20 words for each act; however, teachers may add or delete words from the list as needed.

Texas Essential Knowledge Skills-Objectives

*The student is expected to expand vocabulary through wide reading listening and discussing.

*The student is expected to research word origins as an aid to understanding meaning, derivations and spelling as well as influences on the English language.

Materials

Dictionaries (I would suggest using The American Heritage Dictionary.), graph paper, colored pencils, rulers, highlighter, theme paper.

Lesson

Students are given a list of 20 words at the onset of each act so that they may jot down a quick definition of each word using clues from the root words or any prefixes/suffixes.

Students should next use a dictionary to define each word to include the origins. Ask students to write the first two or three definitions. Those origins can be found after the definitions and are often abbreviated.

Each student is directed to create an origin chart for each set of words which will make it easier for them to graph their findings. You may decide to ask student to use a bar, line or pie graph. As a review quickly go over the parts of each type of graph. Students should once again review the definitions and begin to formulate graphs. Give each student graph paper, colored pencils, rulers and have them use the origin chart that they prepared to graph their findings. Examples of word origin follow.

OE = Old English, ME = Middle English

OF = Old French, MF = Middle French

Spanish

Latin

Greek

Students will enjoy creating the graphs and learning about the origins of these words. The results of this assignment may be displayed around the classroom or placed in student portfolios for this unit.

Lesson 2

Comic Strips (4-6 frames)

The main objective here is to allow students to paraphrase any of the short quips between Benedick and Beatrice in comic strip form. Define and discuss irony, satire, and sarcasm with students. Make certain to point to their use in modern day comic strips to ridicule social/political issues or institutions. A few basic definitions are included below.

Irony: the use of words that mean the opposite of what one really intends.

Satire: something meant to make fun of and show the weaknesses of human nature or a particular person.

Sarcasm: a remark made usually to hurt someone's feeling or show scorn.

Point out that the basis of the discussions between Benedick and Beatrice contain these elements of humor. If students find other elements of humor, for example, exaggeration or hyperbole, they may use them.

Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills-Objectives

*Students will write in a voice and style appropriate to audience and purpose.

*Students will analyze strategies that writers in different fields use to compose.

*Students will respond productively to peer review of his/her own work.

Materials

Pencils, rulers, white paper, colored pencils, newspapers, magazines

Lesson

Allow students time in class to read comic strips that have been gathered from newspapers, magazines and other publications. Students will find this especially enjoyable because doing this will set a leisurely tone in the classroom. Give them an opportunity to cut out the ones that they find especially funny or intriguing. This will give them a starting point for this assignment.

Students should review and highlight any instances in the play where they find Benedick and Beatrice engaged in dialogue. Once they have chosen an excerpt on which to focus, they should paraphrase it looking for examples of irony, satire and sarcasm. It is also important that they understand the speaker's motive and purpose. Students must recreate a meeting between Benedick and Beatrice in a 4-6 framed comic strip. (The size of each frame should be determined by each teacher.) Be sure to tell them that they may not simply copy text from the play. Creativity should be encouraged, so they may embellish at will.

After students have completed their own comic frames, give them time in class to exchange with others so that they have an opportunity to read and respond to what their peers have created. These may be published on the walls around the classroom.

Lesson 3

Producing a Scene- Three Brave Punishments: Collaborative Learning

Once students finish the play, many may want to know what becomes of Don John who worked to foil the nuptials of the two lovers, Hero and Claudio. This is a legitimate question given that the play ends on a high note when Benedick calls for musicians to begin the celebration with their music. This assignment calls on the imagination of the student as they decide the fate of the play's villain. They have read stories and seen a number of movies where the villain is dealt with in any number of ways. Start by discussing the specifics of his crime and how severe his punishments should be. Students will really get a thrill out of having the power to decide what three punishments for the criminal, Don John. For this assignment students may be placed in groups of 2-4.

Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills-Objectives

- *The student will use informal, standard, and technical language effectively to meet the needs of purpose, audience, occasion, and task.
- *Students will use effective verbal and nonverbal strategies in presenting oral messages.
- *Students will present interpretations such as telling stories, performing original works, and interpreting poems and stories for a variety of audiences.

Materials

This is left up to the teacher's discretion. One may want students to create detailed props to go along with the scene.

Lesson

Student or teacher should decide on group members. Students must review the play after class discussion to decide what will work best for the group. Give them time to talk and plan what will happen to Don John in small groups and how his three punishments will be portrayed in performance. Make certain to have students type out the final product for submission. It often works better if students memorize their parts before performance although this is not necessary. Each group should plan for a 3-5 minute production of their scene.(This can be lengthened.) It may take a few class periods to get this prepared. Each teacher may set the guidelines for what is acceptable in his/her classroom in terms of content. Guidelines should be given in writing at the onset of the assignment.

Allow 1-2 class periods for performances depending on class size. All will enjoy the finished product of this assignment. Video recording is a great idea so that students may critically view and respond to their work.

APPENDIX A

Act I	Act II	Act III	Act IV	Act V
Bestow	Melancholy	Warrant	Appertain	Lineament
Feat	Disposition	Merit	Conjoined	Proverb
Modest	Shrewd	Lapwing	Interjection	Devise
Victual	Curst	Woodbine	Counterpoise	Dissembler
Virtues	Cuckold	Slanderous	Cunning	Braggart
Mortal	Apprehend	Odorous	Vanquished	Reverence
Pestilence	Amorous	Endear	Extenuate	Flout
Disdain	Partridge	Noble	Intemperate	Valor
Tyrant	Enamored	Mock	Nuptial	Scabbard
Commendation	Repute	Devise	Catechizing	Minstrel
Flout	Forsaken	Attire	Reproach	Cowardice
Fury	Transgression	Incite	Ruffian	Capon
Signify	Jest	Summate	Impiety	Ambles
Temporize	Poniards	Manifest	Conjecture	Hypocrite
Liege	Valiant	Disloyal	Frugal	Treachery
Revel	Termination	Woo	Infamy	Sexton
Remedy	Dote	Disparage	Bedfellow	Penance
Mortify	Alliance	Thwart	Belied	Dispose
Betroths	Beseech	Defile	Apparition	Rancor
Enfranchise	Impediment	Amiable	Lament	Mitigated

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Berry, Ralph. *Shakespeare's Comedies*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972.

This is a discussion on the motive of love throughout the play.

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare The Invention of the Human: Much Ado About Nothing*.

New York: Riverhead Books, 1998.

Bloom's article dedicates itself to the war of the sexes where Benedick and Beatrice ridicule each other but decide in the end that their love out weighs wit.

Ejner, J. Jenson. *Shakespeare and the Ends of Comedy*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana

University Press, 1991.

Mistaken observations and false reporting aiding in comedy's triumph in this play is the core of the discussion here.

Frey, Charles H. *Making Sense of Shakespeare*. Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson

University Press, 1999.

This discussion centers around sense-reading in the classroom, nonvisual images, and sounds.

Rabkin, Norman. *Approaches to Shakespeare*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964.

A focus on interpretation and criticism is what this article lends to the discussion.

Shakespeare, William. *Much Ado About Nothing*. New York: Penguin Books, 1989.

This interesting play centers on mistaken identity and false pretense.

———. *The Taming of the Shrew*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Pertruchio dedicates his life to marrying and in that act wooing Katherina by means of contradiction to be his wife.

———. *Romeo and Juliet*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980.

This anthology contains the two plays *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Romeo and Juliet are two star-crossed lovers who fall in love upon first meeting and despite their families objections give their lives in a quest for love.

White, R.S., Charles Edelman, and Christopher Wortham, eds. *Shakespeare: Readers, Audiences, Players*. Nedlands, Western Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 1998.

Focusing on characterization, this discussion looks at the play on language as it reveals or conceals the true heart.

Filmography

Branagh, Kenneth (director). *Much Ado About Nothing*. American Playhouse Theatrical Films, 1992.

Burge, Stewart (director). *Much Ado About Nothing*. Time Life Television, 1990.

Luhrman, Baz (director). *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*. Twentieth Century, 1997.

Zeffirelli, Franco (director). *The Taming of the Shrew*. Columbia Pictures Home Videos, 1987.

Internet Resources

www.teachervision.com/lesson-plans/lesson-3712.html

teachervision.com

Lesson plan for *Much Ado about Nothing*.

www.sparknotes.com

SparkNotes.com

Provides study guides on hundreds of texts.

www.teachwithmovies.org

teachwithmovies.org

Provides background, benefits and possible problems encountered by selection of movies on different subject matter.

www.hull.ac.uk

University of Hull

Website for the University of Hull in the United Kingdom.

www.shakespearepapers.com

ShakespearePapers.com

Research material on Shakespeare and his works.

www.folger.edu

Folger Shakespeare Library

The library was founded by Henry Clay Folger and dedicated to the life and works of William Shakespeare.