

Shakespeare's Clowns in *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Twelfth Night*

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INTRODUCTION

Reading and teaching Shakespeare is my passion. I have a reverence for Shakespeare; reading and watching his plays enrich my life. I try to instill this passion in my students. I have been teaching Shakespeare as literature for years; however, he is a playwright, and his plays should be performed, seen, and especially heard because Shakespeare is a master manipulator and artist of the English language. This curriculum unit is about teaching Shakespeare from a different perspective; rather than teaching the plays as literature, the students will be introduced to the techniques used by directors and actors to produce the plays on stage. I want to share Shakespeare with my students. Instead of staying within the confines of the few tragedies that most high school students read before they graduate, I will expand their horizons and introduce them to new plays, such as the comedies, and to new angles, such as studying the clowns in several plays. Comparative literature is taught in senior English, so this is a good opportunity to compare different plays and to compare characters and discern why the clowns in Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Twelfth Night*, are crucial characters in these plays.

OBJECTIVES

TEKS: English 4

The students will:

Writing

- write in a variety of forms.
- use technology for aspects of creating, revising, and editing.
- use writing to discover, record, review, and learn.

Vocabulary

- expand vocabulary through wide reading, listening, and discussing.
- rely on context to determine meanings of words and phrases, such as figurative language, idioms, multiple meaning words, archaic words, and technical vocabulary.

Reading/Comprehension

- comprehend selections using a variety of strategies.
- draw upon his/her background to provide connection to texts.
- draw inferences and support them with textual evidence and experience.
- read extensively and intensively for different purposes in varied sources and increasingly demanding texts.

RATIONALE

I teach academic and dual credit English to seniors in a large urban public high school. The dual credit students are enrolled in a community college class, so they are simultaneously earning high school credit for British literature and six college credit hours for freshman English Composition

I and II. The college-bound students can handle the rigors of Shakespeare, British literature, MLA documented research papers and abstract thinking. I teach the class as though it is the last English class that the students will be attending because, in some cases, it is. I want to impart my passion for Shakespeare by exposing the students to various tragedies and comedies. The lesson plans can be geared toward younger students as well. The reason I am writing this curriculum unit is that I want my students to gain an appreciation for Shakespeare's works, and I wanted the privilege to work with Dr. Sidney Berger, the founder of the Houston Shakespeare Festival. According to Samuel Johnson, "We owe Shakespeare everything" (Bloom, *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human* 2). Bloom explains that Johnson has taught us to understand human nature (3). *Hamlet* is a play that explores so many avenues of the human mind. There is a reason why Shakespeare is considered the greatest writer in the English language. More than 400 years later, Shakespeare is just as relevant to the contemporary audience. Watching Shakespeare on stage is a cultural experience that everyone should experience as a part of education about the world and about himself/herself. Teaching about the clowns in the plays *King Lear* and *Twelfth Night* is a different angle to focus on in a Shakespeare unit. Shakespeare's plays are meant to engage the imagination. Shakespeare was not trying to be realistic. For instance, the setting may be a cold, dark night in Denmark; however, the audience may be watching it in the middle of the afternoon in spring or summer, as the Elizabethans did (Berger). You can play Shakespeare anywhere at any time. The plays are universal; the audience is going to see it as real when they watch it. The most important goal that I have for this unit is to make Shakespeare relevant to the lives of the high school student.

UNIT BACKGROUND

Most high school students encounter Shakespearean tragedies as literature. They rarely have the opportunity to see Shakespeare's plays and characters come to life on the stage, as they were meant to be presented to an audience. The students usually focus on the protagonists, such as Hamlet and King Lear. This curriculum unit is going in a different direction, away from reading the plays as books and away from the main characters. Students will learn the meaning of Shakespeare's words as he meant for them to be understood: as stage direction and for actors to speak, to bring the characters to life for the audience today. I do, incidentally, teach the historical background of each play. The characters that the students will learn about are the clowns in the following plays: *Twelfth Night* (1598-1600), *King Lear* (1605-6) and *Hamlet* (1601-1602) (Bloom, *Invention* xvii). All three of these plays were written late in Shakespeare's career. These plays are more mature and less formulaic. I will address Shakespeare's language later.

The clowns give a voice that cannot be expressed by main characters in the play. They, ironically, are the voice of reason. The characters with substance were the Clowns and the Fools as well as the protagonists, such as Hamlet or King Lear. The Clown's voice is in prose, not the usual iambic pentameter of Shakespeare.

Shakespeare's comedies are a mixture of light and dark, particularly *Twelfth Night*. Shakespeare immerses his plays in irony. There are dark elements in his comedies and light elements in his tragedies. One of the ironies is that Shakespeare's comedies, such as *Twelfth Night*, are dark, and some of his tragedies, such as *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, contain light humor. I will address this paradox of light versus dark. The changes from light to dark to light are so interspersed throughout the play that I visualize a chess board. The psychological nuances of Shakespeare's plays can be compared to the complexities of chess. Even more intricate is Shakespeare's language.

Shakespeare's Language

The students today live in this visual, nonverbal culture. "It's what you see, not what you say" (Berger). They are verbal in a technological way, texting, e-mailing, twittering, but not so

much in face-to-face communication. Some teachers may disagree, having to deal with students who like to talk to their peers in class or in the hallways. The written word is becoming abbreviated to fit into our fast-paced lifestyle, and the appreciation for the sound of the language that the Elizabethans enjoyed is not the type of entertainment that the students are used to. Students need to get the words to say what they feel. Dr. Berger believes that there is a “hunger for verbal communication.” Tens of thousands of people come to the Shakespeare Festival in subtropical Houston in the heat of August to experience Shakespeare’s language. What he has to say and how the actors present his words meet a need in our culture for more verbal communication. “Much of the pleasure of Shakespeare is the pleasure of his language” (Roberts 125).

The English language was in flux during the sixteenth century. It was early Modern English, similar to the language that we speak today, *not* Old English, which is a Germanic language. I teach my students a little Old English when they read *Beowulf*. I pass around the Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, so that they can see the difference in Old English vs. Modern English. Shakespeare’s English is also not the Middle English of Chaucer’s day. Early Modern English evolved from Middle English that was spoken less than two hundred years before Shakespeare’s time. When I teach Shakespeare, I point out the archaic words. I also have to make sure that the students understand that the Elizabethans did not speak in verse, although iambic pentameter does mimic the rhythm of speech. There are Shakespearean characters that speak in prose: the common folk, such as the clowns. Granted, there are many vocabulary words that are either no longer used today or they have a different meaning. That is why it is important to teach the vocabulary of Shakespeare and to make sure that the students understand that Shakespeare wrote in iambic pentameter, which is poetry. The Elizabethans didn’t normally speak in poetry. Verse is easier to memorize due to the rhythmical pattern. The most important thing is the rhythm. Actors can absorb verse more quickly (Berger). “The verse is Shakespeare’s medium because the verse is universal” (Berger). The Elizabethans loved language. It was more of a verbal than a visual society. Shakespeare’s audiences loved the plays on words. Shakespeare was a master of the English language. He introduced many new words into our language. The nobility in the plays spoke in verse. The commoners, such as the clowns and the fools, spoke in prose. When a character wants to praise someone, he speaks in verse. Prose is spoken by and sometimes to commoners. Prose is not metrical. The metrics of the lines are pragmatic. The Fools and clowns speak in prose. Clowns are prosaic characters. The Fool speaks in prose, but he sings in rhyme, which is in ABCB trimeter. Shakespeare rhymed a lot in his earlier plays. His more mature plays that he wrote later had less rhyme (Berger). Rhyme punctuates the emotion of the character.

Contemporary audiences must deal with the archaic words in Shakespeare’s plays. There is “a more interesting dynamic when you involve the audience” (Berger). Shakespeare imbeds his direction in the language of the characters. The play is like a musical score. “You’re playing Shakespeare’s music; you have to play it the way he wrote it.” (Berger). The text is the director. The play is led entirely by the text. It is clear that he was creating a pattern. Shakespeare created a scene with words. There were few props on the Elizabethan stage. There was no curtain; he used language to end a scene (Berger). Every word has importance. There is no subtext and there is no realism in Shakespeare. The audience must use its imagination.

There are responsible texts that are loyal to the First Folio of 1623, which is considered to be the most reliable text because two of Shakespeare’s actors and colleagues, John Heminge and Harry Cordell (Kastan 52), painstakingly put the Folio together using what we believe to be the actual words that Shakespeare wrote for the actors of the Chamberlain’s Men (Berger). The editions are the Riverside edition, Signet Classics, and the Folger Library.

There is implied stage action in plays:

What we are reading is a performance script. The dialogue is written to be spoken by actors who, at the same time, are moving, gesturing, picking up objects, weeping, shaking their fists. Some stage action is described in what are called ‘stage directions,’ some is suggested within the dialogue itself. Learn to be alert to such signals as you stage the play in your imagination. (Roberts xxiv)

The characters in Shakespeare’s plays speak what they feel. The actor says what he means and he means what he says (Berger). “The score tells you what you need to know about the characters” (Berger). You find the character through the text. Shakespeare tells the audience what the character is going to do in the dialogue of the characters. Accept ambivalence; Shakespeare writes that way. He uses the connotative meanings of words. The key to Shakespeare’s appeal is that there is “another layer of possibilities” (Berger).

Music

“The most striking uses of music in the comedies of Shakespeare’s maturity are to govern the romantic mood and to express the inner psychology of the characters. *Twelfth Night* does both those things. Music is sounding already when the play begins.” (Hartnoll 32)

The Fools often sing songs that rhyme. “Rhyming is the province of clowns” (Berger). Two compelling characters are Feste in *Twelfth Night* and the Fool in *King Lear*. The Clown, Feste, in *Twelfth Night* and the Fool in *King Lear* both sing the lyrics of the same song, reminding the audience that “the rain it raineth every day” (Shakespeare, *TN* 5.1, *KL* 3.2). No source has been found for the clown’s song “which certain editions have inexplicably denounced as doggerel – we may assume that it is Shakespeare’s” (Shakespeare, *TN* 103). Shakespeare is known to have borrowed from himself, so there may not be any profound significance for these two particular Fools to be singing the same lyrics except for the fact that this curriculum unit is addressing these two characters and their impact on the protagonist as well as the audience.

The Clowns

The clowns, or fools, in Shakespeare serve a useful purpose. The tradition of the Fool was not new to Shakespeare, but evolved from a long tradition dating back to medieval times.

The Fool was a nearly indispensable presence at renaissance revels...he was apart from the ordinary men, irresponsible, but adept at uttering home truths which others would be afraid or too proud to acknowledge. Shakespeare follows this tradition. As a rule, his clowns stand aside from the intrigue of the play...they stand for the instinctive nature as contrasted with culture...whenever they appear, they turn affection to ridicule. (Salingar 15-16)

The Fools of Shakespeare are ironic. The Fool in *King Lear* ridicules yet shows total loyalty and affection to King Lear. Feste, the Clown in *Twelfth Night*, and the Fool in *King Lear* are the voices of reason. Even the Grave digger in *Hamlet* (called Clown in the Signet version) understands the ways of the world when he comments on the fact that Ophelia would never have gotten a Christian burial had she not been a gentlewoman. I have included the Grave digger in *Hamlet*, not because of his complexity, but rather to demonstrate how Shakespeare uses the Clown to serve a vital purpose in each play. The Clowns in Shakespeare’s plays are probably the most human of his characters. They also have more freedom to speak their minds than other characters in the plays. “The Fool’s function is to tell subversive truths to a court society foolish enough to think its own truths are *the truth*” (Calderwood 126).

Feste is the only character in *Twelfth Night* who really knows himself. “This play is often discussed as a play of self-discovery” (Barber 147). The clowns were in touch with the audience.

They understand what is going on and they have self-knowledge as opposed to the other characters.

Lear refers to his Fool as “my philosopher” (Shakespeare, *KL* 3.5.189). The Fool is Lear’s steadfast companion. The Fools spoke the plain truth to kings when others were reluctant to do so. The jesters, or fools, did not sugar-coat their words. “It was the nature of jesters to speak their minds when the mood overtook them, regardless of the consequences” (“Jesters”). Perhaps it is their inferior social position that kept them from being a threat. Here is another example of Shakespeare’s irony: “They [jesters] were not necessarily calculating or circumspect, and this may account for their foolishness” (“Jesters”). This is not the case in *Twelfth Night* or *King Lear*. The Fools in these plays knew exactly what they were doing and saying. It appears that Feste was in control of his thoughts and actions throughout the play, *Twelfth Night*, and King Lear’s fool was the voice of reason just as King Lear was abdicating his own responsibility.

Clowns have been entertaining people since medieval times. The court jester played a prominent role as entertainer to kings and peasants alike. The clown’s job and purpose was to entertain people (“Jesters”). “The theatrical fools of the end of the sixteenth century were only one manifestation of a long tradition of fooling, more or less continuous since at least the Middle Ages, which evolved alongside the theater but was by no means dependent upon it” (Berry 110).

Within certain limits or on certain licensed occasions (such as Carnival), double dealing and practical jokes are permissible and even admirable. This assumption...goes far back into the origins of literary comedy; without it, most European comedy as we know it would disappear (Salingar 89).

“Jesters and the clowns who performed as court jesters were given great freedom of speech. Often they were only ones to speak out against the ruler’s ideas, and through their humor were able to affect policy” (“Jesters”). The “jester delivered kings facts without sugarcoating...it was the nature of jesters to speak their minds when the mood overtook them, regardless of the consequences” (“Jesters”). The clowns and fools in Shakespeare’s plays were natural philosophers. “The theatrical fools of the end of the sixteenth century were only one manifestation of a long tradition of fooling, more or less continuous since at least the Middle Ages, which evolved alongside the theater but was by no means dependent upon it” (Berry 110). Elizabethan dramatists were “concerned with presenting convincing renditions of type” (Davies 90).

The clowns and fools are the outsiders. They don’t evoke the same emotions from the audience that the protagonists and antagonists do. There is a fine line between love and hate, and then there is indifference. The Fool in *King Lear* was the voice of truth, reason, and irreverence. The Fool was there in Lear’s darkest hour, yet he doesn’t notice when his Fool is gone (he is last heard in Act III). “In Shakespeare clowns often ape the gestures of kings and heroes, but only in *King Lear* are great tragic scenes shown through clowning” (Garber 243). The Fool in *King Lear* is balanced between majesty and folly (244).

Licensed fools had standardized costumes, of which one noticeable item was the hat, which had sewn into it a piece or serrated red cloth to represent a cockscomb. The cock, after all is a stupid creature filled with a foolish pride and given to making senseless sounds, so that there seems to be a resemblance between cock and fool. (Asimov 17)

The clowns in Shakespeare are a composite of dark and light (Berger). His humor was dark and his tragedy was, at times, light. The mature plays differ from the earlier plays. The plays *Twelfth Night*, *King Lear*, and *Hamlet* are not formulaic, and they are considered the best of Shakespeare’s plays (Berger). The wisdom of Feste in *Twelfth Night* and the Fool in *King Lear* are the domain of the clown. Feste understands far more than any other character in *Twelfth*

Night, and the Fool is Lear's voice of reason when he has lost his own. Even the simple Grave digger in *Hamlet* is astute enough to realize that the only reason that Ophelia is allowed to have a Christian burial is because of her elevated social status and the privilege would not be allotted to his kind (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 5.1). Here is an example of the moral ambiguity in *Hamlet*. Yorick was the King's jester during Hamlet's childhood (5.1). The Fool in *King Lear* is loyal to his monarch, and Feste, ironically, is the wise voice of reason in *Twelfth Night*.

King Lear and *Hamlet* are considered to be Shakespeare's best tragedies. It is not solely the domain of Shakespeare to find comedy in tragic events. The Grave digger in *Hamlet* jokes about death as he digs a grave for an imminent funeral (5.1). The wisdom in *Twelfth Night* and *King Lear* is the domain of the clown. Feste in *Twelfth Night* understands far more than any of the other characters. The Fool in *King Lear* is the loyal, trustworthy voice of reason, and the King is mad. Irony pervades Shakespeare's plays and the clowns and fools are clarified examples.

Twelfth Night

Twelfth Night is considered to be Shakespeare's best comedy. "*Twelfth Night* may be Shakespeare's most perfect comedy. It is also one of the hardest to bring off in the theatre because of its sheer kaleidoscopic range of moods" (Billington ix). "In the nineteenth-century, *Twelfth Night* was rarely off the London stage" (xii). Ironically, *Twelfth Night* was written in the same time period as *Hamlet*, which is considered to be his best tragedy. This comedy was written late in Shakespeare's career. Shakespeare's late comedies, such as *Twelfth Night*, end darkly. Shakespeare brings the audience back to the real world. There is no happily ever after, always sadness (Berger). Life has its rainstorms and "the rain it raineth every day" (5.1). *Twelfth Night* is the only comedy with two titles. The other title is *What You Will*. "*Twelfth Night* also seems to strike a balance between the practice of early and of late Shakespearean comedy" (Evans 440).

Twelfth Night refers to the last night of the Christmas festivities.

Fools were important festive characters throughout fourteenth and fifteenth century England, however, particularly during the Christmas season, and something of the spirit of the Feast of Fools was probably transmitted through them. (Berry 116)

"Illyria is a country permeated with the spirit of the Feast of Fools, where identities are confused, 'uncivil rule' applauded...and no harm is done" ("*Twelfth Night* – Analysis of Fools"). *Twelfth Night* refers to the twelfth day after Christmas, the Epiphany. "The Elizabethan *Twelfth Night* holiday commemorating the visit of the Magi to the newborn Christ child, the secular holiday *Twelfth Night* was called 'Feast of Fools'...somewhat like our Halloween combined with our April Fool's Day" (Roberts 71). It is the day that the Christmas tree and all of the decorations come down and people get back to reality and everyday life. The festivities are over and Feste sings, "For the rain it raineth every day" (5.1). *Twelfth Night* has a seemingly happy ending with the clown singing a song. Actually the song is about rain and getting back to everyday life after the Christmas holiday. The ending is truthful, as are so many of the clown's words in this play, as well as other clowns in other plays. Life goes on and it isn't always in a comedic way. Every day we live through struggles and darkness. Shakespeare will give the audience darkness in a comedy. *Twelfth Night* is "an admixture of the dark and the light" (Berger). *Twelfth Night* is full of shadows. Life is in a constant state of change. It is Feste's clear wisdom that recognizes this and he accepts it, as the audience should. "The wind and the rain accompany him throughout his life" (Hollander 145). Change is growth and *Twelfth Night* is a play about moving on. "At the end of the scene, all exit. Only Feste, the pure fact of feasting, remains. His final song is a summation of the play in many ways at once" (145).

The chief spokesman in the play for this ...realistic kind of Time is ...Feste. Feste is not only a wise fool, a man in complete intellectual and emotional control of himself, who

has chosen the part of professional jester: he operates throughout the comedy as a truth-teller who reminds the other characters that holiday, by its very nature, is not eternal. It is Feste who points out to the revellers [sic] that the future is uncertain, laughter momentary, and youth “a stuff will not endure” (2.3.52) ... Feste’s account of man’s inexorable progress from a child’s holiday realm of irresponsibility and joy into age, vice, disillusionment, and death draws upon an old, didactic tradition. Its basic pessimism is informed and sweetened, however, not only by the music to which it is set, but by the tolerance and acceptance of Feste himself. Precisely because of his anonymity and aloofness in the play now ended, he can be trusted to speak for all mankind, and not simply for himself. There is nothing that can be done about those harsh facts of existence to which Feste points, any more than about the wind and the rain. They must simply be endured. Like childhood happiness, all comedies come to an end. The great and consoling difference lies in the fact that one can, after all, as Feste points out, return to the theatre: after all, as Feste points out, return to the theatre: and there, “we’ll strive to please you every day.” (Evans 440-441)

Another example of Feste’s control over himself and the manipulation of other characters is that “from here on in it will be Feste who dances attendance on the revelry, singing, matching with Viola, and being paid by almost everyone for his presence” (Hollander 137-8).

“In *Twelfth Night*, Feste plays the role of a humble clown employed by Olivia’s father playing the licensed fool of their household” (“*Twelfth Night – Analysis of Fools*”). Ophelia’s Fool, “Feste is a wise fool, a mature, sensible wit who is conscious of his superiority to the fools who surround him. He has little to do with the plot until the last act. His function is to indicate to the audience the foolishness of the main characters” (Quennell 76-77).

Here is an example of Feste’s interchange with Mary in prison:

Feste is probably hysterically laughing at what he has just been up to. ‘Nay, I’m for all waters’ may have the additional meaning that he was on the verge of losing control of himself. He is ‘for all waters’ primarily in that he represents the fluidity of revelling celebration. And finally, when all is done, ‘The rain it raineth every day,’ and Feste reverts to gnomic utterance in a full and final seriousness. Water is rain that falls to us from Heaven. The world goes on. Our revels now are ended, but the actors solidify into humanity, in this case, ‘But that’s all one, our play is done/ And we’ll strive to please you every day. (Hollander 143)

Her first words are “Take the fool away.” Equally unexpected is the fool’s retort: “Do you not hear fellows? Take away the lady.” This great dame is called a fool by one of her own attendants, who then goes on to prove it:

CLOWN: Good Madonna, why mourn’st thou?

OLIVIA: Good fool, for my brother’s death.

CLOWN: I think his soul is in hell, Madonna.

OLIVIA: I know his soul is in heaven, fool.

CLOWN: The more fool, Madonna, to mourn for our brother’s soul being in heaven. Take away the fool, gentlemen. (Honigman 125-126)

Feste is the only one who can speak the truth. He tells Olivia exactly what he thinks of her.

I have listed several quotations that may give a better understanding of Feste:

“The Clown, Feste, seems to remain a little detached.” (Hartnoll 32)

Feste...Like his song at the end of the play, “a timeless comment on the essential human situation, cleared of the blustery jollity of the drunken knights and of the over-ripe sensibility of the Duke.” (33)

Feste remarks about “the ease with which language can be twisted.” (3.10-12; Greenblatt 56).

Feste prefers to be the clown: “I wouldn’t be in some of your coats for twopence.” (Shakespeare, *TN* 3.1.30)

The critic G.L. Kittredge called Feste “the merriest of Shakespeare’s fools.” (Levin 135)

“Feste reminds us that we have merely been watching actors striving to please us, as we must strive to please each other, whatever life brings” (Edmondson 166). In his song, Feste reminds us, “like childhood happiness, all comedies come to an end. The great and consoling difference lies in the fact that one can, after all...return to the theatre: and there ‘we’ll strive to please you every day’” (Evans 441).

Feste may be one of Shakespeare’s best known fools; however, most of Shakespeare’s plays have this archetype in different capacities. Feste dominates *Twelfth Night*, whereas the fool in *Hamlet*, the Grave digger, only appears in one scene in the last act of the play.

Hamlet

Hamlet is arguably the finest play ever written in the English language. “*Hamlet* clearly works on a different level from any other play of its kind, and indeed from any preceding play of Shakespeare’s” (Evans 1183). Hamlet “is a masterpiece on fourteen different levels” (Berger).

Hamlet is a multiple play; Shakespeare not only alters the old plot but also expands it at every opportunity” (Evans 1185). Because of its complexity, T.S. Eliot made the following statement about how Shakespeare handles the expansion of the original revenge play: *Hamlet* is “Certainly an artistic failure” (qtd. in Evans 1183). The play is too complex to categorize into a trite description. People relate to this play, which accounts for its vast popularity over the centuries. Samuel Taylor Coleridge even stated, “I have a smack of Hamlet” (qtd. in Evans 1183).

“Hamlet is an extremely theatrical play. It is part of the story of the development of the Elizabethan theatre that as it grew more and more professional and self-conscious, it more and more distanced its audience” (Evans 1187). The audiences today are distanced in that they don’t actively participate in the play as they did in medieval times, “of treating the spectators as part of the show” (1187). This is not to say that the audience does not connect to the play on a personal, emotional level. There are times when spectators become compelled to make a verbal commentary to the actors or to the audience. Hamlet addresses the human fear that this is a godless universe and that there is no structure or reason for what happens. The Grave digger scene addresses this issue with dark comedy. There is a moral lesson in every one of Shakespeare’s great tragedies. The “lesson-giving is still there and prominent” (Berger). There is no moral universe in *Hamlet*. The world is out of joint. Moral actions happen all of the time. The play is about finding the truth. Hamlet’s world doesn’t make sense (Berger). There is no order and no reason in the amoral, chaotic world that Shakespeare creates in *Hamlet*. No one is evil or good; there is no moral structure in this world (Berger). Perhaps the only character that finds sense in the world, or else can live with the chaos, is the Grave digger. Again, the clown is the voice of reason. This particular character makes jokes about death as he digs up graves in preparation for another. He realizes that the socially prominent people get special favors over the commoners; in this case, the Christian burial of Ophelia who committed suicide (Sobran). The Grave digger scene is full of the irony that can be found in all of Shakespeare’s plays. The grave

scene (5.1) demonstrates the anonymity of death. “It doesn’t mean anything” (Berger). Hamlet’s world is very cynical. Hamlet raises questions that Shakespeare doesn’t answer (Berger).

The clown in *Hamlet* is only in one scene. “The effect of the grave digger upon Hamlet has generally been classified as either foil or parody. Actually the grave digger conforms, for the most part, to a third role – that of the proletarian...believed to possess an intuitive wisdom...which could yield insights denied the more intelligent and mature” (Hunt 2). This role is similar to the Fools in *Twelfth Night* and *King Lear*.

It is dark comedy, as the clown is the grave digger in the scene about Ophelia’s funeral. When Hamlet approaches, the grave digger is singing a song. He doesn’t recognize the young prince and comments to him that Hamlet has gone to England to recover his wits and if he doesn’t, then it doesn’t matter because “There the men are as mad as he” (5.1.156-7). The Elizabethan audience probably appreciated the joke that was at their expense. (5.1) “The grave digger answers Hamlet’s questions with “earthy humor” (Sobtan). One of the most iconic scenes in *Hamlet* is the scene in which Hamlet is told that the skull he picks up is that of the court jester of his idyllic childhood. It is highly unlikely that that particular skull that is dug up to make a grave for Ophelia is actually Yorick’s; however, it lends itself to the grave digger talking about how long he has been working and that dialogue reveals Hamlet’s age and his happy childhood that is in stark contrast to the misery of the present. Again, Shakespeare interjects the light and dark theme. The contrast of what was to what is intensifies the tragedy in contrast to the comedy of the grave digger’s lines about death (5.1). Death is pervasive in *Hamlet*. “Mousetrap becomes a great excuse for a long lecture on acting, the death of Ophelia for hundreds of melancholic lines on death” (Evans 1185). *Hamlet* is about finding the truth (Berger). It is a matter of opinion as to whether *Hamlet* or *King Lear* is Shakespeare’s most tragic tragedy.

King Lear

The Fool in *King Lear* is Lear’s closest confidante. Shakespeare humanizes the Fool, giving him childlike qualities that compel Lear to worry about his welfare and suggest that the Fool seek shelter when the Fool insists on staying with Lear during the tempest. Then, in Act Three, the Fool disappears and Lear doesn’t seem to notice. The disappearance can be interpreted as death. And the Fool was the only person that Lear could communicate with. “Lear confides in the Fool that he did Cordelia wrong and that he fears madness” (Davies 19). “It is the Fool in *King Lear* who stretches these paradoxes (natural child) to the breaking point, thinking the part of a knave and acting the part of a fool” (Berry 124).

“According to Greenblatt, “of all his [Shakespeare’s] tragedies, *King Lear* seems to be the wildest and the strangest” (357). According to Percy Bysshe Shelley, *King Lear* is “the most perfect specimen of dramatic poetry existing in the world” (Evans 1299). On the other hand, Tolstoy “thought that an aged Lear who walks about raving wildly was an appropriate object not of awe but of moral revulsion and aesthetic contempt” (Greenblatt 388). Samuel Johnson stated that *King Lear* was “Shakespeare’s greatest achievement, but... *not* his best play.” (Evans 1297)

King Lear’s setting is Anglo-Saxon medieval, but could take place at any time because Shakespeare understood human nature, and relationships are timeless (Davies 38). “Lear is, in part, a play about the end of the world.” (Evans 1297).

The basic story was well known in Shakespeare’s day. “Originally a folk tale in which a daughter tells her father she loves him as much as salt and dissipates his anger by demonstrating that this means he is essential to her, it made its first literary appearance in the twelfth- century *History* of Geoffrey Monmouth. Sixteenth- century interest in British history gave it wider circulation...Lear, in his moments of self-knowledge never reproaches himself with *political* error; what he and the good characters, including Kent

and the Fool, complain is his madness in disinheriting Cordelia, and his mistake in supposing that he could remain a king after surrendering the cares of kingship and placing even his human rights to shelter in the hands of Goneril and Regan...he assumes a right to love and respect also in his capacity as father, and as an old man. (Evans 1298-9)

Shakespeare converts the storm from the old play “into an image of evil chaos” (Evans 1299). There is chaos in *Hamlet*, too. Shakespeare’s protagonists try to make sense of their lives in an amoral world. “This is the world of the play, a world in dissolution.” (1301) Lear is about the fate of a man at the end of the world (1302). This is similar to Hamlet, in that the chaos leads to the end of Hamlet’s world.

The Fool is a serious character. He speaks in prose and King Lear speaks to him in prose. “The Fool (“fool though he is”) is wise enough to see Lear’s true position as one who cannot possibly reward a follower, for he no longer has anything to give or keep now that he has given his kingdom away. It is more than Lear can see – yet” (Asimov 17). The Fool enters the play in Act I, scene 4, line 96 (Shakespeare, Folgers). He has “down to earth practicality” (Shakespeare, Folgers 295). The Fool calls King Lear “nuncle” (a derivative of mine and uncle). He gives Lear advice throughout the play. He can get away with talking to Lear in a way that would get others in trouble. For instance, the time that The Fool calls Lear a fool: “Thou would’st make a good fool, King Lear will make a good Fool” (1.5.37). “That’s a wise man and a fool” (3.2.15). He also calls Lear brainless: “If a man’s brains were in’s heels, were ‘t not in danger of kibes?” (1.5.8-9). King Lear’s Fool is the court Fool. “He comments ironically on Lear’s folly, and tries to avert his madness with jokes” (Quennell 78). Again, the Fools get away with saying things that would get someone else in trouble. “After all, the Fool’s function is to tell subversive truths to a court society foolish enough to think its own truths are *the* truth.” Thus he is the “outsider-within,” living at the borders of accepted reality, issuing alternative reports on “what is.” When Lear crosses these borders, he enters uncharted regions of mind where much madness is divinest sense and the Fool has no business. The Fool can tell the court that much sense is the starkest madness, but it is a violation of foolish function to tell the starkly mad Lear the redundant truth that he is mad. ... unable in the storm either to lie or to tell the truth, the Fool appropriately falls silent and disappears. Or, if the doubling theory is true, he metamorphoses into Cordelia, representing what Lear now needs more than the truth – love. But not even love can save him in this harsh world. Ultimately he must announce, “my poor fool is hang’d” – both his poor fools. Perhaps in “The Phoenix and the Turtle” Shakespeare found the right requiem for this doubly sad hanging: “Truth and beauty buried be” (Calderwood 126-127).

The Fool disappears from the play when Cordelia returns to England (3.6). Pragmatically, it is the opinion of some that the reason the Fool disappears at that time is because the actor that played the Fool also played Cordelia. “The Fool’s report, which yields a world of indifferenced foolishness, tells the truth, but tells it slant and incomplete. If the same actor doubled as Fool and Cordelia, then we may see each character embodying merely part of the truth.” The Fool is a companion on whom Lear increasingly depends. The utterances of the Fool are gnomic and often hard to decipher in detail, partly perhaps because a new comic actor named Robert Armin had joined Shakespeare’s acting company in about 1598 and his special ‘line’ of foolish wisdom as his stock-in-trade; perhaps also because the tragedy of Lear raises such complex issues of wisdom and folly. Despite the sometimes riddling nature of the Fool’s witticisms, what he has to say to Lear (and us) is, on the whole, clear if also paradoxical. As a professional fool, his business is to see what is ridiculous in the supposedly sane behavior of his nominal superiors; his being a fool gives him a kind of license to say what ordinary counselors and advisors to a king would not dare to utter. From first to last, the Fool dares to suggest that King Lear is the truly foolish one – even more so than the Fool himself (Bevington 108). “Of course Lear is a fool for all the reasons that

the Fool has cited. Yet we realize that the Fool has no intention of following his own advice. He will not abandon Lear when the King's fortunes are heading lower and lower, as a supposedly wise person would do. "But I will tarry," he sings: "the fool will stay, / and let the wise man fly" (2.4.80-1) (Bevington 109-110). "Lear is a fool for having grown old before he learned to be wise" (1.5.43-4) (109). "He is a fool not to come out of the rain when it begins to storm" (76-9). "Even though Lear scarcely hears these quaint admonishments of the Fool, we hear them as audience. We perceive, moreover, that they are offered in a profoundly paradoxical sense. That is because to run away is to be the fool in the deepest sense of the word. Wisdom and folly change places in the Fool's gnomic wisdom. To be wise as the world defines the term is to be in danger of becoming insolent, selfish, and indifferent to the sufferings of others. Only the foolish – i.e., those who are foolish enough to practice charity and kindness even at great risk to themselves – will be rewarded with the higher wisdom of understanding what things truly matter in life. They will do so, however, at the huge cost of being frequently victimized, pushed aside, humiliated, and forgotten" (Bevington 109-110).

"The Fool declares, 'This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen'" (3.4.75), and indeed, there do seem to be many fools and madmen in the play" (Woodford 22). "The Fool notes that he is far from being the only fool in the kingdom. In fact, he complains that all the other fools are infringing on his business" (22). "And how is the fool a fool, since he often seems to be the least foolish of all, able as he is to speak honestly to Lear without fear of banishment?" (23). Truth is an ongoing theme with the Fool, who has no reason to lie or be afraid of King Lear. He says, "Truth's a dog must to kennel; he must be whipped out" (1.4.115).

The Fool sings a ludicrous song, which contrasts with Lear's rage (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Folgers 295). The songs contrast sharply with the events that are going on in the play. The song in Act III "threatens Lear's heroine status" (295) and transforms Lear into another foolish old man. The Fool disappears in Act III; however, "his syncopated rhythm continues (295). It is tragic that King Lear does not comprehend the importance of the Fool as his most truthful advisor and caring friend; the Fool's reference to the King as "Nuncle" is a term of familiarity and affection.

Goddard, in *Bloom's Interpretations*, suggests that the line by Lear, "And my poor fool hanged" refers to the Fool or Cordelia (34). "Cordelia lived in the Fool's imagination, and in her father's before death; the Fool is united with Cordelia in his master's imagination at death. Cordelia still lives in her father's imagination after death" (38). In Act V the Fool is gone and King Lear is utterly alone. "Heroic pathos is suddenly joined by slapstick comedy" (294). While Lear is no fool, he certainly is mad and he is a shattered old man (Shakespeare, *KL*, Folgers 292). Lear never appreciated the importance of the Fool in his life. The Fool is an example of the most human character in the play.

Conclusion

"In his tribute to the first Folio, Ben Jonson called Shakespeare the 'Soule of his age.' Jonson also asserted, however, 'he was not of an age, but for all time.' Jonson's claim of immortality may have seemed in his own day mere hyperbole; in ours, which sees Shakespeare studied and performed in every region of the world, it begins to look like fact" (Berry).

It is ironic that the Clown, Feste, in the comedy *Twelfth Night* is a somber character and the Fools in *King Lear* and *Hamlet* are comedic. Shakespeare is replete with irony, and these three great plays are no exception. Feste said it best with his line, "That that is, is" (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, IV.2). The Fools and clowns were so simple and direct that perhaps if the other characters had heeded their advice, then the tragedies could have been averted. They are advisors to the characters in the plays and they are advisors to the audience as well.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan One: Character Analysis

Objective

Listening/speaking/critical listening. The student listens attentively for a variety of purposes. The student is expected to (A) demonstrate proficiency in each aspect of the listening process such as focusing attention, interpreting, and responding;(E) use appropriate feedback in a variety of situations such as conversations and discussions and informative, persuasive, or artistic presentations. TEKS 110.45 (15)

Materials

Shakespeare's plays: *Twelfth Night*, *King Lear* and *Hamlet*.
Props or costumes

Students will choose a character and trace that character's development through the progression of the play. Students will be placed in groups according to character, so that they can share and compare their ideas with others who have chosen the same character. Students will interpret a certain scene that the character is in and perform it in front of the class. Students may want to present Feste's Song: use any tune: Chant/RAP/sing it. Students may want to work in groups. The audience is responsible for observing the presentation and taking notes so that they can give constructive feedback to the performer.

Lesson Plan Two: Observation and Comparative Analysis of Shakespeare Films

Objective

Reading/comprehension. The student comprehends selections using a variety of strategies. The student is expected to (A) establish and adjust purpose for reading such as to find out, to understand, to interpret, to enjoy, and to solve problems. TEKS 110:45 (8)

Materials

Shakespeare's plays in books and multiple versions of the videos

Procedures

The students will read the play, preferably out loud, so that they get a sense of the theatrical rendering. Watch the different versions of the same Shakespearean play, such as *Hamlet* or *King Lear*. Students can also research the time period in which the movie was produced and what was the standard opinion of the time period of how Shakespeare's words should be spoken. Everything seemed to be overly dramatic in the 1940s movies and understated in contemporary versions. In Branagh's *Hamlet*, he does a lot of close-ups on the faces of the characters as they speak. He also placed *Hamlet* in a different century. The experience on the Shakespearean stage will also be a good discussion topic. When it comes to Shakespeare, students should be encouraged to bring questions about what they don't understand to the class. At a recent workshop, a professor suggested that the student bring three points with him to the class discussion: one point he/she knows, one point he/she has a question about, and one point that he/she doesn't understand. With the emphasis that bringing questions is more valuable than having all of the answers, it will encourage the students who don't comprehend Shakespeare to be involved in the classroom learning environment.

Lesson Plan Three: Writing about Shakespeare

Objective

Writing/processes: the student uses recursive writing processes when appropriate. The student is expected to: (1) (F) organize ideas in writing to ensure coherence, logical progression, and support for ideas. The student is expected to (2) (B) develop drafts independently by organizing content such as paragraphing and outlining and by refining style to suit occasion, audience, and purpose. TEKS 110.45

Materials

Shakespeare's plays, paper, pen, or word processor, and research material.

Procedures

Students will have a variety of subjects to write about within the context of the Shakespearean play that they are reading. The student can research the role of the clowns and jesters in medieval times and compare the information to the clown character in the play, or to clowns in Elizabethan times, or today. He/she can also research the time period, other characters, or write a comparison of two different plays. The student will turn in a multiple page essay with research information.

Lesson Plan Four: The Concept of Nothing

Objective: Reading/comprehension. The student comprehends selections using a variety of strategies. The student is expected to (A) establish and adjust purpose for reading such as to find out, to understand, to interpret, to enjoy, and to solve problems; and (B) draw upon his/her own background to provide connection to texts.

Materials

King Lear

Research material

Procedures

This lesson can be cross-curricular with math, history, or philosophy.

Shakespeare explores the concept of nothing in one of the most famous scenes in *King Lear* when Cordelia responds to Lear's request for affectionate words and she replies with one word: "Nothing." (Act I). Lear becomes irate and repeats the word back to her and she responds in kind. The long silences between the words spoken say so much more than the actual dialogue. "Lear agrees with Aristotle that nothing can come of nothing" (Evans 1301). Aristotle's famous quote expressed that "nothing can come of nothing nor yet return to it" (1302). The concept of zero and the Arabic numeral system was a novel idea to the Elizabethans and Shakespeare includes this in his play. "It is in the new context of *zero* that the play of *King Lear* has been produced, and read, and understood in *our* time" (Garber 264). The student can also explore the concept and use of zero today: Ground Zero, Patient Zero, etc.

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