



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
2015 Volume II: Explaining Character in Shakespeare

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## **Examining Shakespeare's Characters, Character's Choices and the Consequences to Make Them Relevant to Middle School**

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### **Introduction**

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My first encounter with William Shakespeare was in seventh grade; my teacher at the time had us reading *Romeo and Juliet*. Right from the prologue I was immediately hypnotized by the poetic movement of the language that Shakespeare used to create such vivid images of these two young lovers approaching a disastrous fate. I remember swooning over Romeo and becoming a tad jealous of how lucky Juliet was to have had such a romantic guy. But what finally essentially captured my heart was seeing the live performance. Once we finished reading the play, our class had a field trip to the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts to see *Romeo and Juliet* live on stage. It took my breath away. The meaning of the beautiful language became so clear through seeing it performed rather than read. I was hooked. Later in high school, we again read *Romeo and Juliet* in ninth grade and *Macbeth* later on in eleventh grade, when it quickly soared to become my favorite Shakespeare play.

In teaching sixth grade English/Language Arts, I've always had to put my love of Shakespeare's stories on the backburner; it's always been argued that sixth graders are not mentally prepared to handle the difficult language in reading Shakespeare. People think that eleven year olds cannot find relevance within the plays that are appropriate for their age group. However, scholars and art directors have found that this point is invalid. Lara Bobraff is a Globe Education Practitioner that currently works at the recreated Globe Theatre in London. She says that her and her team work with over 70,000 students a year from around the world—some students as young as five years old— on reading, acting, and analyzing Shakespeare's plays and characters. This is her argument for why young children are preferable to teach Shakespeare to:

“I think if you get children young then they're excited about the stories they're excited about the characters—they think *Twelfth Night* is fantastic because there is a character called Sir Toby Belch who burps--they haven't learned yet to be cynical and scared and worried about it ...they haven't learned yet that Shakespeare is boring, dull, and difficult.”<sup>1</sup>

I agree with Lara Bobraff when she says the younger the students are when exposed to Shakespeare, the less 'scary' he becomes; I see myself as a testament to that since I was twelve and had already established an acquaintance with Shakespeare. I think being taught Shakespeare at that age helped me immensely in being successful later on in high school. I can attest to this notion in my students as well. One year, my sixth grade

students were asked to visit the Advanced Placement British Literature class and watch their performance of *Macbeth*. My sixth graders loved it! They were instantly engaged and enthralled with the language; they were able to summarize what the seniors were acting out by relating it to their prior knowledge. They asked thought-provoking questions about the word choices, the characters' choices and the actors' movements. Thus, my students have proven to me that if given the right strategies and models—film or visual aids and a variety of good and bad examples—they can break down difficult, higher-grade level text.

## Rationale

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I find that sixth graders come to middle school with a basic knowledge of what a 'character' is within a narrative. However, in asking them to explain the character motives and the influence their choices have in the outcome of the plot is still a struggle for them to comprehend. Shakespeare had this awesome ability to create such amazing characters and themes that are still prominent in today's society even though these stories were composed hundreds of years ago. Often, we can find characters in his plays that we can relate to, want to befriend, want to hate, are jealous, similarly to the emotions we feel and thoughts we have about real people. For example, my students can relate to the idea of having to choose a their friends or boyfriend against the wishes of their family , just as we see Juliet choose to fake her death in order to be with her true love (also her family's enemy) rather than comply with her father's wishes. Eleven year olds are also testing the waters and becoming a bit rebellious against their parents wishes as they strive for independence. They also know what it means to come to the defense of a friend much like Romeo choosing to avenge his best friend's death. My students too have to make tough choices in their lives; sometimes they make the wrong choice, like Macbeth and have to deal with consequences of their actions.

With this unit, I want to afford my students an early exposure to Shakespeare and help determine how his characters are still relevant and similar to them when it comes to 'making choices'. In order to show my students how to dig deeper into the concept of 'character' we will study the personalities and choices the characters make in Shakespeare's two plays *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*. To give them the exposure to the narratives, we will first read the graphic novel interpretations of the plays. This will act as a springboard for my students learn how to examine how the plot unfolds with respect to the decisions the character made or how they responded. This will also help them be prepared to compare different types of texts in gaining the appropriate plot background and identifying the different cause/effect relationships observable in characters and their choices.

After they read the graphic novels and understand the plot background, I want my students to analyze the word choice Shakespeare used to dictate the characters' personality, emotions, and thoughts behind their choices in various selected scenes. To assist my students in understanding the complex language of Shakespeare we will read portions of the original plays and compare them to the graphic novel interpretations as part of a close read exercise. Here, we will also practice citing evidence to support an argument on posed questions for group discussions about character choice.

## Demographics

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Conrad Schools of Science (CSS) is a unique school in the Red Clay School District housing grades from sixth to twelfth. The school is considered a magnet school with a primary focus on mathematics, science and technology. The high school courses offered are meant to lead into various pathways: Allied Health, Sports Physical Therapy, Engineering and Biotechnology. All students now have to apply and interview in order to be accepted into the school. I am currently teaching 6th grade English/Language Arts and Special Education. In the past couple years at CSS the Special-education component was served using the inclusion model. Since I am dual-certified in teaching special -education and middle school English, I would teach a group of regular education students with the special-education population in the same class. The past school year, I have co-taught in in sixth grade English/Language Arts class where I am considered the content teacher while I had another special-education teacher assist on one day while an English Language Learner (ELL) specialist would come in the next day. Going into the 2015-2016 school year, I will continue to teach 6<sup>th</sup> grade English/Language Arts in an inclusion setting.

For this curriculum unit, I will focus on my sixth grade English/Language Arts class. Since the classes will be an inclusion setting, the lesson will focus on differentiating instruction so that the gifted students as well as the classified special-education students and the ELL students in the class will be able to comprehend the material. This unit has been made to fit a block schedule of 90 minutes classes.

## Essential Understanding/Questions

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In learning the process of breaking down a character and how to analyze their actions and role in determining the outcome of the plot students will answer the following:

1. Why do we make choices?
2. Are we free to make these decisions or is it fate?
3. How would the outcome be different if the character made a different choice?
4. Do our choices shape who we are as individuals?

## Understanding Character in Shakespeare

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So why is it that William Shakespeare—a long dead author whose plays were written for playhouses very different from today—should be celebrated as an author of enduring significance? He was a master of prose and verse and could also tell a gripping story. He could construct powerful passages of rhetoric, write beautiful passages of lyrical verse, speeches that are both witty and comical and yet write with powerful simplicity that pierce our hearts and resonate within our soul. In all of his accomplishments, he is most noted for his eloquence in explaining the human condition. He has this uncanny ability in the rendering of personality that make his personages seem so *real*.<sup>2</sup> As a member of the audience, you will be able to find one attribute that

matches to one of his brilliantly complex characters. For instance us understanding young, passionate (hormonal) love like Romeo and Juliet, have met a bully similar to Tybalt, or had a dedicated best friend like Mercutio. Though, he never passes judgment: characters that behave badly such as the murderous Macbeth can make you feel what they feel rather than see their dark side.

## **Defining Shakespeare's Plays and Examining the Two Tragedies**

Shakespeare's plays were broken up into categories once the first folio was published in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death. These were the categories that were chosen: comedies, histories and tragedies. A 'comedy' involves the main character learning a lesson and falling in love. Usually the villain is caught and the hero or heroine marries. A 'history' play depicted a story from England's past. These plays were highly political, as they dealt with what constitutes a good king (government). We often see that these plays dealt with instability with the crown as model in Shakespeare's *King Henry IV Part I and II*.

Tragedies are the two plays my students will be reading with *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*. A 'tragedy' is a type of play involves the main character learning a lesson and dying. The protagonist or hero is normally someone of high rank- a queen such as Lady Macbeth or a prominent citizen's son such as Romeo. A flaw in the protagonist sets the events in motion and causes his or her downfall. For example, Macbeth's downfall is ambition and his wish for power that causes him to go on this murder rampage to secure the throne of Scotland. In a tragedy, the recurring outcome is that the protagonist dies and his or her family lies in ruin.

### **Romeo and Juliet- A Star Cross'd Tragedy**

*Romeo and Juliet* was the first exposure I had to the writings of William Shakespeare. In some cases Romeo and Juliet as the "world's most famous couple". The play is set in the Italian town of Verona. Today, that very city calls itself the "City of Love" since it takes pride in being the setting of the one of the greatest love stories of all time. This remarkable play, with its spellbinding, beautiful poetry and a profound love the leaves the audience hopeful and longing, ultimately ends being a pointless tragedy. This leaves me wondering: Was it true love? Was it fated for the two young lovers to die in the end or did their actions throughout the narrative play a significant role? This is what I want my students to determine: "Even though the prologue tells us everything to expect and we have no doubt about the outcome, there is a sense of cosmic possibility at the beginning of the play that leaves you optimistic for them."

Gail Kern Paster states this when she was interviewed for the documentary filmed by PBS called *Shakespeare Uncovered: Romeo and Juliet*. Paster perfectly captures what the audience is thinking about these two lovers: you want them to find their happily ever after. In the first acts of the play, *Romeo and Juliet* is often seen as a romantic comedy rather than a tragedy. Even though Romeo is seventeen and Juliet is thirteen years of age, you cannot deny they have been struck with 'love at first sight'. But is it right to say that? Was this in fact true love? This is where we will begin our analysis.

*Romeo and Juliet* begins by giving the audience the impression that the play is a comedy:

Many things contribute to this impression. An amusing street fight and masked ball in the first act, a lovers' meeting in the orchard in the second, a doting young man carrying courtly conventions to laughable excess, parents who would be custom-bound to interfere if they only knew of the affair going on under their noses, an affected troublemaker bent on vindicating his family's honor, a bawdy nurse and an even bawdier friend ordinarily lead to the triumph of young love, a marriage or two, forgiveness and feasting all around. <sup>3</sup>

However, we see the shift to the tragic starting in Act III when Mercutio is killed and chaos ensues because the action of Tybalt provokes Romeo into action and thus thrusts the play into a downward spiral. Tragedy spreads throughout the different characters: Romeo becomes a murderer and is banished, Juliet cuts herself away from her family and nurse; even the background scenery takes a shift to rain and cloudy overcast to highlight the shift.

### **Macbeth- The Darkest Corners of the Human Psyche**

Actor Ethan Hawke once described Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* as this: "*Macbeth* is a play that you're not even supposed to say the name of it because even the name of it is supposed to conjure witches and the dreads of the universe."<sup>4</sup> *Macbeth* is the tale of a serial murder that has gone down in history to be one of the darkest and strangest of all of Shakespeare's plays. Some even say that Shakespeare took a risk in writing this tale considering who his audience was; he wrote about the darker side of the human psyche that in some cases are still relevant in our present time.

Shakespeare had the reputation of embroidering his tales with historical facts and uses true historical accounts to create his tale. University of London Historian Justin Champion is an expert in 17<sup>th</sup> century history says that the real Macbeth lived over a thousand years ago in Scotland. The play *Macbeth* takes place in 17<sup>th</sup> century Scotland where our protagonist Macbeth is revered as a great warrior devoted to his king, King Duncan. In the play, Macbeth saw himself as a devoted subject to his king until he met the three weird sisters or witches. The witches predict that Macbeth will be the next king, which thus forever changes our dashing hero into a serial killer.

*Macbeth* resembles the true tragedy in the sense that the protagonist (Macbeth) has a flaw that ultimately leads to his downfall and death at the end of the play. This flaw is ambition; he shares the prophecy with his wife. However, we can also see some elements of a history play. Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* in honor of the coronation of King James I who was the successor of Queen Elizabeth I. The play was symbolic of the unification of England and Scotland. The 'saintly' King Edward from *Macbeth* is a mirror image of King James I and by the 'grace of Grace' he is there to unify the kingdoms and stabilize the crown. <sup>5</sup>

### **Defining and Understanding Character**

When I receive my new group of students in August/September, they have a basic understanding of the elements that make up a story. Specifically, their general understanding of what a 'character' is: a person or figure in a story.<sup>6</sup> Yet their understanding only touches upon the surface of what a 'character' truly is. In the two seminars that I am currently enrolled in (one here at Yale with Paul Fry as well the seminar through the University of Delaware entitled "Things That Happen in Fiction" with David Teague) we have discussed E.M. Forster's distinction between story, character, and plot. Forster argues that in a story character is established first then the plot is determined based on character motivations. Forster provides this example in his *Aspects of the Novel*:

"'The king died and then the queen died' is a story. 'The King died then the queen died of grief' is a plot. If it is a story we say: "And then?" If it is a plot we ask: "Why?"<sup>7</sup>

The first sentence indicates a basic event sequence since it is having the audience ask "And then?" because there is just a list of events that happen thus making a plot. However, the second sentence Forster gave provides more information about the queen: it shows *why* she died. It gives depth to the plot by exposing the

reason or motive behind her death as indicated by her actions. Establishing the actions of the character first determines how the plot will unfold. Decisions are plot points; the characters' desires and choices are what push the plot forward based upon the decisions they make and ones they do not. In a recent interview with Teague, he mentions this: "Particularly in drama who you are as a character is based on what you *do* upon the stage. It is making their internal the internal life transparent to the audience by looking at what the character *does*. This is what creates a plot."<sup>8</sup>

So this concept of plot and character is what I am going to use in introducing character analysis of the *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth* plays: *plot* is why the character did what he or she did. This notion allows for my students to come to an understanding Shakespeare's character by the actions they perform or the choices they make that ultimately shapes the plot. For example, why did Romeo decide to go after Tybalt? Why didn't Juliet just run away with Romeo when the opportunity presented itself? Why does Lady Macbeth push her husband to commit murder? By organizing the plot in an order that follows the choices of each character, we will be able to come to some conclusions about these characters and possible question their motives.

### **Examining the Characters in Romeo and Juliet**

In reading the graphic novel interpretation and the play of *Romeo and Juliet*, I want my students to focus on four particular characters: Romeo, Juliet, Tybalt, and Mercutio. They are the prominent teens, young adults in the play; looking at a character that is somewhat close in age will help them find relevance in the choices that advanced the plot forward. In regards to certain characters, I pose a question that I want my students to ponder throughout the process of learning the plot and understanding the character.

#### **Romeo and Juliet: is this true love?**

*Romeo and Juliet* was the first exposure I had to the writings of William Shakespeare. In some cases, Romeo and Juliet are regarded as the "world's most famous couple". The play is set in the Italian town of Verona. Today, that very city calls itself the "City of Love" since it takes pride in being the setting of the one of the greatest love stories of all time. This remarkable play, with its spellbinding, beautiful poetry, a profound love the leaves the audience hopeful and longing, ultimately ends being a pointless tragedy. This leaves me wondering: Was it true love? Was it fated for the two young lovers to die in the end or did their actions throughout the narrative play a significant role?

This is what I want my students to determine "Even though the prologue tells us everything to expect and we have no doubt about the outcome, there is a sense of cosmic possibility at the beginning of the play that leaves you optimistic for them." <sup>9</sup> Gail Kern Paster states this when she was interviewed for the documentary filmed by PBS called *Shakespeare Uncovered: Romeo and Juliet*. Paster perfectly captures what the audience is thinking in regards to these two lovers: you want for them to find their happily ever after. In the first acts of the play, *Romeo and Juliet* is often seen as a romantic comedy rather than a tragedy. Even though Romeo is seventeen and Juliet is thirteen years of age, you cannot deny they have been struck with 'love at first sight'. But is it right to say that? Was this in fact true love? This is where we will begin our analysis.

Romeo is the only son of the Montagues. It is said that he is around seventeen years old. When we meet Romeo, his heart is broken since his 'love' for Rosaline is not returned. In Act II, Scene II, Romeo sneaks into the ball being held by the Capulet's to accompany his best friend Mercutio. Mercutio hopes to find a distraction for his friend by stirring up some fun with a night of dancing. It is here where our star-crossed lovers meet for the first time. Romeo catches a glimpse of the fair Juliet and thus becomes a victim of "love at first sight." But is he really in love? Any sensible human being would think that he is not genuine in his



feelings for Juliet. I'm going to have my students examine this theory.

In seminar we argued that Shakespeare wants us to see his character Romeo developing to ultimately become the man sweet, innocent Juliet deserves. We can trace through the language and by his interactions with the other characters and in the plot development that he has truly moved from lust to love. We first see a shift when Romeo first meets Juliet at the ball. Prior to this, we have two young people who presumably have had no opportunity to develop any special gift for language. The best example we see of Romeo's dialogues in an exchange with Benvolio. Suddenly, with Juliet in sight at the ball, his dialogue drastically changes and he begins to make something like poetry<sup>10</sup> :

*Romeo:* O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!

It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night

As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear—

Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!

So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows

As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows.

The measure is done, I'll watch her place of stand

And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand.

Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight!

For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night. [I.iv.46-55]

As we said in seminar, it is here Romeo takes Juliet's hand and begins talking sonnets to her and you get a sense that the emotions he is feeling are stronger for Juliet than for Rosaline; as J.A. Bryant states in his introduction to the play "we have sensed a rightness of this unexpected attachment and its potential for permanence"<sup>11</sup> . As the play progresses to the balcony scene, the change in his emotions becomes more prominent since they are reciprocated from Juliet rather than be denied, as Rosaline has done. Actor Orlando Bloom had to portray Romeo back in 2007 and he recalls this impression: "Romeo is in love with the idea of love but it's not until he meets Juliet he understands what true love is." <sup>12</sup> But is this true love? What about Juliet: how does Juliet feel about Romeo?

Juliet is a young maiden at the age of thirteen. She is the only daughter of old Capulet and his wife. She has a very close relationship with her nurse; essentially it is the nurse that raises Juliet and their strong bond is evident upon our first meeting with these two characters. Lord Capulet states, "My child is yet a stranger in the world"<sup>13</sup> insinuating to Paris that she is young, maybe naïve, and innocent in regards to the outside world. However, Juliet is often argued as being the more active partner in the sudden romance. It is she on whom our main attention focuses, and it is she who has the best lines. If we examine the balcony scene, we see Juliet begin to speak in something like sonnets:

*Juliet:* O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?

Refuse thy father and refuse thy name:

Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,

And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.

Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.

What's Montague? It is not hand, nor foot,

Nor arm, nor face. O, be some other name

Belonging to a man.

What's in a name? That which we call a rose

By any other word would smell as sweet.

So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,

Without that title. Romeo doff thy name;

And for thy name, which is no part of thee,

Take all myself. [II.ii.33-49]

It is here we start this idea of isolation through choices they make.

As the plot moves forward, we start to see them two of them isolate themselves more and more to the point where they are only sharing information and feels with each other. We see this especially with their morning exchange after spending their first night together; they converse as if they are the only two in the world. Another example is Juliet getting rid of her support system (father, mother, and most especially her nurse); this is obvious in her shocked reaction to the nurse suggesting that she marry Paris. Juliet betraying her willing to "kill herself" to run away with Romeo. We always see Romeo in the secrecy of solitude. He keeps things to himself and does not discuss his feelings with his cousin Benvolio and best friend Mercutio. Romeo only confides his deepest feelings to Juliet. As they create their own form of isolation, we the audience can see this as love.

Another scene that I have my students read closely of is Act 4, Scene 3 where Juliet is contemplating with another important choice: whether to drink the potion or not.

*Juliet:* What if this mixture do not work at all?

Shall I be a married then tomorrow morning?



No, no! This shall forbid it. Lie thou there.

[lays down dagger]

What if it be poison which the friar

Subtly hath minist'ed to have me dead,

Lest in this marriage should be dishonored

Because he married me before to Romeo?

(IV.iii.21-26)

As the audience we are visualizing Juliet question the potion and whether that potion will work. She questions whether it will work and whether she will wake the next day and forced to marry another; she is critical of Friar Lawrence's ability to mix the tonic properly in that it may be poison and kill her; she's worried Romeo will not arrive on time to get her from the vault so that she will stuck down there with rotting dead bodies. In my opinion, these are all reasonable concerns, especially for a young teenager. However, none of these concerns demonstrated that her love for Romeo is compromised; her love for him is never questioned. "*Juliet: Romeo, Romeo, Romeo, I drink to thee. (IV.iii.58)*"<sup>14</sup>

She drinks the potion in faith that she will be reunited with her love Romeo. That is the one aspect that she does not question: is her love for Romeo or his love for her. So it is evident how Juliet feels on this question of true love.

### **Romeo, Mercutio, and Tybalt: Defending of a Friend or Making Poor Choices?**

Mercutio is one of Shakespeare's most memorable characters. As Harold Bloom states in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* Mercutio is the most notorious scene stealer in all of Shakespeare...Shakespeare declared he was obligated to kill of Mercutio, less Mercutio kill Shakespeare and hence the play."<sup>15</sup> Mercutio is commended for his wit and courage and promises a great comic role. On the flipside, he can be argumentative, crude, and heartless as we see demonstrated in his Queen Mab speech. In examining Mercutio, scholars see his role providing irony. He is seen as the debunker of love; he himself does not believe in love: "Love is an open arse and a poperin pear."<sup>16</sup>

"Tybalt is a bully" Paul Fry puts bluntly. Tybalt is a Capulet. He is seen as being the only one trying to act like the macho guy in the play and is very much 'by the book' as accused by Mercutio. The first time we meet Tybalt he is looking for a fight:

*Tybalt: What, art thou drawn among drawn among these heartless hinds?*

Turn thee, Benvolio; look upon thy death. (I.i.68-69)

To me, it seems as if Tybalt is the only substantial character who worries about the feud amongst the two families. When he sees Romeo at the ball, he insists on confronting him and is not worried about creating a scene; though, Lord Capulet delays him, however, and prevents him from causing an up roar at the party. This

motivates Tybalt to find Romeo on his own accord and confront him for his wrongdoings:

*Tybalt:* Romeo, the love I bear thee can afford

No better term than this: thou art a villain.

*Romeo:* Tybalt, the reason that I have to love thee

Doth much excuse the appertaining rage

To such a greeting. Villain I am none.

Therefore farewell. I see thou knowest me not.

*Tybalt:* Boy, this shall not excuse the injuries

That thou hast done me; therefore turn and draw (III.i.61-68)

For my students, I want to consider the climax of the play as Shakespeare has it in Act III and summarized by J.A. Bryant in the introduction to the play:

Tybalt deliberately sought to murder Romeo and Romeo so badly underestimated his challenger that he declined to defend himself; whereupon Mercutio, in defense of both Romeo's honor and his person, picked up the challenge and would have killed Tybalt but for Romeo's intervention. Tybalt then killed Mercutio, and Romeo killed Tybalt in revenge.<sup>17</sup>

But one should ask: what if Romeo never intervened? J.A. Bryant states that Tybalt would surely be slain at the hand of Mercutio; since he was family of the prince his punishment would be minimal. This family feud would then die with Tybalt. "Mercutio was on point of bringing to pass what neither civil authority nor well-intentioned but misplaced ingenuity had been able to accomplish, and Romeo with a single sentimental action destroyed his only hope of averting tragedy."<sup>18</sup> This is another question I would pose to my students in regard to choices- let's consider what the hypothetical outcome would have been if Romeo didn't make the choice to intervene.

### **Examining Character in Macbeth**

In regards to the play *Macbeth*, this is the question that Professor Gail Kern Pastor asks: "The real question that they raise of course is to what extent they play or only see the evil in him...does the supernatural cause anything in the play or does it simply forecast what is already going to happen." <sup>19</sup> So where does the darkness truly come from? Is it from the witches or is the evil already present in the man? I want to see if my students can tackle this on-going debate that Professor Stephan Greenblatt proposes: "Part of the cunning of Macbeth lies in the difficulty everyone has in determining what is that these creatures are doing and how much responsibility that they have for what you see unfolding." <sup>20</sup> Shakespeare does a beautiful job of writing to his audience's desires; it is in our human desire to interpret and find meaning within what we see happening and yet might not fully comprehend. In this scene, Shakespeare leaves us wondering if we can

easily be influenced by others if it solely benefits our ambitions and question how far we are willing to go to achieve our desires (for example, willing to murder our competition just to get ahead).

**The Witches: should we hold them responsible for creating a monster?**

Over four hundred years ago witches were seen not as whimsy or fantasy or flilly extras in the play to make the story interesting but as real figures that often served as makers of medicine or forecasters of the future. Historian Justin Champion states that in 1597 King James I wrote a book about demonology stating he was against witches since he was convinced that witches could help destroy the divine monarchy. King James believed that witches were a direct link to the devil. "Great anxiety that plagued and dominated the 16<sup>th</sup> /17<sup>th</sup> century political realm was the devil through the Pope or the Anti-Christ was going to topple the Protestant rule in England."<sup>21</sup> Thus, Shakespeare took a huge risk in including figures of the supernatural, yet he knew that this was seen as powerful language that the audience would connect with right away. Even today, the audience is drawn and fascinated. But what role did the supernatural play in our fated character?

The trio of witches appears at the opening of the play, and they state their purpose is "There to meet with Macbeth" which means in the coming lines they are going to have an interaction with Macbeth. Then, in Act I, Scene III the witches forecast the future:

*First Witch:* All hail Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!

*Second Witch:* All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!

*Third Witch:* All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter! [I.iii.47-49]

They go on to predict Banquo's fate as well:

*First Witch:* Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.

*Second Witch:* Not so happy, yet much happier.

*Third Witch:* Thou shalt get kings, thou shalt be none. [I.iii.65-68]

Unfortunately, Banquo will never be king following the prophecy of the witches. We see the first part of the prophecy come true when King Duncan honors Macbeth I giving him the new title Thane of Cawdor (just as the witches predicted). In seeing this premonition become a reality, Macbeth sets out to further his fate and murder Duncan. After Macbeth moves forward with killing Duncan, he sends out two assassins to kill Banquo and his son. The assassins succeed in killing Banquo but his son Fleance escaped. So as the play continues we are seeing how accurate these three witches were in predicting Macbeth's fate. Here's the question: should we hold fate responsible for Macbeth's actions or is Macbeth truly to blame?

**Macbeth and Lady Macbeth: How far will they go to get their deepest desires?**

Who would you claim to be the villain in this tragedy, Macbeth or Lady Macbeth? Both characters play a role in several murders in order to reach a prophesied desire. Is there any point in time when either character questions or reconsiders their choices? Do they feel remorse for their bad choices? In another close read

activity, I am going to have my students examine these two characters in an attempt to answer these questions.

Aristotle stated that the best tragedy concerns a man who does a deed of horror in ignorance. However, Macbeth is not confused about the criminal nature of his deed. When he kills the king who is his guest and generous lord, he knows he does a “horrid deed”.<sup>22</sup> Even before he commits the murder, he foresees the outcome of his actions. He is plagued by feelings of immense guilt. Yet, this just makes Macbeth more determined in his destructive path:

*Macbeth:* From this moment

The very firstlings of my heart shall be

The firstlings of my hand. And even now,

To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and

Done:

The castle of Macduff I will surprise;

Seize upon Fife; give to th’ edge o’ the’ sword

His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls

That trace him in his line. No boasting like a fool;

This deed I’ll do before this purpose cool. [IV.i.146-54]

We see his calculating villainy progress in this plot he creates against Macduff and his family to ensure his stability upon the throne. His opponents begin to see Macbeth as a butcher, a tyrant, while in contrast, Malcolm—the true heir to the throne—as trustworthy and patriotic. Malcolm and his men are viewed as God’s soldiers while Macbeth is a hellhound.

Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare’s most shocking characters. In Act I, Scene VII Macbeth starts to question their action plan in killing King Duncan. At one point, she states she would sacrifice her own child rather than fail to pursue their murderous intentions:

*Lady Macbeth:* I have given suck, and know

How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me.

I would, while it was smiling in my face,

Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums

And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you

Have done to this (I.vii.54-59]

This scene depicts woman in a completely different realm. Throughout Shakespeare's plays, you see and can identify with strong female figures. However, this is the first time you glimpse a woman as being, evil and adopting the role as a villain in her conniving schemes to see Macbeth succeed in killing Duncan. Having finished reading the graphic novel interpretation of the play, students will be given the task of arguing this point: Who is to blame? Is it right to claim that there were bad influences involved or are you solely to blame for the consequences of your actions?

## Strategies

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### Close Reading

Close reading is defined as a careful and purposeful reading of a text. When incorporating this strategy, it is said you follow the rule of three. This means that students will read the same text three different times. The first encounter is reading the text in its entirety; the second could be single words or sentences that help the student reflect on individual word meaning; the third could be smaller portions of the text to help focus on one major aspect or comparison to another version/interpretation of the same text to help students focus on a particular section or aspect you want your students to see about the text. I plan on using this strategy in reading both of the plays using the various graphic novel interpretations as well as reading the original text excerpts that were selected from the plays.

### Graphic Novels

Educators agree that graphic novels are useful for teaching new vocabulary, visual literacy, and reading skills. The images scaffold word/sentence comprehension and a deeper interpretation of the words and story. This is essential for understanding the language of Shakespeare. For my sixth graders to get exposure to the plays and learn the plot, we will read *Romeo & Juliet* as retold by Martin Powell and Illustrated by Eva Cabrera as well as the plain text version *Romeo and Juliet* written by Ian McNeilly; we will read *Macbeth* as retold by Martin Powell and illustrated by F. Daniel.

### Think Pair Share

Think-Pair-Share is a specific type of responding to questions strategy. It allows for collaborative learning in that students think and generate their own conclusions about a prompt or question. They then pair up with their assigned partner (or a peer of their choice) and share the conclusions they each came up with. The Think-Pair-Share strategy will be implemented to allow the students to collaborate and share their ideas on the author's intentions and use of persuasive techniques.

### Collaborative Groups

Working together with peers is a life skill that students need to practice and accomplish. With collaborative learning, it allows students to learn to work together towards a common goal. Each member of the group is accountable to each other and required to participate in order to achieve the final outcome. Students need to

learn how to work respectfully with others and learn how to consider each other's points of views and opinions. Collaboration also benefits students in that by listening to their peers they can develop better understanding of the task or content; it also extends their thinking by hearing other perspectives that they may not have considered or thought of. Individual and group evaluations are essential to monitor the group's work and their progress working as a team.

### **Socratic Seminar/Fish Bowl**

A Socratic Seminar is a scholarly discussion of an essential question in which student opinions are shared, proven, refuted, and refined through dialogue with other students. In classes of more than fifteen students, the fishbowl format for Socratic seminars should be used. In employing the fish bowl, the students are working in partners developing their points they want to share out in the discussion. During the Socratic Seminar, one of the partners will participate in the first round of discussion while the other sits on the outside and observes/takes notes. We will use this approach after reading *Macbeth* to discuss character choices and who is to blame for their actions.

## **Teacher Resources**

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Romeo and Juliet Graphic Novel by Martin Powell

Macbeth Graphic Novel by Martin Powell

Romeo and Juliet Graphic Novel by Ian McNeilly

Signet Classic version of the plays *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth* for excerpts of the play for close reading

Poster board

Access to internet/color printer

## **Classroom Activities**

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### **Activity One: Graphic Novels**

#### **Part A: Comparison of the Two Graphic Novels**

To help students better understand character motivation for the play *Romeo and Juliet*, we will first read the graphic novel interpretation of the play by Martin Powell. This particular graphic novel shares the basic story line of the play but incorporates only small portions of the Shakespearean language as a part of the dialogue of the characters. This will help introduce the students to word choices made by the author. For the second activity, we will read the graphic interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* by Ian McNeilly and compare the two versions of the text. Using the "Think, Pair, Share" strategy, students will work with a partner to identify the

similarities and differences between the texts. Ultimately, I want students to recognize that McNeilly incorporates more dialogue for each character, hence provides a better understanding of the character and their choices. For example, Mercutio and Tybalt have more dialogue and their prominence is highlighted in the McNeilly version while in the Martin version they play minor roles and the emphasis is exclusively on Romeo and Juliet. On the other hand, I want students to see that Martin does a good job of incorporating the language of Shakespeare as a part of the dialogue while McNeilly does not.

### **Part B: Character Action Diagrams**

After reading the two graphic novel interpretations, students will map out the plot focusing on the choices the characters make. Students will follow the choices made by these four characters in particular: Romeo, Juliet, Mercutio, and Tybalt from *Romeo and Juliet*. In regards to *Macbeth*, students will closely follow the decisions made by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Following the idea of a “timeline” as used in a history or a Social Studies class, students will create an event “timeline” or a plot diagram based on the choices each character makes as a way to summarize the plot of the play. This will also be a springboard for the discussion of character motivation and whether the choice the character made was the best option; we will also examine different outcomes: if the character had made a different choice, how would the plot be different?

### **Activity Two: “Insta-Shakespeare”**

Since my students are avid users of social media, they will create an Instagram account for the characters of *Romeo and Juliet*. Instagram is a form of social media that is mainly visual; the user of the app posts images that reflect who they are as an individual. There are two ways images can be put on display. The user can take an actual photograph in the moment, as in using a camera, and share to their followers; or you can upload an image found online and post it on your profile to share online. Along with posting the photo, there is an area where the user can create a caption for the photo explaining what the photo represents. Instagram is a unique app in that it allows for others to see the photos you post as followers. These followers can also make comments on a photo/image.

Working in collaborative groups of four, each member of the group will embody one character: Romeo, Juliet, Mercutio, or Tybalt. Pretending to be this character, students will have to find five to ten images that tie back to the character’s family, emotions, and choices, and place the images on the poster board provided. They will need to explain why they chose this photo to represent their character. The other three students in their group (each representing another character) have to create a comment for each of the images as if talking to the character their group mate represents.

### **Activity Three: Socratic Seminar on Character Choices and Essay**

As a culminating activity for both plays, students will participate in a Socratic seminar in the format of a fishbowl. In employing the fishbowl method, students will work with a partner to develop their argument and points they want to address on the four questions presented: (1) Does true love really exist? (2) What qualities create a good friend? (3) Can we blame others for the choices we make? (4) Is there such a thing as a bad influence?

Each partner will have to answer two of the four questions presented; as a part of their argument, they have to quote the graphic novels we read as well as the lines from the various scenes provided in their argument. For the question “Does true love really exist” we will focus on the dialogue shared between Romeo and Juliet in Act II and Act IV. For the question “what qualities create a good friend?” we will examine the fight scene



between Mercutio, Tybalt and Romeo in Act III. For the last two questions, we will examine portions of *Macbeth* and lines from speeches by the witches, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to find evidence that supports their arguments for these two proposed inquiries. The role of the non-speaking partner during the debate is to take notes outside of the circle in order for their team to develop a counterargument.

As a final assessment, students will use the notes they took during the debate as well as what they discovered as evidence for their answers to each proposed question to write an essay summarizing their responses to each question. Students can work with their partners to peer edit their responses (using a guide and copy of the rubric provided by myself) but each student is responsible for their own essay.

## Annotated Bibliography

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Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*. Edited by J.A. Bryant. New York, New York: New American Library, 1986.

This is the Signet Classics edition of William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*. I'm using this edition I for the quoting of the lines from the play that I am incorporating as a part of my analysis and classroom activities.

"Romeo and Juliet with Joseph Fiennes." Denton, Richard. *Shakespeare Uncovered*. PBS. 13 Feb. 2015. Radio.

This is an episode of a series entitled *Shakespeare Uncovered* that was broadcasted by PBS. Each episode breaks down and examines one of William Shakespeare's plays. This one in particular has actor Joseph Fiennes narrate the play *Romeo and Juliet*. I found this very useful to refresh my understanding of *Romeo and Juliet*; it discussed how actors who played the characters came to understand the story, the character choices, and emotions of the play. I will most likely allow my students to watch clips to help give them a better understanding of the play.

"Macbeth with Ethan Hawke." Denton, Richard. *Shakespeare Uncovered*. PBS. 25 Jan. 2013. Radio.

This is an episode of a series entitled *Shakespeare Uncovered* that was broadcast[] by PBS. Each episode breaks down and examines one of William Shakespeare's plays. This one in particular has actor Ethan Hawke narrate and discuss the play *Macbeth*. I found this very useful to refresh my understanding of *Macbeth*; it discussed how actors who played the characters came to understand the story, the character choices, and emotions of the play. I will most likely allow my students to watch clips to help give them a better understanding of the play.

Forster, E. M. *Aspects of the Novel*,. Vol. 12. London: Edward Arnold, 1974. 169.

This book summarizes the various aspects of what constitutes a novel. I used this resource to help explain why character is essentially the driving force that creates the plot, which is based on character motivation.

Wells, Stanley. *The Shakespeare Book: Big Ideas Simply Explained*. New York, New York: DK Publishing, 2015.

This book summarizes all of William Shakespeare's works. It gives a short biography of William Shakespeare and account of the Elizabethan Theatre along with a simplified explanation of all of his plays.

## Appendix

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### Appendix A: Common Core Standards

RL.6.3: Describe how a particular story or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.

RL.6.7: Compare and contrast the experience of reading a story, drama, or poem to listening to or viewing an audio, video, or live version of the text, including contrasting what they "see" and "hear" when reading the text to what they perceive when they listen or watch

RL.6.9 Compare and contrast texts in different forms or genres (e.g., stories and poems; historical novels and fantasy stories) in terms of their approaches to similar themes.

RI.6.10: By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 6-8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

## Notes

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1. Films for the Humanities & Sciences *Shakespeare's Globe*
2. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare the Invention of the Human*, 6
3. A. Bryant Jr. , essay in *Romeo and Juliet*, ixvi
4. PBS Arts, *Shakespeare Uncovered: Macbeth*
5. Sylvan Barnet, Introduction to *Macbeth*, lxvii
6. Webster dictionary
7. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 60
8. David Teague, interview
9. PBS Arts, *Shakespeare Uncovered*, *Romoe and Juliet*
10. A. Bryant, lxxi
11. *ibid*
12. PBS Arts, *Shakespeare Uncovered: Romeo and Juliet*
13. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*,14.
14. *ibid*,
15. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare the Invention of the Human*, 93
16. *ibid*, 97
17. *ibid*, xxvii
18. *ibid*
19. PBS Arts, *Shakespeare Uncovered: Macbeth*
20. *ibid*
21. *ibid*
22. A. Bryant, *Macbeth*, lxxv

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