



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

The Question of Desire: A Comparison of Love in Shakespeare

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Introduction

Romeo and Juliet and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* give rise to a great deal of commentary on the topics of desire and love. When considering the words and actions of the characters within these plays, one can arrive at two very differing conclusions about love, complicated by the fact that one play is a tragedy and the other a comedy. What is the difference between love and desire? Is love fated and inescapable? Or is love arbitrary and messy, and purely a matter of chance? By examining the decisions and thoughts of characters within these two plays we can attempt to answer this question in different ways.

Shakespeare's works have always held a special literary place in my mind, though I may not have always fully understood them. Each year I have taught, I have tried to extend that passion to my students with different works, and each year has met with varied successes and problematic hurdles. It can be challenging to inspire young people to care about the words of an author who died before their view of American history begins. It wasn't until I began to use the connecting tissue of television programs, music and even pop culture that I started to have some success with increasing students' interest in what this famous playwright had to say.

Once I'd motivated my students to care about Shakespeare's works, the second biggest hurdle was sustaining that interest and helping my students to explore character and not just plot. Students who read the opening sonnet of *Romeo and Juliet* would discover that the two lovers would eventually die (or already knew that from hearsay), and they then considered the entire play and experience to be spoiled and impossible to enjoy. My struggle was repeatedly to show my students that these plays aren't just the soap operas of Early Modern times, but character studies of deeply complicated and flawed individuals.

Rationale

The district I teach in is quickly growing to become the largest school district in Oklahoma, but defies the expectations of many. Tulsa Public Schools sprawls across a primarily urban area, with pockets of crime and poverty scattered throughout. Hale Junior High came into being in the wake of a district-wide shake-up that

combined schools. Due to this, there are still several factions of students within the school that don't identify with the mascots, colors, or school activities and feel unjustly relocated to a place that isn't their home. Additionally, ten percent of the student body comes from homeless shelters and safe havens for abused individuals. The projections for the 2015-2016 school year place over half of our students as having a language other than English as their first, with most of these students still struggling as English language learners. For all of these reasons and more, many students feel alienated from their education and community.

Within the school where I teach, there exists an array of situations that reflect the conflicts and truths in Shakespeare's works. There are divides along racial lines with some deciding to cross those boundaries for love. There is peer pressure to participate in gang activity, often coming from quarrels passed along from older generations. Drug usage is also a common activity for many students. Combine all of this happening alongside the confusing middle school years and we often have a difficult constituency to serve adequately. This population is also very modern and progressive, with a large LGBT population and a number of youths who are enthralled by the idea of transgender dressing. In this environment, I believe an exploration of Shakespeare's characters could help students not only to see the world around them better, but to understand themselves on a deeper level. I teach both 7th and 8th grade English Language Arts and will be responsible for assignments that enhance comprehension, vocabulary, speaking, listening, and writing skills.

My classes are composed of mostly English language learners, the majority being male and all of them on free-lunch programs for those living in poverty.

Objectives

This unit hopes to offer students an introduction to the world of Shakespeare, though it could be used by anybody looking to create comparison between the two aforementioned plays and the characters within them. Students will first read Shakespeare's *Sonnet 130*, inviting them to question the nature of beauty, attraction and desire, before delving into selected scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*, then tackling *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in its entirety, paying special attention to how characters perceive the world around them, the choices their desires lead them to and how they relate to other characters.

As the focus of the unit is on character, nearly all standards relating to characterization, internal or external conflict motive, word choice, and tone are relevant and of importance. Additionally, because we will explore two plays side-by-side, standards related to comparison and contrast of two or more works or scenes also are well-served throughout this unit, as well as standards for sequence. This is also an excellent time to explore the literary structure of a drama with students, addressing standards calling for a close reading of sonnets, soliloquy, rhyme, rhythm, and iambic pentameter. It is also possible to incidentally address a number of other standards, such as personification, irony, and plot structure.

Suggested vocabulary words for this unit are: sonnet, arbitrary, apothecary, charm, destiny, consent, jest, lament, vow, melancholy, soliloquy, stanza, imagery, verse, mend, ironic and personification.

Content

Summary of the Works

The two Shakespearean works at the core of this unit are *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Both plays prominently feature forbidden desires, but have severely different endings while still displaying opposite, conflicting messages concerning the nature of love, bringing the reader to question whether love is fated and to be considered the most exalted of emotions or whether love is merely a cynical case of good timing and settling for the first love you find.

Romeo and Juliet introduces two rival households in the city of Verona, the Montagues and Capulets, that are unable to coexist at the onset of the play, in spite of their prince declaring they should reach for peace. A young boy from one of the households, Romeo Montague, attends a party of the opposing faction to cure his lovesick heart of an unrequited love. Instead, he meets the beautiful Juliet Capulet and attempts to win her affections with a bold and poetic profession of desire. Juliet is smitten but quickly realizes the problem of falling for one's sworn enemy. As she ponders this, Romeo comes to her and the two affirm their attraction to one another.

However, various forces conspire against the lovers. For example, Juliet is to marry the wealthy County Paris and she does not want to participate in bigamy--though she likely would have gone through with the wedding to him if she hadn't already met, and married, the dashing Romeo. Additionally, the ongoing feud between their families fuels events that lead the death of Romeo's friend Mercutio at the hands of Juliet's cousin, Tybalt. Romeo then avenges Mercutio, killing Tybalt. Romeo flees while Juliet seeks a way to escape her family and be with him. A solution is proposed: Juliet will take a sleeping drug and upon being thought dead be put inside her family's tomb where Romeo, having received word that she truly lives, will come and awake his new bride. Yet once the plan is in motion, Romeo only receives word of Juliet's death and goes to see her body, where he encounters a seemingly devoted Paris saying his own goodbyes and leaving flowers at Juliet's grave. When Paris sees Romeo, he fears that he is going to defile the Capulet tomb and attempts to defend the honor of the household, but is slain by Romeo. Upon seeing his love seemingly dead, Romeo consumes poison and dies, after which Juliet wakes to discover Romeo's corpse. In desperation to avoid returning to a life without love, Juliet takes his dagger from his sheath and kills herself. In the end, the city's prince condemns the families for the situation, lamenting the tragedy that has transpired.

The story in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* begins with the ruler of Athens, Theseus, celebrating a successful conquest during which he abducted a fiancée, Hippolyta. He is approached by a father, Egeus, who is frustrated that his daughter, Hermia, has fallen in love with Lysander though he had hoped for her to marry a man he is fond of named Demetrius. Theseus gives Hermia an ultimatum if she will not obey her father: become a nun or die. The two lovers hatch a plan to escape into the woods but are pursued by Demetrius and the woman infatuated with him, Helena.

In the forest, Puck (or Robin Goodfellow) has been given two assignments by Oberon, king of the fairies: first, to help embarrass Oberon's wife, Titania, by using a love potion to make her fall in love with the first thing she sees upon waking and second, to resolve Helena's unrequited love by using the same potion on Demetrius. Things do not go according to plan, as Puck mistakenly drugs Lysander. Further, Demetrius also comes into contact with the love potion and falls for Helena as well, leaving Hermia alone and unloved. Further complicating matters, Titania wakes to behold a human laborer named Bottom who, through Puck's continued

mischievous, now possesses the head of an ass. These lovers pursue their desires through the forest until the fairies ultimately set things right. Theseus comes upon the lovers in the forest and decides to have a group wedding with the now resolved couples of Hermia and Lysander as well as Helena and Demetrius, all to be celebrated alongside his own marriage to Hippolyta.

In the end, the couples are witness to the all-too-familiar production of “Pyramus and Thisbe,” put on by Bottom’s all-male company. In this play within the play, the lovers Pyramus and Thisbe whisper through a wall and plan to meet at a tomb to finally be together. Thisbe arrives first at the tomb and is attacked by a lion and flees, dropping her shawl. When Pyramus arrives at the scene, he sees the shawl and, thinking Thisbe dead, kills himself. Thisbe finds Pyramus dead and commits suicide as well. The spectators comment on the absurdity of the production by the group of Athenian laborers (called “rude mechanicals”) and continue with their seemingly happy lives.

Historical Considerations

Romeo and Juliet was published in 1597 and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in 1600, though many contest that Shakespeare was working on these plays alongside others and his sonnets as early as 1593, constantly making revisions while acting in them (Rolfe, 97). During this time, the Elizabethan era, only male actors were on the stage, as involvement in acting troupes was considered to be unfitting for a woman. Women were regarded as needing someone to protect them and keep them from temptations; therefore they couldn’t possibly belong in the unsavory environment of the Elizabethan playhouse. Male actors became accustomed to playing female roles, though Shakespeare often considered this limitation in his creation of characters. This forethought is reflected in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, as we see one of the mechanicals, Flute, being assigned the role of Thisbe due to his higher voice and feminine features.

It is also important to consider that during this time the Catholic Church was a very dominant force throughout Europe, forcing many laws and ordinances on not only the religious, but all people. These religious expectations are upheld in *Romeo and Juliet* in a number of ways, as the play makes constant allusion to Catholic beliefs. These beliefs are at the moral core of the play, as the Prince forbids dueling in Verona, something that the Catholic Church and the Pope of the time would have certainly been strongly against. Romeo also spends a great deal of his leisure time in the company of a friar of the Catholic Church and frequently indulges in religious imagery.

Shakespeare’s life also offers many connections to the worlds of *Romeo and Juliet* as well as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Many have hypothesized that Shakespeare had a cynical and jaded view of love, as after his death he left his wife Anne Hathaway only his “second best bed” in his will. This slight suggests he wasn’t happy in his relationship with his wife, though it could just be another clever intrigue on the part of Shakespeare. Others point to Shakespeare’s homosexual tendencies, hinting at a forbidden love that brought a great deal of frustration to the playwright, citing many of his sonnets to a fair youth or young man and the abundant presence of homosexual and cross-dressing characters in his plays.

Fate Versus Luck: Characters’ Perceptions of Love

Romeo and Juliet presents a different view of desire and love than can be found in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The central message of *Romeo and Juliet* seems to highlight the importance of love in overcoming insurmountable hate and paints a picture in which love is fated, severe and worth dying for. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* seems to mock this very notion in its conclusion and repeatedly shows us how random and arbitrary desire is and how quickly human beings jump to believe that desire and love are the same thing. It is

also important when considering these characters and their outlook on love to also examine hate, as Shakespeare often deals in contrasting ideas in order to heighten drama. What do these characters' attitudes convey? Is love arbitrary or is love fated, and in either case, do we as humans have any free will in the matter?

Romeo's outlook on love changes throughout the play, though it is central to his character and drives his decisions more than anything else. He is perhaps overly emotional, as he is also quick to act when his friend Mercutio is slain, and even blames Juliet for driving him to become more effeminate in feeling. He begins smitten by a character who never actually appears within the play, Rosaline. He seems to view the passion of love above all else, saying to Benvolio:

When the devout religion of mine eye
Maintains such falsehood, then turn tears to fires;
And these, who often drown'd could never die,
Transparent heretics, be burnt for liars!
One fairer than my love! the all-seeing sun
Ne'er saw her match since first the world begun.

(1.3.95-100)

Here, Romeo uses the word "religion" to discuss his love for Rosaline and invokes strong religious imagery to profess his dedication to her. He has no desire to let these feelings go, or so he indicates to Benvolio. Of course, Romeo then quickly changes his mind about this when he meets Juliet at the Capulet party, indicating it is likely that he truly knows very little about the nature of love or what it is like to be in a long-lasting relationship, in a way forsaking the "religion" that he spoke to Benvolio. He even questions whether he knew the meaning of love before he first saw Juliet. As he approaches her in their first meeting, his words again take on a religious tone, as his first words to woo her are:

If I profane with my unworhiest hand
This holy shrine the gentle fine is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

(1.5.104-107)

While it is possible Romeo is merely saying the words he believes Juliet hopes to hear, it seems he holds the idea of love and the object of his desire in high and holy regard. Considering his closest friend and confidant within the play is a friar within what appears to be the Catholic church, it seems undeniable that Romeo has at

least some faith and commitment to the church and his words here suggest that he would willingly blaspheme these long-held beliefs for the sudden love of Juliet. Romeo's religious frame of mind continues throughout the play, even after he discovers that Juliet is dead. While Romeo is undeniably love-struck throughout all these events, he clearly remains devout. He later considers himself "fortune's fool" at the outcome of the duel with Tybalt, but he never believes his love to be purely a matter of chance.

Romeo's views on both religion and love seem to change over the short course of a few days. Perhaps this is because Romeo is simply in love with the very idea of love itself, and is merely looking for an object to bestow his poetic sonnets upon. His words often convey a gravity and experience of love that isn't fitting with the brief span of time in which he has known love. Especially considering his previous courtship of Rosaline, it is entirely possible that Romeo's love is no more authentically grounded than those the lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* experience, as Romeo transfers his affections so quickly. Romeo's devotion to religion, much like his view of love, is in constant flux and is still malleable, as such thoughts might well be in any youth. Still, the two concepts are strongly tied together within Romeo's heart and mind, as his words often display, and this lends gravity to his devotion to Juliet.

Juliet's view of love is perhaps a bit more complex, perhaps even more sophisticated, as she has witnessed her parents' dispassionate relationship, where mother and father are companionate but no longer model love. Further, her parents arrange a marriage for her to Paris, something that reflects their own loveless and perhaps arranged marriage, but which Juliet refuses. Juliet has no desire for this "man of wax" (1.3.76), though her mother and her nurse desperately try to persuade her to accept the relationship she is offered at multiple points throughout the play, with Lady Capulet emphasizing his wealth as a factor to marry him. Juliet also wisely believes love may indeed be irrational and even arbitrary, saying that "if love be blind, / It best agrees with night" (3.2.9-10) on the evening when she anticipates consummating her love with Romeo, but seems also to be suggesting that the blindness of love has led her to a feeling that is genuine.

If one has any questions about the truth of Romeo and Juliet's love, Shakespeare provides a strong and clear scene where we are shown that the two are instantly reading the thoughts of the other and able to finish one another's sentences in the sonnet in which they first meet, a witty bout of stichomythia. While quick to act, the pair do commit to one another through the sacrament of marriage before they give in to temptation. Ultimately, based upon their actions, it is clear that both Romeo and Juliet believe that their love for one another is all-important. They cannot imagine a world without that love and choose death instead. Their outlook on love is polarizing. It is thought of as foolish and impulsive by some and as the greatest proof of true romance by others.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the characters view love very differently. The first two characters to appear in the play emerge from mythology: Theseus, champion of the labyrinth who slew the minotaur and sailed home with Ariadne as his intended bride, and Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons and daughter of Ares, the Greek god of war. It is also interesting that, according to these original myths, it was Heracles and not Theseus who conquered Hippolyta, suggesting even heroes of legend are interchangeable. Theseus views Hippolyta as a trophy won and brought home in the conquest of war, boasting to her "Hippolyta, I woo'd thee with my sword, / And won thy love, doing thee injuries." (1.1.13-14) While the reader might anticipate that Hippolyta views their impending marriage with contempt and would be unwilling to marry the man who dominated her, instead her response is obedience to his gestures of courtship as she seems to accept her role as a captured prize, though she is subject to fits of what seems like depression.

Love, or something like it, flies back and forth among the lovers who enter the forest. The young beauty

Hermia is deeply in love with the nobleman Lysander, but their desire to be together is impeded by her father. It is unclear why the two are so deeply in love, but it is even more confusing why Hermia's father insists upon his daughter marrying Demetrius. There are no discernible qualities that set him apart as a better husband, as again the characters of Lysander and Demetrius are nearly identical based upon the lines we can read on the page. Helena exists as a foil to Hermia, seemingly having no ties of love at the play's onset. She seems excessively infatuated with Demetrius and unaware of how attraction or desire work, boasting that she is as beautiful as Hermia (which, if true, would challenge the preference of Demetrius even further). Perhaps Helena's existence reflects Juliet's notion of blind love, as she clearly sees something everyone else does not.

As it is King Oberon's duty to ensure that all love ends up as it is meant to be, you would think that he and the fairies under his command would have a high opinion of love. However, they repeatedly use this power to manipulate the desires of others, with Oberon even putting into motion the plan to drug his own wife. Perhaps this is tied to a need for Oberon to exert authority over his wife, much as Theseus does at the beginning of the play. In the midst of the confusion caused by King Oberon's love potion, Puck seems to become carried away and revels in the sight of the lovers acting so foolishly, reminding the audience that perhaps the fates are just laughing at the ways in which we pair ourselves. Puck exists to remind us about the dark side of love: it is temporary, arbitrary and almost completely a matter of luck.

While *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is full of characters who are self-involved, none seems to exemplify this more than the buffoonish fool Bottom. He does present an interesting question, though, wondering at how the ladies in the audience will react when they discover his character, Pyramus, is dead. He goes so far as to write a prologue in which the audience is made aware of the full story, something that occurs in the very same way in *Romeo and Juliet* where the prologue warns the audience that both of the star-crossed lovers will die. Bottom exists as the only character present in all three of the spheres presented: the lower class acting troupe within the woods, the higher class palace of Athens, and finally in the realm of fairies as he is pursued by Titania. Bottom reminds us that regardless of class, we are tethered to an ignorant view of love that is perhaps born from what we dream it to be.

The Importance of Timing

Between the two plays, it seems one factor separates the happy and tragic lovers. For our tragic characters, it seems time is never on their side, allowing them little control over decisions and events in the play. For our comedic characters, it seems coincidence and lucky timing are their friend, solving their problems for them, leaving them little need to grow and struggle along the way.

In the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, the pair are victims of especially bad timing. First, they discover one another at a time of great discord among their families, while Juliet's family also happens to house a bigot, Tybalt, with an unrelenting grudge toward anyone with the wrong last name. Second, they happen to fall prey to a series of events on the day they are married: Mercutio's death can be staged as an accident, as it was in Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 film adaptation. If Mercutio and consequently Tybalt hadn't met early ends, it is likely the two would have successfully eloped, perhaps off to nearby woods where they might meet some kind fairies. Next, we witness the misunderstandings surrounding the friar's plan to put Juliet into an induced coma and then send word to Romeo of the plan. Many who have seen the play question this decision, wondering at how such a convoluted plan could have been expected to be successful. Juliet even questions this plan, thinking to herself "What if this mixture do not work at all?" (4.3.21) and "What if it be a poison, which the friar / Subtly hath minister'd to have me dead?" (4.3.25) Again, Zeffirelli's film shows us clearly why the miscommunication regarding Juliet's apparent death occurs, as Balthasar races toward Mantua on a steed with mistaken bad

news and Friar John, delivering the good news, walks a mule along, yet another example of unfortunate timing. Finally, no example of bad timing is more excruciating than the deaths of the lovers, which are only moments apart. This is well presented in Carlo Carlei's 2013 film adaptation, where Juliet rises as Romeo is consuming his poison. It lends further tragedy to the scene: if Romeo had taken but a minute more, we might have seen an entirely different reunion.

In many ways, the characters of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are fortunate to have the good timing that allows them their happy endings. Theseus waits the four days' length of the play, delaying his marriage to Hippolyta, which is certainly good timing for the lovers as he helps to quell Egeus' frustrations about Hermia's choices.

The lovers' choice to set off into the woods was also impeccable timing, as each character pursued another through the luckiest word-of-mouth. Oberon only gets his wish to embarrass Titania through the random chance of her first seeing Bottom wearing the donkey's head. Similarly, Lysander is also fortunate in his timing because he first sees Helena upon waking. This may seem to be unfortunate, but only in the short term, as Puck does eventually fix all, something that might not have transpired without the farce that had ensued. For here we are presented with the idea that, while luck and timing certainly are present in love, there are forces out of our control, the fairies, which are amused at our whims of desire but still arrange them satisfactorily. Only through "acting comically as puppets" at the whims of the forces around them do any of these people seem to make it out of the woods (Comtois, 16). It seems that here, fate and luck are tied together by the thread of fortunate timing.

The Mirror Images of Comedy and Tragedy

Within the two plays being studied, there exist an array of characters that have parallel roles. There are even themes and symbols that are very much the same in each play. However, the way in which each character approaches the problems at hand set them apart from their counterparts at times, offering us insight into how characters perceive desire, love and the world around them.

A Midsummer Night's Dream sets the stage with an ominous message in its first scene, as Lysander laments "the course of true love never did run smooth," (I.i.134) yet for the characters in this play, their path to find love is anything but rough, all things considered. Shortly thereafter, he and Hermia vow their love for one another and she even goes as far as to call their relationship an "edict in destiny" (I.i.151) suggesting they are fated to be star crossed lovers, as Romeo and Juliet are.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, the Prince who rules Verona urges the families who are at odds to love one another and cease the quarrels that will eventually lead to the tragic outcome. However, when the ruler Theseus presented with a similar situation when Hermia's father attempts to force marriage to Demetrius, he does not counsel love but force, insisting that she obey her father's wishes. This is not surprising of Theseus though, as he has already presented himself as an individual who physically conquered his wife in order to obtain her.

Hermia bears some comparison to Juliet as well. In her protest against her father's wish that she marry Demetrius, she is given the option to get herself to a nunnery or perish. Her realization that she must choose between a life without any possibility of love and death itself is much like the decision Juliet is faced with in the tragic climax of *Romeo and Juliet*. We are left to know little else about Hermia's thoughts on the topic, as she is never presented with those grim options. In fact, Hermia certainly survives the lonely situation she finds herself in when Lysander has abandoned her to pursue Helena due to the love potion administered by Puck.

Romeo's capacity to turn so quickly from passion for Rosaline to devotion for Juliet suggests he is as fickle as the young lovers affected by Puck's love potion. However, as the audience, we are never witness to Romeo's interactions with Rosaline and instead are first shown his complete infatuation with Juliet. Elsewhere, the lovers of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* interchange among romantic pairings and rarely find themselves in a situation in the first half of the play where they are happy with their current romantic prospects.

While *Romeo and Juliet* is certainly a tragedy and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* a comedy, the initial states of the characters seem to strongly suggest the opposite. All is not well in Athens: a ruler who has acquired a wife through violence immediately threatens a girl with death for pursuing her heart's desire and it seems nobody can have love reciprocated. Verona has a grim but promising situation initially: a hopeful pronouncement in favor of peace is reinforced by the meeting of two rivals falling in love. One might venture that by examining only the exposition of each play, each appears to belong to the opposite genre.

As readers or the audience, we are only left to guess at how a relationship born from one member conquering the other could end well; the same applies to Demetrius apparently remaining in a drugged state at the end of the play, completely devoid of choice. "Shakespeare's deliberate rather than unwitting decision to include a tragic story within his comedy surely reflects his desire to instruct as well as to entertain," as at the end of the play we see what is perhaps an omen of the end of the comedy for the lovers. They are given "the clear warning of the tragic consequences that may result from rash actions induced by passionate love" (Hutton, 294).

The question one might have about the outcomes of these relationships is even jokingly addressed in the play's concluding lines, as Puck points out:

I am sent with broom before,

To sweep the dust behind the door.

(5.1.2239-2240)

Any questions of love or how any events of real importance transpire are simply swept under the rug and we are left with only Puck's apology for this:

If we shadows have offended,

Think but this, and all is mended,

That you have but slumber'd here,

While these visions did appear.

And this weak and idle theme,

No more yielding than a dream...

(5.1.2275-2281)

Just as the audience of Theseus and his wedding party mocked the very nature of the play they witnessed, so does Puck. He is openly mocking the central ideas of love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* while Theseus attacks a play that has striking similarities to *Romeo and Juliet* (muted by its non-existent production values and inept cast). His attitude suggests that either Theseus is ignorant to what love and the commitments that come with it will entail moving forward with his newly acquired wife, or that perhaps he is correct and star-crossed lovers dying for their passion are indeed absurd.

Symbolism of the Moon

An iconic symbol that is reflected in both plays is the presence of the moon, an evanescent yet permanent presence within our sky that characters in each play view in different ways, often contributing to their views on love. Romeo views the moon as an obstacle, an object of scorn, when he spies Juliet on her balcony, urging the moon to die and cease, saying:

Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
Who is already sick and pale with grief,
That thou, her maid, art far more fair than she.

(2.2.5-7)

Only shortly thereafter, Juliet likewise condemns the moon for being an ever-changing object when Romeo ironically swears his love by it, saying:

O, swear not by the moon, th' inconstant moon,
That monthly changes in her circle orb,
Lest that thy love prove likewise variable.

(2.2.109-111)

While the presence of the moon seems of great importance to many in *Romeo and Juliet*, this symbol is far more abundantly represented in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with fifty-two occurrences in the text. Theseus curses the moon in a way similar to both Romeo and Juliet in the opening lines (which are often very integral to the central message of a Shakespearean play), offering:

Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour
Draws on apace; four happy days bring in
Another moon; but, O, methinks, how slow
This old moon wanes! she lingers my desires.

(1.1.1-4)

Theseus yearns for his wedding and its following night's consummation, blaming the moon for being "slow." In contrast, he takes a different approach to viewing the moon presented to him in Pyramus and Thisby, the moon by which these two lovers agree to meet under. Theseus alongside his companions take turns ridiculing the actor and character playing the part of moonshine for ironically being "slow" in an entirely different way. The play they observe is just one more way in which the happy lovers miss the lesson and fail to understand what Romeo and Juliet did.

How to Find Happiness: A Comparison of Round and Flat Characters

The characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are almost entirely considered stock characters who offer no substance: Bottom as the buffoon, Puck (and also Oberon) as the Lord of Misrule¹, Egeus as the angry old man and Helena as the heartsick maiden alongside a pair of men, Demetrius and Lysander, who are almost indistinguishable. The characters of *Romeo and Juliet*, however, are complex and round characters, with changing motives and questions about life and love. What is intriguing is that the most complex among these characters all die; Romeo, Juliet and Mercutio perish, while the stock characters of comedy are left to live happily ever after. Is being a round character with a personality as good as a death sentence in Shakespeare's works? Based upon the works being examined, it seems only the shallow characters can prevail.

Strategies

Approaching and teaching two of Shakespeare's plays will seem like a daunting task to many teachers, but I believe the goals of this unit can be met through gradual increases in difficulty of text. For this reason as well as to set a thematic "hook", I encourage the teacher to present *Sonnet 130* ("My Mistress' Eyes Are Nothing Like the Sun"). This sonnet questions the aesthetic basis of desire and serves as a simple 14-line introduction to both Shakespeare's language and style, most importantly the question of what beauty is and what it is that we desire. In approaching the first text to be taught, *Romeo and Juliet*, for the purposes of this unit I believe only a handful of scenes are necessary: when Romeo and Juliet meet (Act I, Scene 5), when they profess their love for one another (Act II, Scene 2) and finally the death of both characters (Act V, Scene 3). While one could expand upon this, this "edit" allows readers (or viewers) to only focus on the characterization and words of two characters. Two scenes that can naturally be included in addition are their wedding vows (Act 2, Scene 6) and the consummation of their marriage (Act 3, Scene 5).

These texts naturally lend themselves to being acted out, but the language can often be intimidating enough that some students may find themselves overwhelmed and not feel as willing to read aloud. If technology allows, the instructor can copy any amount of text into a GoogleDoc (I recommend *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). It can be exciting and educational to then have each student take a number of lines from the play (perhaps linked to the same character) and examine those lines closely, attempting to modify these words to modern English. The teacher serves in the role of editor, examining these thoughts and using the comment feature to offer suggestions where there might have been misinterpretation. This text, even if it is only one act of the sum, can successfully introduce students to interpreting Shakespeare's words while also allowing them to express their own creativity. Additionally, the modified text can be used for read-alouds.

As there exist many adaptations of these two plays, it might be worthwhile to use film to help scaffold student understanding of the events and characters in these plays. Selecting scenes both before and after readings can greatly add to student comprehension of the texts, characters, motives and dramatic differences. Using multiple adaptations is also helpful and allows students to compare two different adaptations, noting the director's decisions in each.

For students who struggle with keeping track of the character actions and attractions (especially in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) a character map on which they can keep track of what each character desires at different points within the play is a good idea. This can be done in a PowerPoint or Google Slides, but is also simple enough (and ever-changing enough) that it is possible to use dry-erase board to track the events and characters.

Classroom Activities

Activity 1: Performing Romeo and Juliet's First Meeting

One of the earlier scenes students will explore is the first meeting of Romeo and Juliet, which takes place in Act 1, Scene 5, spanning lines 104 and 121. A pair of carefully selected students will read aloud or even perform these lines, but under different instructions. First, we will read the scene as it is normally played: Romeo as the bold suitor presenting himself to an equally enraptured Juliet. Next, the scene will be played with Romeo as a promiscuous scoundrel and Juliet as a naive young girl. Finally, the scene will feature an enthusiastic but inexperienced Romeo paired with a mocking and sarcastic Juliet, paying special attention to her line "you kiss by th' book" (1.5.121) and how the meaning of that line changes in each version. If a class has many volunteers for the scene, multiple pairings can exist, each acting out these differing versions.

The class will then debrief the scene with the central question of which versions represent the true intentions and motives of Romeo and Juliet, citing evidence from the scene. Moving forward through other scenes from the play, students will update and inform their assertions.

Activity 2: Creating Your Own Performance of Pyramus and Thisbe

Upon completing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, students will be assigned into groups of 6 to 7 individuals and given a box of random props, construction paper and other oddities. From this, they will take a script of only the mechanicals' production of Pyramus and Thisby and work together to change this scene, updating the text into modern English and also recreating the events in one or more of these fundamental ways: to update the scene to incorporate another actor (in imitation of how the role of Moonshine seemed to be created by Quince to include Snug) change the setting of the play to be modern day, incorporating new elements which suit this, or alter one or more characters from being flat stock characters into round characters.

Students will be given ample time to create their product and then (perhaps on a following class session) each group will perform their versions of the scene. Optionally, a few students in the audience can be selected in advance to be hecklers, much as Theseus and his party were during the play, armed with Shakespearean insults.

Activity 3: Voting on Music Tied to Characters

The music of Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* is iconic and Felix Mendelssohn composed some of his best musical work inspired by *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As students explore the ways in that music and literature are tied through the arts, this activity will give them a chance to listen to segments of these pieces. Most of these clips have no words, so students must pay careful attention to tone. They will then work in groups using iPads to replay the music samples, debating in their group which song belongs to which character. Many of the songs have no character they are absolutely tied to, but the groups must still eventually submit their responses via electronic survey.

As a follow-up or second part to this activity, students will then take the same characters and offer their own modern day songs that they believe fit each character's central message or meaning through the iPad application. These submissions can be screened by the teacher and then the top candidates can be presented. Once again, students can vote for the most fitting theme song for each character. This could also be done easily enough without using the technology mentioned.

Activity 4: Assessment by Socratic Seminar

In place of a final objective test, students will participate in a socratic seminar to demonstrate mastery of the material. In this process, a number of students will be selected to be in an inner circle as "active members" while other students surround them in an outer circle, determining the success of the discussion while also providing support to those within the circle.

Each member of the inner circle will be given the role of one of the characters from the plays we have read: Romeo, Juliet, Mercutio, Paris, Tybalt, Bottom, Oberon. Titania, Hermia, Helena and Puck. An instructor may choose to use fewer characters or may include characters the class has studied in other works of literature (I list a lot of male characters simply because my classes will almost surely include more males than females). In character, they will attempt to have a discussion on different topics that are presented by the instructor. It is important during this activity that students lead all discussion and consider each question. Only those in the inner circle are to speak, though those in the outer circle may pass notes of congratulations and support or suggestions to those near them within the inner circle.

Some suggested topics for the instructor to ask of the group could include broad questions with philosophical answers, such as "What is love?" or "How do you know when you're in love?" The instructor could ask questions that certain characters should have strong answers about, such as "Does Romeo have a problem, because he keeps killing people?" or "When should Puck have stopped using the love potion?" or "Was Juliet foolish to consume the poison she was given?" Naturally, students may experience some distance between what they believe to be the right thing and what their character believes. Students are always to represent what their character would believe in a given situation. In many ways, taking the guise of a character will allow students to feel more free in expressing opinions.

At the conclusion of the activity, after all students have had a chance to be in the inner circle, students will debrief the experience and discuss openly any times they felt they wanted to say something their character would not have said. They will examine the experience and reflect on what helped them to better understand character motivation before writing a more specific response to the entire activity.

Activity 5: Field Trip to View “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”

As our final activity to both close out the unit and fully experience a production, students will attend a daytime showing of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center. This production is updated to where some settings are modernized, such as having the forest transformed into a shopping mall, while still retaining the original language in its entirety. After the production, students will spend time hearing from the actors about their thoughts on the production and the characters they represent. Students will bring with them questions for the actors, with special attention paid to how the actors have elevated their characters beyond being flat characters. Later, at school, students will write a “thank you letter” to the actor of their choice, again with attention to their representation of their character.

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Appendix A: Implementing District Standards

The standards listed below are addressed at some point during this unit. These standards are adjusted for grade 7, but could easily be adapted to other grade level equivalents.

Skill	Application	Oklahoma State Standards	Common Core Standard
Acquire new vocabulary	Suggested is vocabulary listed under objectives.	Reading Standard 1.1	Reading Standard 4
Reading texts	Class will read two different plays and a poem.	Reading Standard 2.2	Reading Standard 10
Application of Comprehension	Comprehension is demonstrated during each activity.	Reading Standard 3.1.C	Reading Standard 1

Sequence	Texts have plot structure which will be examined in sequence.	Reading Standard 3.4.B	Reading Standard 3
Character Traits / Motive	Traits and motive are discussed in activities 1 and 4.	Reading Standard 3.4.E	Reading Standard 6
Drama as a Genre	The focus of the entire unit is drama.	Reading Standard 4.1.A	Reading Standard 5
Theme / Summary	Themes of love and desire explored throughout the unit.	Reading Standard 4.2.A-D	Reading Standard 2
Historical Context	Addressed in activity 5.	Reading Standard 4.4.A	Reading Standard 9
Interpreting Readings	Explored during activities 3 and 5.	Writing Standard 2.5.A	Writing Standard 9
Listening to discuss Topic	Addressed during activity 4.	Speaking /Listening 1.2	Speaking /Listening 1
Oral Presentation	Addressed during activity 4.	Speaking/ Listening 2.3	Speaking /Listening 4
Evaluate Media	Addressed during activity 3.	Visual Literacy 2.1-3	Reading Standard 7

Note

1. The Lord of Misrule was to preside over mischief during the Saturnalia holidays around Christmas in 16th century England. As an archetype, this character often sets chaos and deception into motion for other characters within the play (Barton, 88).

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