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**HURDLING OVER LANGUAGE TO FIND MEANING IN SHAKESPEARE'S *ROMEO
AND JULIET***

Shakespeare, arguably one of the most recognized writers in the English canon, is often over-looked by young adults because he seems inaccessible and foreign. In reality, Shakespeare addresses themes that young adults can connect with and can apply to their own lives if they are able to advance past the language that often complicates the reading for them. Furthermore, with measured exposure to Shakespeare's language, young adults can learn how words and rhetoric can influence an audience and contribute to themes.

On the surface, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* can be seen as a play that is simply about love between the two main characters, Romeo and Juliet. As the audience thinks more critically about the play though, many different elements come together to establish the "love" that exists between Romeo and Juliet, revealing several themes that are relevant to young adults today.

In their article "Supplementing Shakespeare: Why Young Adult Novelizations Belong in the Classroom" in *The ALAN Review*, Sarah Barber and Hayley Esther quote several authorities on Shakespeare, including Dakin who claims that Shakespeare "'transcends the isolation of time, place, gender, race, and status that divide us' (p. xiv)" (52). Regardless of the "difficult and freighted Renaissance language" which may "present comprehension problems" (Barber and Esther 53), his plays are "valuable and necessary reading" (Barber and Esther 52). Though we

live several hundred years later, our young adults -- like the characters in *Romeo and Juliet* -- still encounter the pressures of the environment around them, whether it comes from their peers, their parents, or from other role models. They undergo difficult decision-making, struggling to differentiate what is right from what is selfish and who they are as individuals from who their worlds tell them they must be.

Though these themes may not be easily evident to early high-schoolers who are experiencing Shakespeare for the first time, encouraging these students to work through the initially intimidating language will allow them to identify their own life experiences in the plot of a canonized work. By connecting the themes in *Romeo and Juliet* to the themes in some more accessible young adult novels and by observing the function of Shakespeare's language under careful teacher guidance, young adults can begin to "acknowledge the interpretative nature of any act of reading" (Barber and Esther 58). The language and experiences Shakespeare presents to his audience give young adults the chance to evaluate the actions of his characters and apply the criterion they learn to the situations they encounter in their own lives.

This unit of study, built around the centerpiece Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and supplemented by contemporary music, exercises on figurative language and rhetoric, and several young adult novels, applies best to students who are just encountering Shakespeare in their early years of high school.

Launching the Unit: What We Already Know

The relevance of Shakespeare's works is evident by how prevalent his words, names, and ideas still are today. An example of this prevalence that most young adults are already aware of is in music, particularly in Taylor Swift's song "Love Story." Launch the unit by playing the

music video for Taylor Swift's song, which repeatedly mentions a few of the key events from the play with an idealistic tone:

1. Before playing the song, have students spend two minutes writing down what they already know about *Romeo and Juliet*.
2. Let students know that they will be comparing the music video to what they know about *Romeo and Juliet*, then play the video, which can be found on Youtube or iTunes.
3. Once the video is over, ask the students what stood out to them visually about the video. What words or phrases were repeated, and what do they already know about the play that is different from the video?
4. Why did Swift and her director choose to portray her song this way? Why did Shakespeare choose to portray his play differently?

This discussion will give students a comfortable and relatively easy starting point for learning how to relate with *Romeo and Juliet* and compare the play to different texts. Students should notice that Swift highlights the “fairytale” aspects of love, while visually eliminating any aspect of the outside environment that also influences love, such as the pressure both of their families put on them. This activity will encourage students to realize that Shakespeare includes themes that are realistic and still applicable to their lives today.

Before Reading: The Characters, Comedy, and Tragedy

Before beginning the play, which can be read in-class or as a mostly outside assignment, students should be familiar with the characters. In her chapter “Using Young Adult Literature to Modernize the Teaching of *Romeo and Juliet*” in *Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics*, Arthea J. S. Reed organizes the characters by household, listing traits that are important

to the storyline (101). This is a valuable resource for students to discuss and keep as they begin reading.

Additionally, students should understand the difference between a tragedy and a comedy. As suggested by Reed, half of the class may research or read about the elements of a tragedy and the other may research comedy (101). Then, facilitate a class discussion based on this research, and instruct students to be aware of how Shakespeare uses different elements to build tragic or comedic scenes.

The Text: Words as Tools

Finally, it is beneficial for students to recognize and realize the value of some of the literary devices Shakespeare employs. The following activities can be used before or in conjunction with reading the play in order to help students develop an understanding for how language supports the purpose of the author or speaker.

Puns

Reed uses an example of a chicken and egg pun in a book called *Earth to Matthew* by Paula Danziger. The pun, which unfolds across 13 lines of simple text, is easy for students to identify as entertaining word-play (106). After reading this easier text with students, introduce the following text from *Romeo and Juliet*, which is a good example of Shakespeare's light-hearted word usage:

Mercutio. Nay gentle Romeo, we must have you dance.

Romeo. Not I, believe me. You have dancing shoes

With nimble soles; I have a soul of lead

So stakes me to the ground I cannot move.

Mercutio. You are a lover. Borrow Cupid's wings

And soar with them above a common bound.

Romeo. I am too sore enpierced with his shaft
 To soar with his light feathers; and so
 bound I cannot bound a pitch above dull woe. (1.4.13-21)

Encourage students to find words that sound the same but may have different meanings, and ask what is humorous about the way that the words are used in their conversation.

The Persuasion of Words

Shakespeare's characters use words to attain what they desire. One excellent example of this is how Romeo woos Juliet: though he probably feels the same about Juliet as he did about Rosaline, the language he uses is extremely different. In order to introduce this concept, conduct the following activity:

1. Ask students to think of something they would like to ask their parents for (This could be allowance money, permission to stay out late, a new phone, or other privileges). Then, ask students to write down what they want. Have them write it down as though they are telling a close friend what they want from their parents.
2. Below the first piece of writing, ask students to write down what they would say to their parents in order to get what they want. This should be a few sentences long.
3. In pairs or small groups, have students share both their "friend" and "parent" versions of what they want. How are they different? Which one is more polite? Which one is more persuasive? Why did the language change in the second version, even though both versions ask for the same thing? A few students may share if there is time.
4. Then, tell the class that they will examine how Romeo changes his language between Rosaline and Juliet while thinking about whether or not he wants something different.

Romeo (on Rosaline). ...She'll not be hit

With Cupid's arrow; she hath Dian's wit,
And, strong in proof of chastity well armed,
From love's weak childish bow she lives unharmed.
She will not stay the siege of loving terms,
Nor bid th'encounter of assailing eyes,
Nor ope her lap to saint-seducing gold.
O, she is rich in beauty, only poor
That when she dies, with beauty dies her store. (1.1.201-209)

Romeo (on Juliet). O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!

It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
As a rich jewel in an Ethiope'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 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. (1.5.41-50)

5. Some questions for students to consider follow: How long has Romeo known Juliet? Is the situation different from that of Rosaline? How does Romeo change his language? Why does he change it, and how does it affect us as the audience?

Students will realize that, though Romeo is most likely physically attracted to both of them, he voices his physical attraction more for Rosaline than for Juliet. This choice of words, perhaps, is not just because Romeo is more attracted to Rosaline, but because Romeo knows that he must appear to respect Juliet in order to win her over.

Another captivating activity is “Figurative Language Alive: Balcony Scene Charades,” a lesson plan created by Lisa McDonagh on the online Folger Shakespeare Library. McDonagh’s lesson plan outlines the following steps in order to involve students in the power of the words in Shakespeare’s balcony scene:

1. Write short phrases from the balcony scene on index cards, and give one card to a group of a few students. Tell the students they will have a short amount of time (determined by available time) to decide how to act out their phrase to the rest of the class.
2. Each group picks a student to act out the group’s phrase in front of the class, while the rest of the class tries to guess the phrase.
3. Once all of the phrases have been identified, ask students which phrases are the most powerful and why.

Ideas for reading the text:

Following are a few ideas for reading the text:

1. While reading the entire play in class can be time-consuming, it can be helpful to read a few of the important scenes in class while keeping a timeline for the entire plot based on student input in the classroom (Reed 109).
2. Students could keep a journal of a specific character’s thoughts and feelings across the entirety of the play (Reed 109) or create a social media page with status updates based on the character’s feelings.

3. Powerful scenes can be performed by groups of students in class, giving students time to discuss and select acting possibilities.

While the activities mentioned in previous sections encourage students to learn about how the text works before reading it, the reading activities in this section ensure involvement and better comprehension of the text while in the process of reading.

How This Applies to My Life: Young Adult Novel Selections

While some of the themes may be clear through class discussions, students can identify and connect with more of the themes present in *Romeo and Juliet* by also reading novels that focus on one or more of the themes that the play illustrates. By reading a novel that is most likely easier to understand than Shakespeare's Renaissance language, students are able to supplement their reading without feeling overwhelmed. Young adult novels are "a way to prevent some ... disappointment by reducing students' linguistic anxiety and giving them new points of access from which to identify with and critique the plays" (Barber and Esther 58). Students may select the novel of their choice and discuss the novel and its related theme in literary circles of students who choose the same book. They may also conduct one of the following activities:

1. Create a blog with threads discussing different aspects or themes of the book, being sure to include how each aspect relates to *Romeo and Juliet*. Each student is responsible for posting a short piece of writing and responding to another student's writing each week.
2. Write a letter from the protagonist of the young adult novel to Romeo or Juliet. What advice would the character give Romeo or Juliet, based on his or her own experiences? Students can brainstorm pieces of advice together and search through the text to find examples to support their ideas.

3. Create a Venn-Diagram of the young adult novel and *Romeo and Juliet*. Which parts of the texts overlap, and which parts are completely different? The Venn-Diagram can focus on a particular theme and how the characters react differently, or it can focus on the entirety of the plot for both texts.

Romeo's Ex: Rosaline's Story by Lisa Fiedler

Instead of the expected Romeo and Juliet, Rosaline and Benvolio are the main characters in this novel. Rosaline, who narrates most of the novel, is aware of the consequence of sexual relationships in 1595 because of her experience as a nurse's apprentice. As Romeo woos Juliet, Rosaline questions his motives and tries to convince Juliet of the "absurdity inherent in ... claims of devotion" (Barber and Esther 57).

This novel allows students to see the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* in an altered state; it is a good tool to compare to events in the play. Furthermore, Rosaline's voice serves as a critical lens for Juliet's relationship with Romeo, encouraging the students to thinking critically about the aspects of "love" that may otherwise be overlooked. Rosaline, a representation of today's young adult, is a character that students can relate to, presenting them with a door into Shakespeare's play.

Saving Juliet by Suzanne Selfors

Starting in present time, this novel centers on Mimi, who is acting in a contemporary version of *Romeo and Juliet* until she is taken back in time to Verona in the fifteenth century. There, she and her co-star Troy experience Romeo's and Juliet's story first-hand, with Mimi acting against Shakespeare's plot because she thinks the play as written "totally sucks"... (p. 28)" (Barber and Esther 57). According to Barber and Esther, the novel "raises the question of how young adults can assert their own identities," whether with peers or with parents (57).

Like *Romeo's Ex: Rosaline's Story*, Mimi stands against the so-called "love" between Romeo and Juliet. Students can compare the tensions between protagonists and their families in the novel and the play. Finally, the novel provides an opportunity to compare the novel to the overall plot of the play.

I Never Loved Your Mind by Paul Zindel

Dewey Daniels is tired of attending high school, so he leaves school and takes a part-time hospital job. He meets Yvette, who is also a drop-out, as she is stealing hospital supplies and "it's lust at first sight." Though they are complete opposites, Dewey and Yvette search for meaning together (David Zindel).

Reed writes that this book focuses on decision-making, as Romeo and Juliet also must make decisions based on their environments and desires. Dewey must reflect on the choices he makes in regards to his relationship with Yvette, and he must accept the consequences. Students can draw parallels and highlight contrasts between novel and the play, discerning how Dewey's reaction to consequences are different from the characters' reactions in *Romeo and Juliet*.

The Contender by Robert Lipsyte

In an environment heavy with drugs and temptations, Alfred Brooks is pressured into choosing whether or not to be in a gang. As he trains for wrestling and attends drug-abusive parties, Alfred struggles with who he is and how he identifies himself. Eventually, Alfred is confident in his own strength and declares that he will help get his friend back on track as well (SparkNotes Editors).

As the characters in *Romeo and Juliet* do, Alfred worries about what will happen when he goes against the wishes of those around him. He questions what the correct thing to do is, and he

struggles against the pressure his “friends” put on him. This story about gangs will serve as a powerful comparison to the play, which also contains an intense feud.

When We First Met by Norma Fox Mazer

Jenny falls in love with a boy named Rob during her senior year of high school. Shortly after meeting him, she discovers that his mother is responsible for the drunk driving accident that killed her sister, which occurred two years earlier. Jenny struggles between love and her allegiance to her family (Reed 100).

As Romeo does, Jenny “falls in love at first sight” (Reed 100) and undergoes a tremendous struggle when she finds out who Rob is in relation to the rest of her family. Students can compare Romeo’s experience to Jenny’s, finding similarities and differences between the way the characters handle their situations. Finally, students may explore the influence of family on both main characters.

We Were Here by Matt de la Pena

Miguel is sent to a group home when he commits a crime against his family. Soon, he runs away with a few of the other boys with a desire to escape the guilt he feels. In the midst of loss and rejection, Miguel also finds acceptance and peace as he comes to terms with what he did and how he must live his life now.

Students who read this novel can compare Miguel’s guilt to that of Romeo’s guilt after he kills Tybalt. Do Romeo and Miguel have the same motives, and how do they deal with the consequences? This young adult novel also deals with suicide, an issue that plagues the end of Shakespeare’s play; students may also compare the characters’ motivation for suicide and compare how the remaining characters in both texts react to the suicides.

Twisted by Laurie Halse Anderson

After playing an illegal but harmless prank right before the summer vacation leading up to his junior year, Tyler is viewed as a bad-boy by his parents, his parole officer, the school staff, and his peers. He gains this new title just in time to catch the eye of Bethany Milbury, whose untimely mistake at a party frames Tyler as a more serious criminal. Blamed for everything by his father and peers, Tyler must find the strength to define himself instead of letting others do so.

Students can compare Tyler's attraction to Bethany and Romeo's attraction to Juliet, but - perhaps more importantly -- they can examine the environment that shapes Tyler's decisions. Students can reflect on the effect Tyler's parents and peers have on him until he decides to take a stand and can compare Tyler's final decision against suicide to Romeo's and Juliet's decisions.

Wrapping Up: Revisiting “Love Story”

With the experience gained through various activities, close-readings of Shakespeare's text, and the young adult novels, students should now have a deeper understanding of the themes behind *Romeo and Juliet* and how language functions to support, not obstruct, meaning. As a wrap-up, return to the music video from the beginning of the unit, and prompt students with the following questions:

1. What themes or aspects of Shakespeare's play is Swift missing?
2. What do you notice about the language in Swift's lyrics? How does that affect the meaning of her song? Is there anything missing?
3. Is Swift's song a tragedy or a comedy? What themes are present in her video?
4. Which do you connect with more: Shakespeare's play, or the music video? Why?

In Conclusion

Shakespeare's ability to manipulate language to create meaning is well-known by those who are familiar with the English canon. In order to expose hesitant young adults to Shakespeare's beautiful and universal texts, the young adults must be guided carefully. Once students have a positive experience with some of Shakespeare's language and are able to access his themes with the assistance of young adult novels, Shakespeare's works become less daunting and easier to understand. By slowly and intentionally building a foundation where young adults feel comfortable with Shakespeare, we are instilling a sense of adventurousness in our students. They will confront new texts with a confidence that allows them to think critically and analyze language and themes.

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Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

A Unit of Study by Franchesca Kellett.

Why Shakespeare?

- ◆ One of the most well-known authors in the English canon
- ◆ Seems inaccessible and foreign to young adults readers
- ◆ Contains themes to which young adults can relate: influence of environment on individual, teenage suicide, lust or love
- ◆ Can prove language as tool, not as barrier

“Love Story”

- ◆ What do you already know about *Romeo and Juliet*?
- ◆ Compare what you know to what you see in the video.
- ◆ What stood out visually in the video?
- ◆ What words or phrases were repeated?
- ◆ What is different in the video than in the play? Why did the writers choose to portray them that way?

Words as Tools

“‘Well,’ Matthew continues, ‘I have a question about chickens.’...

Matthew grins again, showing his dimple. ‘Why did the chicken cross the new playground?’

Shaking her head, Mrs. Stanton thinks about how hard the class has been working and about how a few minutes of joking is all right, ‘Mr. Martin, tell us. Why did the chicken cross the new playground?’

‘To get to the other slide’ is the answer...

Raising his hand, Joshua Jackson looks at her. ‘Eggsactly what did you mean by that? I thought it was an excellent yoke.’

‘An eggshellent joke. It broke me up.’ Lizzie Doran giggles.

‘I don’t want to be hard-boiled about this, but dozen everyone think it’s time to get back to our regular class?’” (Reed 106).

Words as Tools

Mercutio. Nay gentle Romeo, we must have you dance.

Romeo. Not I, believe me. You have dancing shoes
With nimble soles; I have a soul of lead
So stakes me to the ground I cannot move.

Mercutio. You are a lover. Borrow Cupid's wings
And soar with them above a common bound.

Romeo. I am too sore enpierced with his shaft
To soar with his light feathers; and so
bound I cannot bound a pitch above dull woe. (1.4.13-21)

Themes through YA Lit

- ◆ Comparing story lines and criticizing “love” with Fieldler’s *Romeo’s Ex: Rosaline’s Story* and Selfors’ *Saving Juliet*
- ◆ Decision-making in Zindel’s *I Never Loved Your Mind*
- ◆ Gangs in Lipsyte’s *The Contender*
- ◆ Love and family conflict in Mazer’s *When We First Met*
- ◆ Guilt, suicide, and environmental pressure in De la Pena’s *We Were Here* and Anderson’s *Twisted*

Goals Met

- ◆ Students will:
 - ◆ be unafraid of exploring language
 - ◆ access themes through young adult literature
 - ◆ learn that language can help to convey a theme
 - ◆ think critically about and analyze texts by comparison

SHAKESPEARE'S ROMEO AND JULIET



Why Shakespeare?

- Well-known in the English canon
- Students see him as inaccessible or foreign because of language
- Contains themes with which young adults can relate: influence of environment, suicide, lust or love
- Can convey that language is used as a tool, not as a barrier



Introducing and reading the text

- Compare what students already know about *Romeo and Juliet* to what they see in Taylor Swift's music video, "Love Song," asking why they think Swift portrays the story differently than Shakespeare does.
- Introduce puns by reading a short excerpt and comparing it to Shakespeare's use of puns (1.4.13-21).
- Discuss the ability of the author or speaker to persuade others using words by comparing Romeo's speech about Rosaline (1.1.201-209) to his speech about Juliet (1.5.41-50).
- Play "Balcony Scene Charades" by having students act out phrases from the balcony scene and discussing the power of description.
- Create a timeline for the plot to keep in the classroom.
- Encourage students to keep a journal or Facebook status updates based on his or her feelings throughout the play.

Accessing themes through Young Adult Novels

- Use literature circles to encourage students to group together and access and discuss themes that are present in both their text and in *Romeo and Juliet*:
 - Create a blog discussing different aspects or themes of the book, one entry per week
 - Write a letter of advice from the protagonist to Romeo or Juliet
 - Create a Venn-Diagram comparing your book to *Romeo and Juliet*

Themes

- Comparing story lines and criticizing "love" with Fieldler's *Romeo's Ex: Rosaline's Story* and Selfors' *Saving Juliet*
- Decision-making in Zindel's *I Never Loved Your Mind*
- Gangs in Lipsyte's *The Contender*
- Love and family conflict in Mazer's *When We First Met*
- Guilt, suicide, and environmental pressure in De la Pena's *We Were Here* and Anderson's *Twisted*

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