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English 112B

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Approaching the Significance of Shakespeare through Comedy

Rationale:

High school English classes often provide students with their first exposure to Shakespeare. Unfortunately for everyone involved, this is not usually a positive experience. The language is difficult, the places are unfamiliar, and the plots seem totally irrelevant to teenagers. So how can teachers inspire an interest in drama half a century old in a classroom full of texting and social media posting?

The key could be as simple as making them laugh. Most of Shakespeare's plays, even the tragedies, have a fair amount of comedic relief, but the jokes are not usually explained to students. This leads to a fragmentary reading of the text, but more importantly, it is a missed opportunity for teachers. This unit is designed to teach *Romeo and Juliet* in such a way that students can understand the humor and plot well enough to access the nuances of the dialogue and analyze major themes and motifs.

Open Discussion:

The lesson will begin with an open forum on Shakespeare and *Romeo and Juliet*. Each student will have an opportunity to share any prior knowledge, questions, or opinions they have. The purpose of this activity is two-fold: the instructor can gauge overall student awareness and interest which can influence lecture and activity focus, and the students can begin to think critically about the text.

Guidelines for discussion

- What do you know about Shakespeare or *Romeo and Juliet*?
- What do you think this play is about?
- Are you looking forward to reading? Why or why not?
- What questions would you like answered?

Plot Overview:

Because reading Shakespeare can be both challenging and intimidating, students will receive a detailed synopsis of the play before they begin reading. Understanding major plot points and the order of events will aid in reading comprehension. They will not have to work so hard just to decode the antiquated language in order to figure out what it means; they will be using the information they already have to better understand and engage with the language.

The main objective of this lesson is to remove the stigma of Shakespeare by approaching it with a modern sense of humor and highlighting the comedy that already exists in the text. In this spirit of lightheartedness, two video summaries of the play will be shown. The first is a four minute video that was created by student at the University of Western Sydney. The video features stills from the Baz Luhrman film *Romeo+Juliet* and references to other modern films while the plot is succinctly narrated. The second video is part of a collection of comedic book summaries called *Thug Notes*. A Lampoon of *Masterpiece Theater*, a man wearing a heavy gold chain sits in a leather armchair and uses African American Vernacular to summarize the play and analyze major themes. Both videos use animation, modern references, and slang to make the play seem easily accessible without insulting the intelligence of the audience. Both are available to stream on YouTube.

Character Lineup:

Once the students have an understanding of the plot, it is important that they are familiar with all the major characters. It is surprisingly easy for students to lose track of the supporting role characters when reading a play because their names are not part of the text that is read; the character names often get glossed over when students scan for the dialogue. Losing track of characters can cause confusion and frustration, especially when the material is already a difficult read. The best way to avoid this dilemma is to put a face to these names. After all, Romeo and Juliet is not meant to be read, but seen. The students will receive a handout created from a post on the Tumbler page of the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University. Using pictures of the actors from the Franco Zeffirelli film adaptation, the post imagines how six of the main characters might appear on the dating application Tinder. Although this will not give the students an in depth analysis of the characters, it does provide a visual reference and an introduction to their unique personality types using quotes from the play. This post is also archived so it can be easily accessed online.

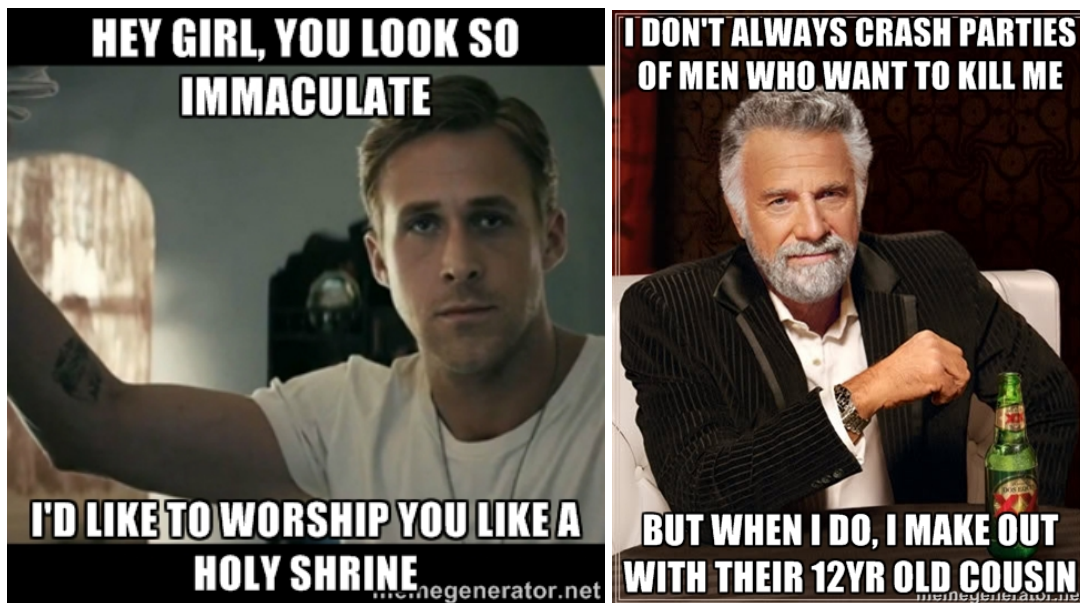
Selected Scenes:

Students will be expected to do a fair amount of independent reading, but select scenes will be reviewed in class. After careful reading and critical analysis, students will view meme representations of each scene.

Memes are single, recognizable images paired with text. This viral phenomenon has become a common method of sharing sarcastic and satirical humor. This method can help students summarize and recall important information about plot and characters, and enjoy what they are reading.

- Act 1 Scene 5

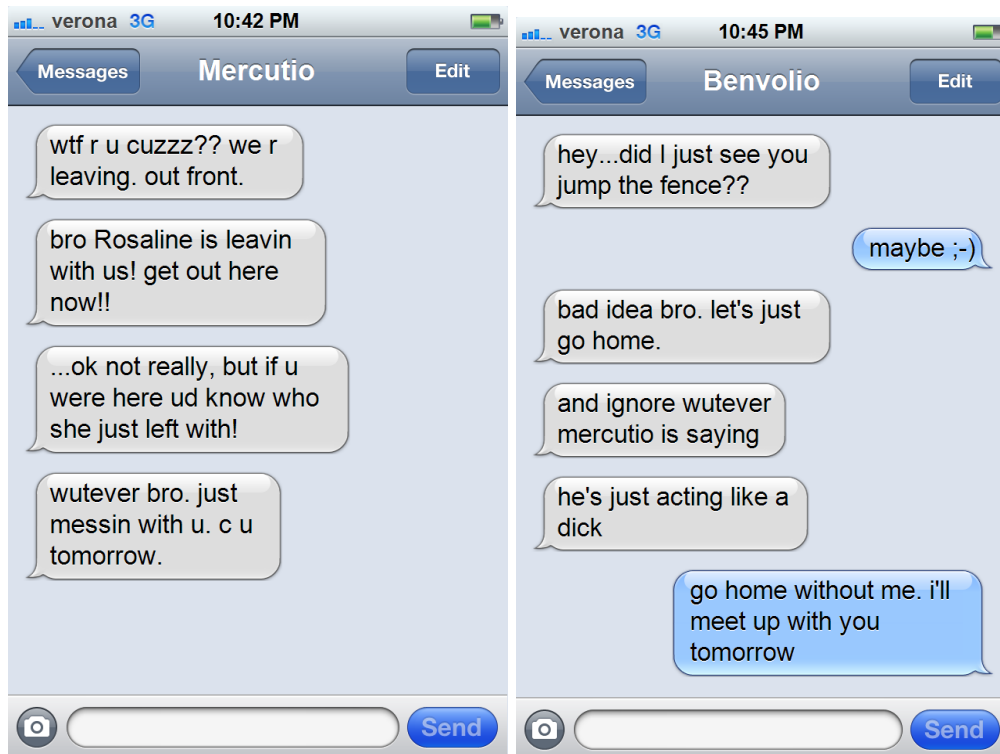
This is the Romeo and Juliet meet cute. It is worth examining because the dialogue is in sonnet structure, and both characters use religious imagery to express their desire for one another. This suggests that their faith may be misplaced, and their emotions are misguided.

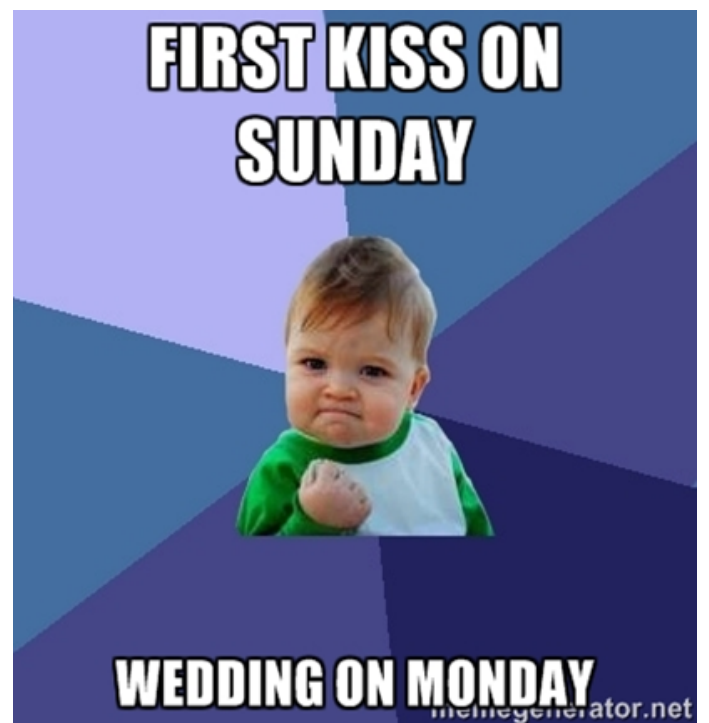
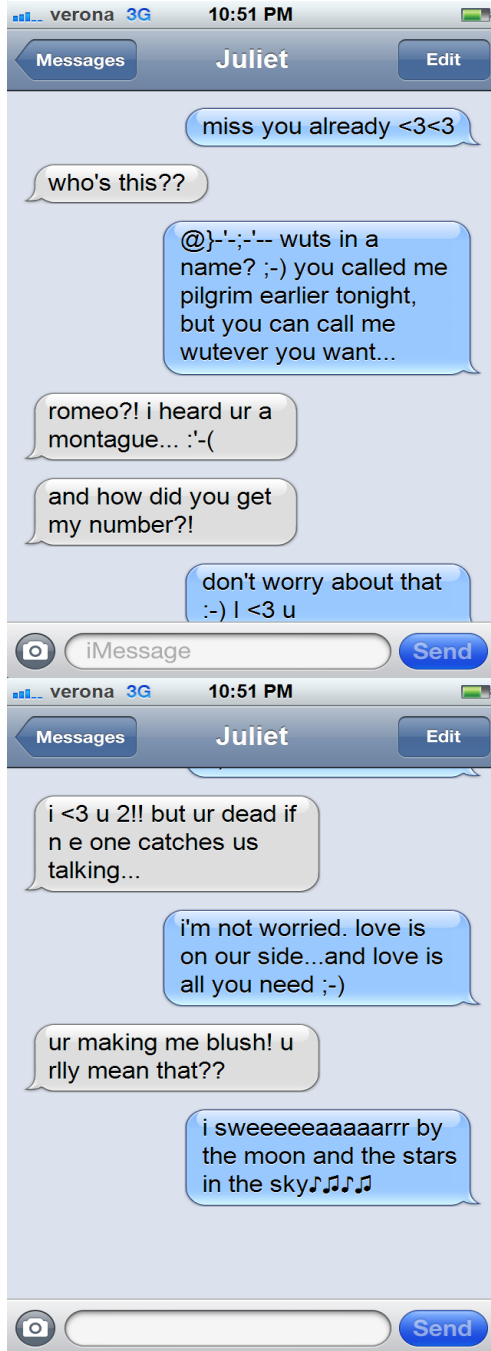


- Act 2 Scene 2

This is the famous balcony scene. Just after they kiss and learn each other's identity, they are separated, but Romeo finds Juliet's window and they pledge their love to each other. This scene is even more than the last because the conclusion of their discussion marks the hamartia—the fateful decision that leads to the downfall of the tragic heroes; they agree to elope. In addition, students should also take note of the fact that Romeo and Juliet have only known each other for a few hours at most, their only conversation has been frivolous, and they are both defying laws of custom and decency by discussing marriage

without the consent of their parents (not to mention the fact that Juliet is barely thirteen years old, and her cousin wants to murder Romeo).





- Act 2 Scene 3

In this scene, Friar Laurence is first introduced. He is Romeo's confidant and becomes a coconspirator in the covert affairs of the young couple. When Romeo confesses that he is in love with Juliet, the friar reminds him that he was in love with Rosaline a day ago.

Romeo insists Rosaline is old news and after a moment's consideration, Friar Laurence agrees to marry the couple with the hopes that their union will end the feud.



- Act 3 Scene 1

This is an interesting scene because Benvolio, who seems to be Romeo's loyal, good-natured companion incriminates him in the death of Tybalt. Romeo is guilty, of course, but Benvolio tells him to leave the scene of the crime before he is caught and sentenced to death, so Romeo takes his advice and runs. Less than a minute passes before the prince arrives and Benvolio immediately pins the crime on his good friend. There is little explanation for this sudden betrayal; students should discuss why they think Benvolio did not try to protect Romeo.



- Act 4 Scene 1

At this point in the play, Juliet learns that her cousin is dead, her cousin murdered her husband, her dad arranged for her to marry a wealthy suitor named Paris, and nobody knows that she is already married to Romeo.



This scene had several examples of dramatic and verbal irony that should be explored, but the most important development is Friar Laurence's idea to give a hormonal, suicidal Juliet a sleeping potion so she can fake her death to escape her second marriage and steal away to her banished husband in Mantua.

- Act 5 Scene 2

After Juliet stops threatening to kill herself and agrees to fake her death instead, Friar Laurence decides instead of traveling to Mantua to let Romeo in on his master plan, he

will explain it all in a letter, and have his friend Friar John deliver it. In this scene, Friar John returns to an elated Friar Laurence, thinking everything is going exactly according to plan. Only Friar John tells him that he stopped on the way to say hello to a friend—turns out that friend may have the plague, so he was quarantined and detained, so Romeo never got the letter.



**Wrapping Up:**

Students will be asked to complete a reading log for every assigned reading, in class and at home. In their logs, students should feel free to explore personal responses and reactions to the text. This is not a formal writing exercise, but an exercise in critical thinking. They should be examining and commenting on themes, scenes, or characters that interest them.

After they finish reading the play, students will have an opportunity to create their own reflection project. They may choose any medium or format as long it is inspired by the text. Students are encouraged to be original and creative. They may create their own memes, Facebook profiles for various characters, or write an original scene. All projects must be approved by instructor. Finished projects will be presented to the class with a detailed explanation of their creation and how it relates to the text.

Lesson Materials:

Plot Overview

- https://youtu.be/N_1K2IJkU-k Three minute summary of Romeo and Juliet, created at the University of Western Sydney, submitted by YouTube profile Nathan Zamprogno
- <https://youtu.be/K-qgVmsV3hM> Five minute summary and analysis of Romeo and Juliet, part of the Thug Notes video series, submitted by YouTube profile Wisecrack

Character Lineup

- <http://thedailyharoldblog.tumblr.com/post/110899470407/romeo-and-juliet-tinder-edition> *Romeo and Juliet* characters reimaged on a dating app, created by Tumblr profile Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University

Additional Materials:

Create your own memes

- <http://memegenerator.net/>
- <http://www.iphonetextgenerator.com/>

Romeo and Juliet rap (abridged)

- https://youtu.be/NV7xJ73_eeM?t=1m45s

Timeline of major events

- <http://robertspage.com/romeo.html> list of major plot developments with line numbers and quotes that indicate day of the week and time of day created by Robert Delaney

Understanding the language

- http://nfs.sparknotes.com/romeojuliet/page_2.html a line by line modern language adaption created by Spark Notes

Analyzing the text

- <http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/playmenu.php?WorkID=romeojuliet> the complete play on interactive website where characters and key words can be searched and catalogued created as an M.A. thesis project and published by George Mason University