



Treasures of the Library

SHAKESPEARE'S UNIVERSALISM



Grades 11–12
British Literature

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens

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I. Introduction

The lesson *Shakespeare's Universalism* explores how aspects of human nature presented in Shakespeare's plays continue to possess contemporary relevance. Working in small groups, students will read lines from different plays (tragedy, comedy, history) and assess the character's emotional and/or mental state. Students will share findings with the class and explain whether their assigned lines can be applied to a contemporary context.

II. Objectives

- ◆ To note that Shakespeare's characters expressed universal human emotions that would appeal to Elizabethan audiences as well as contemporary readers.
- ◆ To critically analyze passages from a variety of Shakespeare's plays.

III. Language Arts Standards

Reading Comprehension

- 2.4 Make warranted and reasonable assertions about the author's arguments by using elements of the text to defend and clarify interpretations.

Literary Response and Analysis

- 3.2 Analyze the way in which the theme or meaning of a selection represents a view or comment on life, using textual evidence to support the claim.
- 3.4 Analyze ways in which poets use imagery, personification, figures of speech, and sounds to evoke readers' emotions.

Writing Applications

2.2 Write responses to literature.

Speaking Applications

2.3 Deliver oral responses to literature.

III. Background

Shakespeare wrote thirty-seven plays between 1588 and 1613. He was an actor, director, and businessman as well as a playwright. Shakespeare's universal popularity is due to his extraordinary facility for language, his memorable characters, and his wonderful stories. His plays cover a variety of topics and his characters represent a diversity of individuals. While being performed, his plays would appeal to the whole social spectrum of Elizabethan society. With the advent of the printing press and the growth of literacy in the seventeenth century, Shakespeare's plays were also published as a result of their popularity.

The earliest published editions of Shakespeare's plays are called quartos, where each page was folded twice to provide eight pages. In 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, his fellow actors assembled the first complete edition of all of his plays. It is called the First Folio, so named because of its leaves (folio means "leaf" in Latin), or sheets that were folded only once, thus producing a rather large book. The Huntington Library Collection has one of the 240 First Folios that are still in existence as well as several quartos from different plays. The multitude of characters in Shakespeare's plays encapsulate universal emotions and timeless truths.

IV. Lesson Activities

1. Begin the class by brainstorming a list of common human emotions on the board or overhead projector. This may include feelings of love, hate, jealousy, passion, fear, anger, doubt, envy, shame, vengeance, pride, disappointment, excitement, etc. Students could be asked to recall emotions expressed by actors in movies, characters in books, or their life experiences to complete the brainstorming activity. After a list is completed, the teacher may pose the following questions to discuss with the class:
 - ◆ Why might a writer incorporate such emotions into his or her work?
 - ◆ How does the reader respond to such emotions being expressed?
 - ◆ Can the study of literature help us to gain a better sense of others and ourselves?

2. Divide the class in groups of four or five according to class size. Distribute a quote to each group (**Reading1** must be cut into eight squares so that each group only has to translate one quote). Working in groups, students should read and discuss their quote. Ask them to determine what type of emotion is being raised or expressed. Assure students that a literal translation is not necessary, but challenge them to make deductions about the character. Other questions they may want to consider to help group discussion:
 - ◆ What words in the passage give you a clue to the character's feelings?
 - ◆ What event or condition might have led up to this?
 - ◆ Can you relate to what he or she is feeling? Why or why not?

Students who are familiar with Shakespeare's plays could also be asked to paraphrase the literary devices that are being used and identify the speaker. Ask the group to read their quote to the class and share their findings. Students should explain why they think a certain emotion is being expressed and how they arrived at their conclusions.

3. Conclude the lesson by sharing with the class that different characters in Shakespeare's plays say all of the passages. The passages can be identified as follows:
 1. Juliet, *Romeo and Juliet*
 2. Cleopatra, *Antony and Cleopatra*
 3. Demetrius, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
 4. Lady Macbeth, *Macbeth*
 5. King, *Henry IV, Part 1*
 6. Hamlet, *Hamlet*
 7. Iago, *Othello*
 8. Beatrice, *Much Ado About Nothing*

Ask students to consider how we resonate with such emotions. For example, the King's disappointment with his rebellious son in *Henry IV, Part I* or Juliet's passionate love for Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*. Students should see how emotions are part of human nature regardless of time or place. Moreover, Shakespeare's continued appeal derives from the fact that we can relate to such characters and their experience as evident from the multitude of films that are contemporary renditions and interpretations of Shakespeare's plays. Finally, we are fortunate to still have the plays that

were printed so we can appreciate his genius and understand how the past parallels the present.

V. Extended Activities

1. Distribute copies of **Reading 2**, excerpts from English writer William Hazlitt's lecture on Shakespeare in 1818. Ask students to read and analyze the text. Discuss the argument that Hazlitt makes about Shakespeare's characters. The following questions could be used to initiate class discussion.
 - ◆ What is the point that Hazlitt is making?
 - ◆ What does he say about Shakespeare's characters? Why is this significant?
 - ◆ How does Hazlitt feel about Shakespeare?
2. Ask students to write a paper using a character from one of Shakespeare's plays who illuminates the point made in Hazlitt's lecture.

VI. Vocabulary

<i>universal</i>	applicable to all cases; relating to all
<i>folio</i>	a single sheet of paper folded once to yield four pages of print or a large book with folio-size sheets of paper
<i>quarto</i>	a medium-size book composed of sheets of paper folded twice (half the size of a folio)

Reading 1

<p style="text-align: center;">1.</p> <p>Give me my Romeo, and when he shall die, Take him and cut him out in little stars, And he will make the face of heaven so fine That all the world will be in love with night And pay no worship to the garish sun.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(III.2.21–25)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">2.</p> <p>See where he is, who's with him, what he does. I did not send you. If you find him sad, Say that I am dancing; if in mirth, report That I am sudden sick. Quick, and return.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(I.3.2–5)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">3.</p> <p>Tempt not too much the hatred of my spirit, For I am sick when I do look on thee.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(II.2.218–219)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">4.</p> <p>Make thick my blood. Stop up th' access and passage to remorse. . . .</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(I.5.50–51)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">5.</p> <p>Yea, there thou mak'st me sad, and mak'st me sin/ In envy that my Lord Northumberland Should be the father to so blest a son, A son who is the theme of Honor's tongue . . . Whilst I, by looking on the praise of him, See riot and dishonor stain the brow Of my young Harry.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(I.1.77–85)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">6.</p> <p>To be or not to be—that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles And, by opposing, end them.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(III.1.64–68)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">7.</p> <p>O, beware, my lord, of jealousy! It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock The meat it feeds on.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(III.3.47–49)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">8.</p> <p>What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true? Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much? Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride, adieu! No glory lives behind the back of such.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(III.2.113–116)</p>

Reading 2

William Hazlitt (1778–1830) wrote thoughtful essays during the English Romantic Era. He wrote on almost every topic—literature, the visual arts, economics, politics, and casual subjects. In 1817, his book *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, was bought and read by his admiring young disciple, poet John Keats. Hazlitt also began a series of lectures in 1818 at the Surrey Institution on English poets. Excerpts from his lecture “On Shakespeare and Milton” are presented here. It provides his perspective on the value and genius of Shakespeare's work.

On Shakespeare and Milton¹

“The striking peculiarity of Shakespeare's mind was its generic quality, its power of communication with all other minds—so that it contained a universe of thought and feeling within itself, and has no one peculiar bias, or exclusive excellence more than another.

“He had ‘a mind reflecting ages past,’ and present: all the people that ever lived are there. There was no respect of persons with him. His genius shone equally on the evil and on the good, on the wise and the foolish, the monarch and the beggar: “All corners of the earth, kings, queens, and states, maids, matrons, nay, the secrets of the grave,” are hardly hid from his searching glance. He was like the genius of humanity, changing places with all of us at pleasure, and playing with our purposes as with his own. He turned the globe round for his amusement, and surveyed the generations of men, and the individuals as they passed, with their different concerns, passions, follies, vices, virtues, actions, and motives—as well as those that they knew, and those that they did not know, or acknowledge to themselves. The dreams of childhood, the ravings of despair, were the toys of his fancy.

“In reading this author [Shakespeare], you do not merely learn what his characters say,—you see their persons . . . a word, an epithet paints a whole scene, or throws us back whole years in the history of the person represented.

“Each of his characters is as much itself, and as absolutely independent of the rest, as well as of the author, as if they were living persons, not fictions of the mind. The poet may be said, for the time, to identify himself with the character he wishes to represent, and to pass from one to another, like the same soul animating different bodies. By an art like that of the ventriloquist, he throws his imagination out of

¹ David Perkins, ed. *English Romantic Writers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1967), 620–625.

himself, and makes every word appear to proceed from the mouth of the person in whose name it is given. His plays alone are properly expressions of the passions, not descriptions of them. His characters are real beings of flesh and blood; they speak like men, not like authors. . . . In the world of his imagination, every thing has a life, a place, and being of its own. . . .”

