

Chapter 6

Using Young Adult Literature to Modernize the Teaching of *Romeo and Juliet*

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Introduction

Romeo and Juliet is frequently the first Shakespearean play taught in the high school curriculum. It is an excellent choice for introducing teenagers to Shakespeare because they can relate to its plot, characters, and themes. The play's action is fast-moving and easily understood. The characters are realistic and their motives are clear. The themes are as current as they were in Shakespeare's time: parent-child conflict, teenage love, friendship and peer pressure, and suicide. More advanced students can deal with the complex social and literary themes of hostility and its effects on the innocent, the use of deception and its consequences, and the effects of faulty decision making.

Similarly, able readers can study how the characters function within the drama and can examine how Shakespeare uses language to develop plot, characters, and themes. They can delve into the play's classical tragic themes: the role of fate and fortune, the inevitable nature of tragedy, and the isolation of the tragic hero.

By using contemporary young adult literature along with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, students can better understand the play. In addition, they can examine how contemporary writers use characters to carry the plot's action and utilize language to develop characters and themes. They can also begin to understand the universality of great literature as they discover the classical themes of tragedy in contemporary young adult fiction.

This chapter will be divided into four sections: (1) before reading *Romeo and Juliet*, (2) while reading *Romeo and Juliet*, (3) after reading *Romeo and Juliet*, and (4) extending the students' learning. Each section will contain numerous ideas for teaching the play and employing adolescent literature to bring the play to life for contemporary readers. It is recognized that no teacher can employ all of the suggested ideas but instead, can pick and choose among them to meet the specific goals and objectives of his or her course.

Before Reading *Romeo and Juliet*

Shakespeare's plays were to be performed rather than read. In fact, most were unpublished until after his death in 1594. When Elizabethan audiences heard the prologue, introducing "the two hours' traffic of our stage," they already were aware of the story of *Romeo and Juliet*. The tale was popular in Elizabethan times, with many versions available. The best known was Arthur Brooke's narrative poem *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* (Reed, p. 4). Therefore, Shakespeare's audience was not fooled by the comic beginning of the play when Sampson and Gregory opened it with swashbuckling action and humor. Even without hearing the prologue, they knew that by the end of the play the "star-crossed" young lovers would "take their life" and "bury their parents' strife" (Prologue, 6-12). Our students should have the same advantage. We can introduce them to the play in numerous ways.

Introducing the Plot

Although the plots are not exactly the same, students can read modern versions of *Romeo and Juliet* to help them understand the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues and the teenage love story of Romeo and Juliet. There are numerous young adult novels that revolve around the plot of teenage lovers from different worlds.

Teenage Lovers from Around the World

1. *Summer of My German Soldier* by Bette Greene (199 pp.). This is the story of a young American Jewish girl who falls in love with a German prisoner of war during World War II.
2. *Fair Day, and Another Step Begun* by Katie Letcher Lyle (157 pp.). Based on a medieval love ballad, a young girl seeks the love of the man who has impregnated her.
3. *Across the Barricades* by J. Lingard (159 pp.). The story is set in Belfast, Ireland and revolves around a Protestant girl and a Catholic boy who fall in love despite their parents' objections. This is a Romeo and Juliet romance with a political angle.
4. *Song of the Buffalo Boy* by Sherry Garland (249 pp.). The reader learns about the ridicule heaped on Amerasian children in Vietnam and the family traditions involving arranged marriages.

Students can also view films that present modern versions of a tragic love story. Bette Greene's *Summer of My German Soldier* is available in video tape,

for example. Additionally, students might view one of the movie versions of the play prior to reading it. The most popular and accessible one is S. Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968). Since Zeffirelli's screenplay changed a good bit of the play, the changes he made will make interesting discussion as students read the original. And, finally, because *Romeo and Juliet* is frequently performed, students may be able to see a production of the play prior to its reading.

Teachers can also tell the story to the class. If you are a good storyteller you can bring the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* to life for the students. Or, you can introduce each act of the play by asking leading questions: The plot begins with a teenage boy who is smitten but rebuffed by a lovely young girl named Rosaline. Suppose you were in a similar situation and you knew that the person you cared for was going to be at a party to which you were not invited. What might you do? Would you crash the party? Well, that's what Romeo does.

One of the subplots of *Romeo and Juliet* is the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets. Students are often intrigued by the concept of a feud. Students can investigate other feuds in history, such as the ones between the Campbell and MacDonald Scottish clans or the one between the Hatfields and McCoys in Appalachia. They can read about feuds in literature. In *West Side Story*, for example, the feud is between ethnic gangs. In Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* the students can read about the feud between the Shepherdsons and the Grangerfords. Students can examine the effects of the feuds and present information about them in oral reports or creative dramas to the class.

Introducing the Themes

An interesting way to organize a unit in which *Romeo and Juliet* is taught is thematically. Teachers can introduce the difficult theme of the isolation of the tragic hero by having students read young adult novels before reading the play.

Isolation of the Tragic Hero

1. *I Am the Universe* by Barbara Corcoran (136 pp.). Katharine Esterly, an eighth grader, has to write a composition entitled, "Who Am I?" at a time when her mother has to have a brain tumor removed.
2. *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier (191 pp.). Jerry Renault finds himself "disturbing the universe" alone in an all boys' school.
3. *The Magic Box* by Olga Cossi (191 pp.). Mara Bennetti changes from an immature teenager who hates her mother into a concerned, grown-up daughter through an intense series of events.
4. *Two Blocks Down* by Jina Delton (148 pp.). This novel explores the

emotional decline of Star, a lonely seventeen-year-old.

5. *Beyond the Divide* by Kathryn Lasky (264 pp.). Fourteen-year-old Meribah decides to accompany her father on the '49 Gold Rush, leaving the Pennsylvania Amish community where she has been shunned for attending a non-Amish funeral.

Ambitious students could tackle the same assignment using either of these classics: Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* or Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

Students can be divided into small groups with each group reading one of the works listed to examine the tragic hero in the novel or play. After they have read and discussed these works, they can read *Romeo and Juliet* and compare Shakespeare's characterization of the tragic hero with that of the authors of the more contemporary works they have read. They might deal with questions such as the following:

- * What makes the hero tragic?
- * Why is the hero isolated? From whom?
- * How does this isolation affect the hero's behavior?
- * Could the hero have avoided this isolation? How?
- * Would the outcome of the novel or the play have been different if the hero had not been isolated? Why? How?

Other thematic units can be developed. Below is a thematic list of more contemporary books and authors which can be used along with *Romeo and Juliet* in exploration of other specific themes:

Hostility and Its Effects on the Innocent

1. *Blubber* by Judy Blume (153 pp.). Jill, an upper class fifth grader, torments Linda, better known as "Blubber," because of her weight and her oral report on whales.
2. *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne W. Houston and James Houston (160 pp.). The true story of a Japanese-American child's survival at the Manzanar internment camp during World War II.
3. *Across the Barricades* by J. Lingard. In modern-day Belfast, a Protestant girl and Catholic boy fall in love despite family opposition.
4. *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* by Elizabeth Speare (249 pp.). Set in Colonial America, "Kit" not only deals with feeling unloved and alone

in a house of strangers but has to withstand accusations of being a witch.

5. *Words by Heart* by Ouida Sebestyen (144 pp.). The story of an African-American family who suffers discrimination in the American Southwest in the early part of the twentieth century.

Teenage Suicide

1. *Ordinary People* by Judith Guest (256 pp.). A sensitive teenager, Conrad Jarrett, is recovering, both physically and emotionally, from his suicide attempt.
2. *So Long at the Fair* by Hadley Irwin (202 pp.). Joel spends a week at the State Fair trying to figure out why Ashley, his best friend, committed suicide.
3. *Because of Lissa* by Carolyn Meyer (192 pp.). Four teenagers decide to make some good come out of Lissa's suicide by establishing a school hotline for troubled students.
4. *Remembering the Good Times* by Richard Peck (181 pp.). Three teenagers, two boys and a girl, strike up a friendship that ends in tragedy.
5. *How Could You Do It, Diane?* by Stella Pevsner (192 pp.). Bethany finds her older stepsister's body after she commits suicide and is left with the struggle of trying to figure out why.
6. *About David* by Susan Beth Pfeffer (176 pp.). After David kills his parents and himself, his close friend Lynn is left to figure out why he could do such a thing.

Decision Making

1. *Leroy and the Old Man* by William Butterworth (154 pp.). When Leroy's no-good father offers him a chance to be a numbers runner in New York City, Leroy must decide between right and wrong.
2. *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton (156 pp.). Ponyboy Curtis, a fourteen-year-old Greaser, ultimately discovers that life is rough all over, even for the Socs, and that he can choose what he wants out of life.

3. *Grounded* by William Jaspersohn (244 pp.). Joe runs away from home because of his father and meets another teenager who helps him face up to some unpleasant realities.
4. *The Contender* by Robert Lipsyte (167 pp.). Alfred Brooks must choose between gang life or be different from what his environment cultivates.
5. *I Never Loved Your Mind* by Paul Zindel (144 pp.). Two bright but lost high school students drop out of school in order to search for meaning to life in a world that they find unbearable.

The Generation Gap

1. *Ask for Love and They Give You Rice Pudding* by Bradford Angier and Barbara Corcoran (151 pp.). Robbie Benson, a very rich and lonely teenager, lives with his less-than-doting grandmother and dying grandfather while his mother recovers from her alcoholism.
2. *Everything is Not Enough* by Sandy Asher (155 pp.). Seventeen-year-old Michael's future has been all mapped out for him—by his parents.
3. *Home Before Dark* by Sue Ellen Bridgers (150 pps.). Stella, the oldest child in a family of migrant workers, refuses to leave the cabin—her only real home—to move into her stepmother's larger house in town.
4. *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack* by M.E. Kerr (192 pp.). Dinky does not have a drug problem but feels her mom is too busy helping other kids with drug problems to notice her.
5. *Crossing Over* by Jesse McGuire (184 pp.). A group of teenagers deal with their inability to express their true feelings to their parents and themselves.

The Role of Friendship and Peer Pressure

1. *The Moves Make the Man* by Bruce Brooks (280 pp.). Jerome, an outstanding student and an excellent basketball player, has been selected as the token black to integrate the Wilmington, North Carolina schools in the Fifties. He meets Bix, and through their friendship, each learns more about the other and himself.

2. *Killing Mr. Griffin* by Lois Duncan (243 pp.). Five teenagers fall prey to peer pressure and its negative effects.
3. *The Friends* by Rosa Guy (203 pp.). Fourteen-year-old Phylissia, a West Indian, and Edith, a child from Harlem, eventually become friends. The friendship is difficult due to the girls' many differences.
4. *The War on Villa Street* by Harry Mazer (192 pp.). In an attempt to escape the pain of his drunken, abusive father, Willis runs into Rabbit Slavin's gang on Villa Street.
5. *Scorpions* by Walter Dean Myers (216 pp.). Twelve-year-old Jamal Hicks might have a gun, but it doesn't help him lead the Scorpions and it doesn't prevent the older kids from pressuring him into selling drugs.

The Use of Deception and Its Consequences

1. *I Am the Cheese* by Robert Cormier (233 pp.). Adam Farmer, a young teen, struggles to regain his identity.
2. *Gentlehands* by M.E. Kerr (144 pp.). Buddy outclasses himself when he falls for the well-to-do Skye Pennington during the same summer his gentle grandfather is accused of being a Nazi murderer.
3. *The Masquerade* by Susan Shreve (184 pp.). Seventeen-year-old Rebecca's father is arrested for embezzlement, and her mother suffers a nervous breakdown.

Teenage Love

1. *Forever* by Judy Blume (220 pp.). Katherine meets, falls in love, and decides to have her first sexual experience with Michael, her forever love.
2. *Acts of Love* by Maureen Daly (164 pp.). Retta's family is poor but genteel, whereas Dallas is basically the head of his family since his father is a broken man. In spite of their differences and a family moral dilemma faced by Dallas, the teenagers are drawn to each other.
3. *My Love, My Love, or, the Peasant Girl* by Rosa Guy (119 pp.). A poor girl in the Antilles nurses to health a wealthy Creole injured in

auto accident. The theme of this love story is clear: Color and class division are difficult to bridge.

4. *The People Therein* by Mildred Lee (271 pp.). This is a touching love story about a crippled girl and a recovering alcoholic that takes place in late-nineteenth century Appalachia.
5. *When We First Met* by Norma Fox Mazer (192 pp.). Jenny, a high school senior who has never experienced romance, falls in love at first sight. When she finally meets Rob, the object of her affection, she is appalled to learn that his mother was the drunk driver who killed her sister two years earlier.
6. *That Night* by Alice McDermott (184 pp.). Sheryl's mother decides that Sheryl will drop out of school and give the baby up for adoption without consulting the father; she seriously underestimates his love.

Another approach to teaching thematically is to allow each student to select and read any one of the aforementioned books and attempt to track in a reader's response journal the development of the theme. Then, as students read *Romeo and Juliet* they can track the development of the same theme in the play. Afterwards, students can compare how the authors of the contemporary works and Shakespeare developed the theme.

Students can also read or view modern versions of the play that deal with many of the themes. The closest parallel in terms of multiple themes is the musical *West Side Story*. This musical, which is available in script or video, introduces most of the major themes found in *Romeo and Juliet*: parent-child conflict, teenage love, friendship and peer pressure, and suicide. In addition the more complicated, literary themes of hostility and its effect on the innocent, the use of deception and its consequences, and the effects of faulty decision making are also important in the musical. However, the classical tragic themes are not a part of *West Side Story*. Instead of the role of fate and fortune, *West Side Story* addresses the role of hate and prejudice. Students can discuss why the modern version leaves out these themes as they read Shakespeare's play. This is a good way to introduce them to the Elizabethan belief that one's life is controlled by elements external to the individual that is so important in Shakespearean drama.

Introducing the Characters

It is best to introduce the characters in a straightforward manner. You can begin by explaining to the students that the characters can be divided into two groups. Each group represents one of two feuding families who are well-known and prosperous in their community of Verona. The first family we meet is the

House of Montague, the family of Romeo, who is the son of the household. The second family is the House of Capulet, the family of Juliet, who is the daughter of the household. All of the characters are related to one or the other of these families. It is helpful to list the characters and their relationships on an overhead or handout that can be kept by the students.

House of Montague

Romeo:	son of Montague, isolated, passionate, idealistic, naive, has premonitions but does not act on them, helpless.
Mercutio:	kinsman to Prince and friend of Romeo, witty, honorable, intelligent, loves word play, amiable, could be voice of reason but underestimates Romeo's passion, foil to Romeo, his death makes the tragedy inevitable.
Benvolio:	Montague nephew, friend of Romeo, peacemaker.
Friar Laurence:	Romeo's counselor, loved and respected, attempts to do what is "right", marred reasoning, misplaced virtue.

House of Capulet

Juliet:	daughter to Capulet, takes the lead in the romance, lyrical use of language, has premonitions but does not act on them, isolated, only one in play to guess the outcome.
Tybalt:	Juliet's cousin, foil to Romeo, passionate, prideful, easily provoked, high-spirited, hot-blooded, fiery nature, inflexible, single set of absolutes.
Nurse:	Juliet's nurse, stereotypical, arrogant, garrulous, ignorant, bawdy, uncultivated, old and infirm, fickle, wants the "best for Juliet" (translated: wants Juliet married to anyone), looks at love as "animal lust," comic.
Capulet:	Juliet's father, impatient, loves Juliet but is misguided in his love, garrulous, inflexible, old, looks at love as a good match.
Paris:	a count, betrothed to Juliet, foil to Romeo.

Introducing Literary Techniques: Comedy and Tragedy

Since *Romeo and Juliet* is a play that has elements of both Elizabethan comedy and tragedy, students can investigate the dramatic techniques of each genre. Divide the class into two groups—one group to research the elements of comedy and the other to research the elements of tragedy. After locating the elements of comedy and tragedy, students can be directed to modern comedies and tragedies to help them understand these elements. Two young adult novels that will work well for comedy follow.

1. *Who Put That Hair in My Toothbrush?* by Jerry Spinelli (220 pp.). A teenage brother and sister are continuously taunting one another with practical jokes.
2. *The Snarkout Boys and the Avocado of Death* by Daniel Pinkwater (156 pp.). A group of adolescent boys take on their parents and their teachers.

Two young adult novels, mentioned earlier, that will work well for tragedy are 1) *About David* by Susan Beth Pfeffer and 2) *Remembering the Good Times* by Richard Peck. Students may also be able to relate the elements of comedy and tragedy to other books they have read or films they have seen. This will help them better understand the elements in Shakespeare's play.

Foreshadowing

Young readers often do not recognize the literary technique of foreshadowing which allows authors to develop plots. Students can be successfully introduced to this technique by reading them the first chapter of Lois Duncan's *Killing Mr. Griffin*. The chapter begins with the words, "It was a wild, windy, southwestern spring when the idea of killing Mr. Griffin occurred to them." It ends with a bird crashing into the classroom window and dropping "like a feather-covered stone to the ground below." In between the students in Mr. Griffin's English class argue with him about an assignment to write a final song for Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Susan, the unhappy heroine of Duncan's story, thinks to herself at the end of the chapter:

'Poor thing . . . Poor little thing. Poor bird, Poor Ophelia. Poor Susan.' She had a sudden, irrational urge to put her head down on the desk and weep for all of them, for the whole world, for the awful day that was starting so badly and would certainly get no better.

From his seat behind her she heard Jeff Garrett mumble under his breath, 'That Griffin's the sort of guy you'd like to kill.'

After reading aloud this opening chapter, made even more appropriate because of the classroom assignment of *Hamlet*, ask the students what they predict will happen during the rest of the novel.

- * What will happen to Mr. Griffin?
- * Who will be involved?
- * What about Susan, what will happen to her?

The students will be able to guess a good bit of the plot. Ask them how they know so much about it.

- * What clues did they get from the first chapter?
- * Why does the chapter begin with the weather?

- * Why is the bird killed?
- * Why is it important that the students are reading *Hamlet*?
- * How does Lois Duncan foreshadow Griffin's murder?

The students will now have a clear understanding of the technique of foreshadowing and you can introduce one or more examples of it from *Romeo and Juliet*.

O God, I have an ill-divining soul!
Methinks I see thee, now thou art so low,
As one dead in the bottom of a tomb. (Juliet, III,v,54-56)
Or if you do not, make the bridal bed
In that dim monument where Tybalt lies. (Juliet, III,v,202-203)

Structure and Dramatic Techniques

Most students are unaware of the structure of Shakespeare's plays. It is important to explain to them that each of his plays is divided into five acts, which are divided into scenes. The rising action occurs in the first two acts, the climax or turning point in the third act, and the falling action in the final two acts.

In addition, it is important to introduce students to some of the dramatic techniques used by Shakespeare: chorus, prologue, soliloquy, asides, and blank verse. The chorus can be found at the start of the play in the prologue. One of the most famous soliloquies of all time is Romeo's love speech under Juliet's window at the beginning of Act II, Scene ii. An example of an aside can be found shortly after this speech immediately following Juliet's own profession of love when Romeo says to the audience:

Romeo: [Aside] Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this? (II,ii,37-38)

Introducing Language Techniques

Students who are just becoming acquainted with Shakespearean drama often have problems with the language in the play. Since he used the language to develop his characters, to introduce humor, and to carry the plot, it is important that students learn how to recognize the techniques of language Shakespeare employs. To show students that other authors use language in similar ways, you can present models from contemporary novels. Following are some examples of how you can help students understand how authors use language:

Developing Characters. Introduce students to a work like Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*. Have the students compare and contrast the language of the villain, Archie, and the hero, Jerry. Ask questions such as these:

- * How does their language tell you more about their personalities?
- * How does their language identify their social class?
- * How does their language help you predict the outcome of the story?

Point out that they will find the same technique employed by Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet*. For example, the nurse's peasant speech and her attempt to imitate her betters:

Yes, madam. Yet I cannot choose but laugh
To think it should leave crying and say, "Ay."
And yet, I warrant, it had upon its brow
A bump as big as a young cock'el's stone;
A perilous knock; and it cried bitterly.
"Yea," quoth my husband, "fall'st upon thy face?
Thou wilt fall backward when thou comest to age,
Wilt thou not, Jule?" It stinted and said, "Ay." (I,iii,50-57)

The friar's moralization:

Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied,
And vice sometime by action dignified. (II,iii,21-22)

The gentrified talk of Capulet:

And too soon marred are those so early made
Earth has swallowed all my hopes but she;
She is the hopeful lady of my earth. (I,ii,13-15)

The intellectual banter of Mercutio:

Romeo! Humors! Madman! Passion! Lover!
Appear thou in the likeness of a sigh;
Speak but one rhyme, and I am satisfied!
Cry but "Ay me!" pronounce but "love" and "dove";
Speak to my gossip Venus one fair word,
One nickname for her purblind son and heir
Young Abraham Cupid, he that shot so true
When King Cophetua loved the beggar maid! (II,i,7-14)

The fiery, insolent speech of Tybalt:

What Dares the slave
Come hither, covered with an antic face,
To fleer and scorn at our solemnity?
Now, by the stock and honor of my kin,
To strike him dead I hold it not a sin. (I,v,57-61)

The love-struck, figurative language of Romeo:

But soft, What light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun!
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.
Be not her maid, since she is envious.
Her vestal livery is but sick and green,
And none but fools do wear it. Cast it off. (II,ii,1-9)

The naivete of Juliet:

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What's Montague? Is it nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face. O, be some other name
Belonging to a man.
What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other word would smell as sweet.
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name;
And for thy name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself. (II,ii,38-48)

Developing Metaphors

Introduce students to some contemporary novels which use metaphoric language in their titles:

1. *Blinded by the Light* by Robin Brancato (215 pp.). A teenager becomes a member of a religious cult, and his family attempts to get him out.
2. *Jacob Have I Loved* by Katherine Paterson (228 pp.). Because Sara Louise believes that she is the despised Esau and her adored twin is the beloved Jacob, she lives in a constant state of conflict.
3. *Bridge To Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson (155 pp.). Leslie and Jess create their own imaginary kingdom of Terabithia. After Leslie is killed swinging across a creek on a vine, Jess builds a bridge to Terabithia and his new maturity.
4. *A Solitary Blue* by Cynthia Voigt (204 pp.). Jeff's mother abandons him for her "more important work," leaving him with his remote, perfectionist father. Jeff comes to understand his parents as he sits in a boat in the marsh near his mother's South Carolina home.
5. *The Pigman* by Paul Zindel (192 pp.). Mr. Angelo Pignati, "the pigman," is a lonely old man who helps make two sophomore's lives more meaningful.

Students can discuss what they believe the metaphors in the titles of the books mean. Students can also search for metaphors in the young adult books they are reading. Prior to having students read *Romeo and Juliet* you can point out and discuss some of the metaphors in the play:

It is the East, and Juliet is the Sun! (*Romeo*, II,ii,3)

Two of the fairest stars in the heaven,
 Having some business, do entreat her eyes
 To twinkle in their spheres till they return. (Romeo, II,ii,15-17)
 Alas, poor Romeo, he is already dead:
 Stabbed with a white wench's black eye; run through
 The ear with a love song; the very pin of his heart
 Cleft with the blind bow-boy's butt-shaft . . . (Mercutio, II,iv,13-16)
 Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds.
 Towards Phoebus' lodging! Such a wagoner
 As Phaeton would whip you to the west
 And bring in cloudy night immediately. (Juliet, III,ii,1-4)

Developing Puns

Students love puns but often have difficulty recognizing them in Shakespeare because they are unclear about the meanings of the words. Since puns use words in unusual, unexpected ways, punning requires a good vocabulary. And that is one of the best reasons to teach it. Begin by acquainting students with puns they will understand. Once you get going, they are likely to be able to find their own puns.

Paula Danziger loves puns. All of her books are filled with them. Here are a few from *Earth to Matthew*:

'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 that 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?'
 Mrs. Stanton calls the class to attention. 'Now, let's get serious.' (pp. 24-25)

After the students have shared their puns, they can be introduced to some in *Romeo and Juliet* and instructed to keep a list of others as they read.

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.
 Mercutio. And, to sink in it, should you burden love-
 -Too great oppression for a tender thing.
 Romeo. Is love a tender thing? It is too rough.
 Too rude, too boist'rous, and it pricks
 like thorn.
 Mercutio. If love be rough with you, be rough with love;
 Prick love for pricking, and you beat love
 down. (I,iv,13-28)
 An old hare hoar,
 And an old hare hoar,
 Is very good meat in Lent;
 But a hare that is hoar
 Is too much for a score
 When it hoars ere it be spent. (Mercutio, II,iv,141-146)

Choosing Names

The concept of naming and how things are named is important in many religious traditions. Madeleine L'Engle deals with naming in her time trilogy books: *A Wrinkle in Time*, *A Wind in the Door*, and *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*. Many high school students were introduced to these books in late elementary school or middle school. If students are familiar with the books, you can ask them to find examples of the importance of naming.

You can also discuss with students why names are important. You can deal with given names, and how what we are named may help define who we are or who our parents hope we will become. At this point, you might discuss some of the names in *Romeo and Juliet* as examples: Why is Mercutio Mercutio and Benvolio Benvolio? Students can look in the dictionary for words from which these names might be derived. They will find such words as "mercurous" and "Mercury" when they look for Mercutio. This may help them understand why Mercutio is named as he is.

You can ask them some questions about these characters:

- * Given their names what do you expect Mercutio will be like?
- * What will Benvolio be like?
- * Do you think that Shakespeare believes that names are important?

Now, read to them some passages from the play about naming and discuss whether or not Shakespeare agrees with what he has his characters say.

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.
 Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
 What's a Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
 Nor arm, nor face. O, be some other name
 Belonging to a man.
 What's in a name? That which we call a rose
 By any other word would smell as sweet. (Juliet, II,ii,38-44)
 As if that name,
 Shot from the deadly level of a gun,
 Did murder her; as that name's cursed hand
 Murdered her kinsman. O, tell me, friar, tell me,
 In what vile part of this anatomy
 Doth my name lodge? Tell me, that I may sack
 The hateful mansion. (Romeo, III,iii,102-108)
 It was the nightingale, and not the lark . . .
 It was the lark, the herald of the morn;
 No nightingale. (Juliet, III,v,2; Romeo, 6-7)

While Reading *Romeo and Juliet*

Providing students with the introductory material suggested above should make reading the play much easier. In this section methodologies for helping students read *Romeo and Juliet* through creative drama, writing, and discussion will be suggested.

Creative Drama Activities

Since Shakespeare wrote for the stage, the more you can make his stagecraft a part of the students' reading, the more they will enjoy the play.

Students can practice their own dramatic techniques and be introduced to the themes of *Romeo and Juliet* by using Robin Brancato's one act play "War of Words." Students can practice the following informal creative drama techniques with this play and then utilize them as they read *Romeo and Juliet*.

Choral Reading. Assign several students to each part in Brancato's one-act play. The students practice reading the play with each character represented by a chorus of students. The class presents the play chorally with every member involved.

Readers' Theatre. Assign individual scenes to small groups of students; each group should have one student per character in the scene. Each group should rehearse their scene. Each scene is then read in order by the groups with every student participating.

Story Theatre. Students are assigned to groups with two students for each character in the scene. Each group practices their scene with one student reading the part orally and the second acting it. The scenes are then acted and read in order by the class.

Oral Reading. Students who are good readers can be assigned complete scenes to rehearse and read to the class. They can use the teacher's oral reading of a scene as a model.

Once the students have practiced these techniques using a contemporary play, they can transfer their skills to informal dramatic readings of *Romeo and Juliet*. Informal dramatic reading of scenes of Shakespeare's play can be interspersed with professional recordings of scenes from the play (many different recordings are available).

Writing and Discussion Activities

Writing and discussion activities reinforce students' understanding and learning. Students can participate in one or more of the following activities:

1. Allow students to select one of the young adult novels suggested in "Before Reading *Romeo and Juliet*, Introducing the Themes." Have them read the young adult book and compare it to *Romeo and Juliet* as they read the play.
2. Students can record in a journal the chronological plot sequence of the contemporary book and of *Romeo and Juliet*. A class timeline of the chronological sequence of the play can be kept in the classroom.
3. Students can keep a diary of one of the characters in the contemporary novel and another diary of one of the characters in the play. Students should record not only what the character is doing but also what the character is thinking and feeling. During the reading of the play, one student representing each character can be asked to read the diary entry to a small group or to the class each day. Students can discuss how the characters are developing throughout the play.
4. In their journals, students can trace a young adult novel's character's development noting the chapters in which the character's traits are developed, how language is used to develop the character, how the character interacts with other characters, how the character changes and what makes the character change, and how the character relates to the themes of the novel. After doing this for a character in a young adult book, the students can do the same for a character in *Romeo and Juliet*.

During the reading of the play students can work in small groups based on the character they select. The group can plot a character relationship chart and discuss how the character is developed.

5. If students have selected a young adult novel based on one of the major themes in *Romeo and Juliet*, they can write in their journals about how the author of the young adult novel develops that theme. Later, as they read Shakespeare's play, they can write about how he develops the same theme. Also, they can keep track of how the characters they are studying relate to the theme. Students can discuss the selected theme with a group of students who are investigating the same theme.
6. Students can attempt to find some of language usage described above in their young adult novels. They can transcribe in their journals examples of language that develops character, puns, and metaphors. When they read *Romeo and Juliet*, they can keep similar journal entries. They can share examples of language usage in small groups.
7. So that vocabulary can be developed in the context of the students' reading, they can identify unfamiliar words in both their young adult novels and *Romeo and Juliet*. These can become the focus of their vocabulary study during the reading of the play.

After Reading *Romeo and Juliet*

The activities in which the students participate after reading the play are designed to help them synthesize various aspects of the drama.

Comparative Essays

After students have read both the young adult novel and *Romeo and Juliet* they can do a comparative essay on any of the topics suggested above. For example, compare how Shakespeare and Cormier develop the theme of the isolation of the tragic hero in *The Chocolate War* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Students can then share their papers with a small group of students who have read the same book or dealt with the same theme.

Classroom Drama

Students can work in small groups to develop one or more scenes into a classroom drama, building on some of the creative informal drama techniques used earlier. Students can be divided into small groups with two groups practicing the same scene or each group practicing different scenes. Students

should be instructed to decide who will play each role. They should then discuss how each character will act in the scene, how the character will deliver the lines, where the character will stand, how the character will move. They can also discuss how the character's lines develop the plot and the theme, how the character interacts with other characters, how this scene leads to the next scene. The scenes can be videotaped, viewed, and critiqued by the small groups and the class. In the critique, students can discuss how faithful their staging was to Shakespeare's characterization, plot, and theme.

Viewing the Film or Play

Viewing a film or stage version of *Romeo and Juliet* can provide students with an important synthesis. Students can be asked to compare and contrast the version they have read with the one viewed. They can critique the play they have seen in the way they critiqued their own scenes above.

Extending The Students' Learning

One of the reasons for studying the classics is the possibilities they offer for extending students' learning far beyond the original work. Below are some literary extensions that can be used before, during, or after reading *Romeo and Juliet*.

Developing Critics

Students can become Shakespearean critics. Most editions of *Romeo and Juliet* have prefatory remarks and literary commentaries. Able students can read one or more of these commentaries and discuss them in small groups. The group can select a topic discussed in the commentary and go to the library to research the topic to determine how scholars respond to the issue. (If a college or university is nearby, it presents a wonderful opportunity to introduce students to an academic library.) The group can write a group paper exploring the differences in the critics' views.

Discussing Differences of Plot and Theme

After viewing or reading *West Side Story*, students can compare it to *Romeo and Juliet* and discuss why there are differences in the plot and theme.

Studying Literary and Mythological Allusions

Romeo and Juliet is full of literary and mythological allusions. Students can search the play for these and research them in small groups in the library. The results of the research can be shared orally with the class.

Studying William Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Theatre

Students can research Shakespeare, the man and the playwright. They are likely to find interesting the controversy about whether he was the author of the plays. They can present their findings orally to the class. Students can research the Elizabethan theatre and present their findings to the class in alternative formats: construct a replica of the Globe Theatre, create props that might have been used, play a madrigal song, prepare a medieval recipe such as Rose-Petal Bread (Rygiel, p. 114), or make a sculpture or painting indicative of the time period.

Comparing *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*

Students can locate a copy of Arthur Brooke's *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*. They can compare it to Shakespeare's play and discuss the reason for the differences.

Reading or Viewing other Shakespeare Plays

Students can read another Shakespearean comedy or tragedy and compare it to *Romeo and Juliet*. If students are working in small groups, each group can select a different play. They can examine the plays in terms of the classical elements of comedy or tragedy. How does each play deal with these elements? If students prefer, they can watch a film or video of another Shakespearean play and compare it to *Romeo and Juliet* in terms of the elements of comedy and tragedy, use of language, development of plot, characterization, and theme. They can present their plays and how they differ from *Romeo and Juliet* to the class.

Writing Papers on Contemporary Issues

Students can research and write a paper on one of the modern themes of the play: suicide, teenage love, friendship and peer pressure, or parent/child relationships. It is interesting to note how the attitudes have changed since Shakespeare's time.

Students can research and write a paper on one of the literary themes of the play: hostility and its effect on the innocent, the use of deception and its consequences, or the effects of faulty decision making. The papers might be written in terms of modern literary treatment of the theme or the theme in modern history or politics.

Students can also research and write a paper on one of the themes of classical tragedy: the role of fate and fortune, the inevitable nature of tragedy, or the isolation of the tragic hero. These papers might also deal with modern literary treatment of the theme or the theme as seen in modern history or politics. In addition, students could discuss one or more of the themes as depicted on television or in film.

Exploring Similar Themes

Students can search their literature anthology for works that explore similar themes. They can develop a bibliography for each theme and read and discuss other works related to the theme.

Conclusion

Romeo and Juliet is a particularly accessible Shakespearean play for adolescents since it contains many of the characteristics of a good young adult novel. The protagonists are young and exhibit the developmental tasks of their age group: They rebel against their parents; they succumb to peer pressure; they are emotional and egocentric; and they do not see beyond the moment. The plot is fast-moving and filled with action, excitement, and romance. Subplots provide humor and help readers gain additional information about the characters. The readers often know more about the protagonists than they know about themselves. The themes are as contemporary today as in Shakespeare's time and are meaningful to adolescent readers.

Because there are so many parallels between good contemporary young adult fiction and *Romeo and Juliet*, the pairing of the play and adolescent literature is an effective teaching technique. By reading young adult books and comparing them to *Romeo and Juliet*, adolescents can gain a better understanding of the play, Shakespearean theatre, and Elizabethan England.

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