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Comic-textualizing Shakespeare: Teaching Shakespeare Comprehensively to Ninth Grade
Students

Rationale:

Although some students, and even educators, think that Shakespeare's literature is outdated and nonessential in classrooms, high school students can advance their reading comprehension and understanding of cultural references through analyzing Shakespeare's plays. However, the impact of a student's experience with Shakespeare heavily relies on the process in which they are taught the text. Students may feel intimidated by Shakespeare's plays, which prevents them from being able to fully appreciate his work. By having students read comic book adaptations of Shakespeare, they are able to gain further understanding of his text through using visuals.

By having students choose between four different Shakespeare plays with various themes, I'm hoping to capture the interest of students who like different kinds of media, and will manage to connect with stories in different ways. The plays I chose for students to choose between are *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*. The comic book adaptations I chose of these texts are *Macbeth: The Graphic Novel* by Petri Hänninen and Petri Hiltunen, *Romeo and Juliet (Shakespeare Classics Graphic Novels)* by Gareth Hinds,

Shakespeare's Hamlet - Classics in Graphics and *Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing: A Graphic Novel* by Steve Skidmore and Steve Barlow. Since students will be reading simplified versions of the original Shakespeare text, I am hoping this unit would work well for ninth graders, as that is the age that students are typically introduced to Shakespeare when they are assigned *Romeo and Juliet* in their English classes.

Into the Text:

Before introducing students to Shakespeare's plays, I will first start with a class discussion about what students know about Shakespeare, and how they were exposed to information about him. I will then fill in some of the missing holes in the information that the students provided, including some historical information on Shakespeare, and going further to provide direct comparisons between modern day television shows and movies that have themes similar to Shakespeare's plays.

From here, I will show student's clips from iconic renditions of the Shakespeare plays we will be reading in class, including act 1 scene 1 from *Macbeth*(2010), act 1 scene 1 from *Romeo + Juliet*(1996), act 3 scene 1 from *Hamlet*(2000), and act 2 scene 1 from *Much Ado About Nothing*(2012). I will also share with students the prologue to *Shakespeare's Hamlet - Classics in Graphics*, which states that "*Romeo and Juliet* is a love story... *Macbeth* is a horror story... *Much Ado About Nothing* is a rom-com- and *Hamlet* is a thriller,"(Skidmore and Barlow) as well as some modern comparisons with the plays, including comparisons between *Macbeth* and AMC's *Breaking Bad*, *Romeo and Juliet* and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Anyone But You*(2023), and *Hamlet* compared with Disney's *The Lion King*. Based

on these resources, students will choose which play they want to read the comic book adaptations of. If students are struggling to choose a play, I will ask them further questions about movies, tv shows, books, songs, or poems they like, and based on this I will provide suggestions.

By showing students clips of the plays, providing modern and recognizable genres, and comparing each play to popular modern media, I am hoping to help students make an educated decision about which play they would be most interested in reading and delving more into. It's important that students enjoy the play they're reading so that they have more motivation to read and discuss the text.

Through the Text:

Rather than having students read just the comic book text, I find it important for students to read the original Shakespeare text occasionally because having the comparison to the comic book text will encourage student's reading comprehension of the original text. Students will divide into four groups based on their plays and choose characters to read as, then they will begin by reading the first few scenes of their play in the original Shakespearean English. By having students read the beginning of the original play before reading the comic book version, students will be able to reflect on their group readings when they are reading the comic later on. This will further their comprehension of the play as they move throughout it, even if the play is confusing upon first read.

Then, students will read the comic book adaptation for around 20 minutes at the beginning of every class period because I find it important to make sure students are actually doing the reading, since falling behind on reading Shakespeare only leads to further confusion

and disconnection from the text. Some scenes will be chosen for students to read the original Shakespearean text prior to reading the comic book renditions. Examples of scenes I would want the students to read the original text of are act 1 scene 5 of *Romeo and Juliet* (the scene where Romeo and Juliet meet at the masquerade ball) and *Hamlet* act 3 scene 1 (the scene where Hamlet tells Ophelia to “get thee to a nunnery.”)

As a repeated assignment (done two-three times throughout reading the text), I would have students choose 10-20 lines of Shakespeare's text and create a one to two page comic on 25” x 30” poster paper. I would then have students complete reflection questions about their comic, such as:

1. What about Shakespeare’s text inspired your group's design for the setting?
2. What about Shakespeare’s text inspired your group's design of the characters?
3. What was confusing about the text for you? What did you understand?
4. What motifs and symbols from the text did you include in your comic?

By asking questions like these, I am hoping that students think more carefully about the choices they make when creating their comics, and that they’re able to use that thoughtfulness when reading the comic books they’re assigned.

Another assignment I would want groups to complete is using their knowledge from the original Shakespearean English and the comic book text to create modern English scripts of scenes from their play to perform for the class. Performance will be encouraged to be humorous and dramatized, but should still convey themes and symbols from the text, as well as core characteristics of each character.

Ending the Unit:

In order to assess the unit, I would have students do a creative project inspired by scenes, themes, characters, and storylines from the play. Students have creative freedom with their mediums including painting, drawing, making a short film, writing a poem or short story, or any other idea they can pitch to me. Students can work individually or in groups of two or three. Each student will be responsible for writing a one to two page rationale on their project, students will respond to questions in their paper, such as:

1. What themes/symbols in the text are you focusing on in your creative project?
2. What specific scenes from the text inspired your project?
3. Which characters are represented within your project?

When assessing the students' work, I would focus on their overall understanding of the plot and the text's themes. I would also want to frame the rationale as a way for students to justify the themes in their creative projects to me. If they can create a meaningful explanation for their choices, and connect it back to the themes in Shakespeare's text, then their rationales are acceptable.

Beyond the Text:***Ophelia* by Lisa Klein**

- Themes: romance, loss, and coming of age
- *Hamlet* told from Ophelia's perspective.
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***Tempestuous* by Kim Askew**

- Themes: grief, not judging a book by its cover
- A loose YA retelling of several Shakespeare stories, focusing on Miranda from *The Tempest*

***Vinegar Girl* by Anne Tyler**

- Themes: gender, social norms, family
- A modern retelling of *The Taming of the Shrew*

***Warm Bodies* by Isaac Marion**

- Themes: hope, redemption through love
- A retelling of *Romeo and Juliet* where Romeo is a zombie.

***Exit, Pursued by a Bear* by E K Johnston**

- Themes: reclaiming life, experiencing trauma
- A loose retelling of *The Winter's Tale* focusing on Hermione.

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