
The

English Teacher's

Companion

A Complete Guide to Classroom,
Curriculum, and the Profession

SECOND EDITION

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tradition of which it is a part and the cultures of the students who are reading the novel.

- Explore, even require, a range of interpretations and responses, developing students' abilities to generate and ask their own questions through discussions with each other, the author, characters, and even themselves that lead to a deeper understanding of the work, the world, and themselves.
- Engage in frequent discussions—in different settings, in different configurations, for different purposes—about the literary work.
- Integrate use and teaching of writing throughout the study of literary works, writing to improve but also to learn, to think, and to demonstrate their understanding.
- Address those issues of social justice and ethical complexity inherent in any serious work of literature so that students come to recognize the complexity of such issues and how to discuss those issues with intelligence and sensitivity.
- Use a variety of techniques and tools to help students explore and understand the text and develop their capacity to read such texts on their own at both the literal and the figurative levels.
- Assess students' reading of such literary texts using a variety of means, so that they can demonstrate their understanding by those means most meaningful and appropriate to them.
- Move through the novel at a pace that sustains students' interest without eclipsing the novel's ideas or other crucial aspects.
- Teach the book in ways that cannot be undermined by Cliffs Notes, online resources, or other study aids. Moreover, do not use video versions of the novel in such ways that allow a student to not read it.

TEACHING DRAMATIC TEXTS: SHAKESPEAREAN VIGNETTE

When I was in graduate school, I took a Shakespeare course that made me love the plays but fear them more than a bit, too. My first paper, on *Hamlet*, came back with a giant "SO WHAT?!" inked across the page. I wondered if the professor had gone out to buy a bigger red marker just for my paper, so huge was his "remark." After a few initial flops with teaching Shakespeare, I learned that nothing scares students more nor gives them a greater sense of achievement than having successfully read—and, ideally, performed—a Shakespeare play. They know he is the top of the mark, the point of reference. What ultimately convinced me that anyone could do Shakespeare, however, was the documentary a friend of mine made about a fourth-grade class in Berkeley that put on a

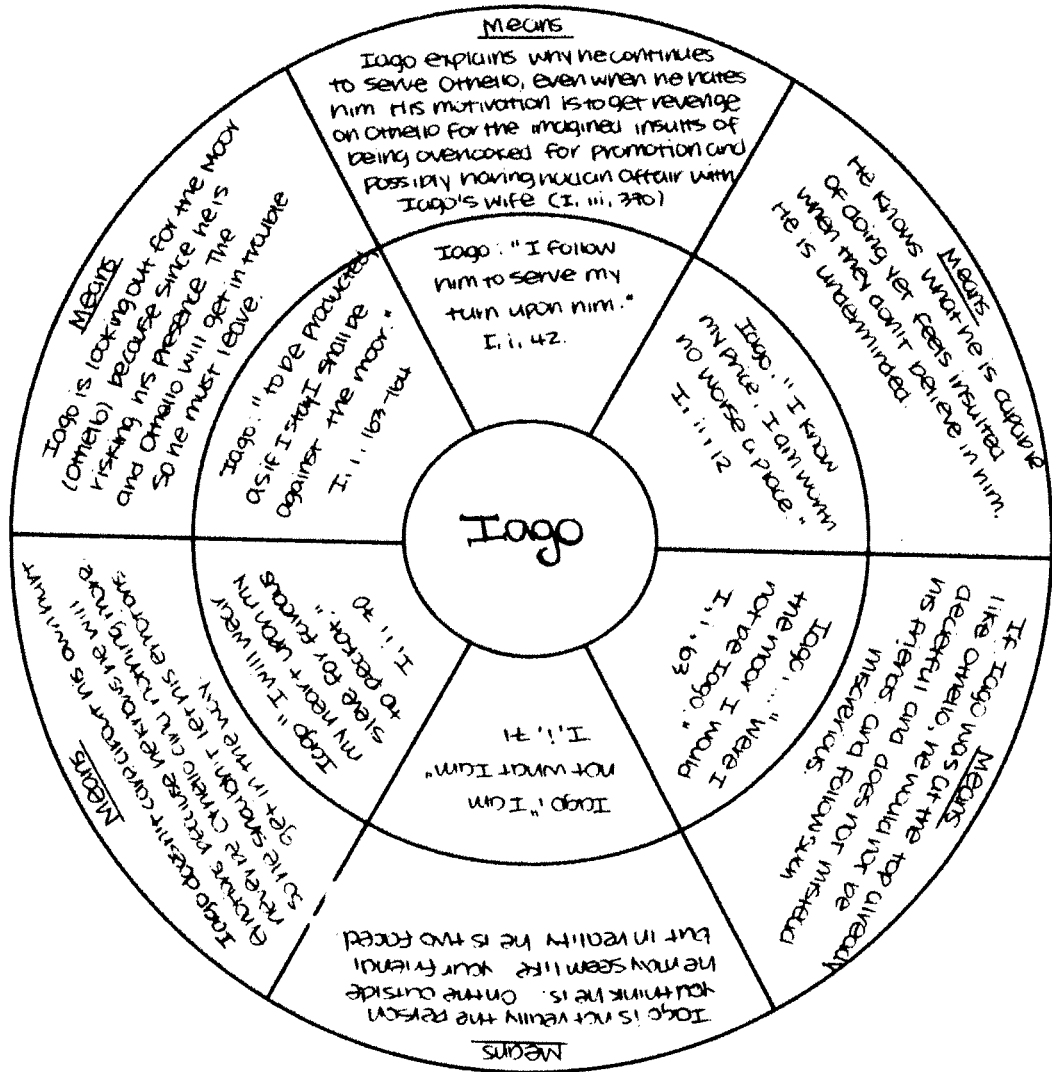
full performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I figured that if these little kids could do it, so could my big kids. And so they have.

I happen to be blessed with a lovely park with massive oak trees right next to my school; when we put on plays, we get out and give ourselves room to act out and speak up. I focus here on Shakespeare because, though these ideas will help you teach other dramatic texts as well, it is Shakespeare that challenges us most as teachers and readers. Following are some of the most helpful strategies I use to teach my students how to read the plays.

Prepare Them to Read Shakespeare

What students need is a framework for the play; as my father-in-law used to say, "If you don't read the *TV Guide* to find out what the movie's about, how will you be able to follow it?" To help them create this foundation and further develop their capacity, I do the following:

- *Focus on character.* Plays are character-driven; thus, you cannot understand them if you do not understand the characters themselves. Consider having students draw the characters to help them see what they look like and how they act. Seeing what they look like only goes so far; using a technique like the Target Notes in Figure 4.17 develops their capacity to read for character by showing them what to look for. Such tools also teach students to read from multiple perspectives, to see a character and, we hope, other people from different angles and thereby better understand how complex we all are. Obviously watching movies, especially different versions of the same play, allows students to better understand character by seeing how different actors or directors interpret the character. Other assignments, such as the Iago character study shown in Figure 4.17 and character study vocabulary exercise shown in Figure 5.4, further improve students' ability to read for character.
- *Focus on plot.* Certainly characters are key to any play; in short, we watch them to see what they will do. What the main characters want drives the action. Yet the action is the story, and so students must learn how the story works by studying its narrative design. Why, for example, does *Romeo and Juliet* begin with a prologue that tells the whole story? How does Shakespeare create such tension within the story (and within the reader)? Using a tool like Plot Notes (a blank Plot Notes organizer is included in my *Tools for Thought*, page 168) or asking students to provide a visual explanation of the action allows them to see how the story plays out. Also, creating a storyboard of an act or scene (see *Tools for Thought*, page 144) allows students to identify the main events, those they



Iago is a person who only thinks of himself and what revenge he wants to take on Othello as shown when he says "I follow him to serve my turn upon him." (I, i, 42) He is also bitter because Othello chose someone else for the lieutenant position. He knows this when he says "... I know my price, I am worth no less." Iago is also a two-faced. He shows this quality when he says "Though I do hate him as I do hell (poison), then yet, for necessity of present life, I must show out a flag and sign of love." (I, i, 172-173)

FIGURE 4.17 Sample Character Target Notes for Shakespeare's Othello.

think are crucial to the story; this helps them read for plot details but also for the details needed to visualize (so they can draw) the action. In the case of Shakespeare, each play neatly conforms to the traditional plot design of Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Resolution.

- *Focus on language.* Plays are made of words, and no one makes greater use of words in all their connotations than Shakespeare. Focusing on language means learning to identify puns (as in the opening scene of *Romeo and Juliet* when Gregory and Samson banter back and forth about "collar," "choler," and "collier"); it also means learning why Shakespeare (or any writer) might use such wordplay in that particular scene. Close reading of language also asks students to consider the different connotations of words; Shakespeare routinely challenges us to make sense of two words whose connotative (and denotative) meanings contradict each other, as in the case of the Capulets' and Montagues' "civil blood." To prepare students to read Shakespeare's English, I prefer to start with the sonnets, which provide self-contained texts about subjects the students are all thinking about anyway: love and beauty. See "Reading Literature: A Poetic Cycle" (Figure 4.19, p. 82) to see what we do at this point to prepare for Shakespeare.
- *Focus on themes.* Shakespeare's plays are so rich in ideas that you cannot help but enter into discussion of the plays' ideas. The previously mentioned assignment, "Reading Literature: A Poetic Cycle," provides a useful example of how students can learn to read for themes.

Dramatize the Plays

Plays were written to be heard, spoken, and seen. There are two essential resources for getting students up and acting, for bringing Shakespeare alive. The first, *Shakespeare Set Free*, is a series of books created by the Teaching Shakespeare Institute at the Folger Library and published by Washington Square Press. The other, *Teaching Shakespeare*, is written by Rex Gibson (1998) and published by Cambridge University Press; the Cambridge School Shakespeare editions of the plays are also outstanding guides for the novice and the advanced teacher alike. You can use any number of the following techniques to have students enact the play:

- *Divide the play into parts.* I often have a group take one act and then, after they read it, create their own script for their performance. They can keep it Shakespearean or adapt it into other styles. Either option helps them better read the play, because they

have to understand it in order to revise it. Some go onto the Internet to download the text of their act or scene; this has the advantage of allowing them to adapt and revise their script into a format that works best for them. When the group is finished performing, they must write a critical analysis of their portion of the play, examining its importance to the larger story of the play. This last assignment is essential, as it asks students to keep the entire play in their heads instead of reducing it to just one piece.

- *Perform it as reader's theater.* This approach focuses on dramatic reading. You can assign readings to individuals—for example, one of Hamlet's soliloquies—then follow up the performance with interpretive discussions. You can also assign a reading to a group—for example, the fight scene between Romeo and Tybalt. You might keep the readers in front of the class after they are done and allow students to ask them questions about what they think Mercutio means, for example, when he says, "A plague on both your houses."
- *Read aloud.* For those teachers who can read Shakespeare with the proper effect, it is very helpful for the students to hear how the language sounds, where the emphasis falls, and how the names and words are pronounced.
- *Keep a Director's Notebook.* There is also a variation called a prompt book; these approaches ask students to adopt the role of the director who will stage the play or specific scenes, or the actor who must interpret and perform the scenes. This technique is ideal with Shakespeare, as he offers no stage direction or guidance in the area of costuming, staging, or characterization. Nearly all contemporary plays, on the other hand, provide specific instructions about lighting, dress, and characterization. A description of this activity appears on pages 96–97; it's worth noting, however, that this technique works just as well when recasting a story or novel as a dramatic interpretation, as the group Word for Word does with many short stories. For a more complete discussion of these two methods, read *Shakespeare Set Free: Teaching Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, A Midsummer Night's Dream* (O'Brien 1993).
- *Connect the play to the students' world.* Whether this means recasting *Hamlet* as a disgruntled teenager whose parents have divorced or setting *Romeo and Juliet* in modern-day America, with a Romeo and a Juliet of different cultures whose relationship their parents oppose, students must connect the play to their own world. They can do this through dramatic interpretation; they can also make such cultural and personal connections through discussions with classmates, parents, or others whom they interview or read about through letters, journals, or other primary source documents.

I have focused here on Shakespeare because he remains the primary challenge for most teachers, especially those new to the profession. Obviously most of these strategies would also work with any other play. I use the same techniques, for example, when teaching Arthur Miller's *Crucible*. I have not done so, but I can envision how a powerful class adaptation of Miller's play could be made about the McCarthy era, since Miller himself was using the Puritan past to comment on his Communist present. In fact, Miller has in recent years published new editions of his plays with outstanding essays in them in which he discusses the context in which he wrote them. New editions of the works we teach come out all the time, often with valuable new resources. McDougal-Littell, for instance, in its Literature Connections series, now publishes most of the books commonly taught with "related readings." What is distinctive about these editions is that each includes a range of texts from different cultures and genres that expand the conversation the main work begins.

I always encourage students to dress up for their performances. Costumes create a dramatic space and get kids into character. I have photographs of girls putting lipstick and wigs on tough athletic boys decked out in dresses. As I said earlier, I also like to get outdoors if we can: the classroom is too familiar and too restrained for the volume and movement you hope students will bring to a dramatic performance. I have seen otherwise shy and troubled readers bring a sense of fun and passion to the dramatic reading of Shakespeare, which never fails to move me. The kids know Shakespeare is hard, and for that reason they consider it a formidable achievement if they are able to climb that mountain.

TEACHING POETIC TEXTS: COURTING THE ELUSIVE MUSE

A poem is anything said in such a way or put on the page in such a way as to invite from the hearer or reader a certain kind of attention.

—WILLIAM STAFFORD, *WRITING THE AUSTRALIAN CRAWL*

Poetry was my passport into the world of literature. Few other texts offer so much substance, such rich fare as poems; nor are there many other texts, Shakespeare included, that challenge teachers and, of course, students as much as poetry can. Who wants to teach something that they themselves sometimes find hard to grasp? Surely this just feeds those fires of insecurity in teachers, that fear that our students will one day rise up en masse and shout, "Admit it! *You* don't even know what it means!" I tend to think of poetry less as a wall we must climb than as an invitation, a doorway into the conversation we are trying to have. Billy Collins, during his tenure as America's poet laureat, created Poetry