

Shakespeare and the Secondary School Classroom: A Literature Review

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In an editorial titled, “Translating Shakespeare Into English,” George Meyer captures the feelings of many high school students when he quotes a passage from a twelve year old’s diary. The young man wrote, “My brain is hurting. I have had two pages of Macbeth to translate into English” (2). Assisting today’s young reader in the “translation” process of Shakespeare’s plays is a hurdle that many language arts teachers must clear. It is a consensus among language arts teachers that teaching Shakespeare to today’s high school students is a challenge. (Kernodle, 1949; McKenna, 1976; O’Brien, 1984; Blinderman, 1975; Carter, 1983; Renz, 1942; Veidemanis, 1964). Without proper instruction, students could feel that the material is outdated and inaccessible to them (Blinderman, 1975; Kernodle, 1949). Although it is a challenge, many teachers believe that it is a necessary part of the curriculum (Kernodle, 1949; Frey, 1984; McKenna, 1976; Carter, 1983; Renz, 1942; Veidemanis, 1964). Esther Cloudman Dunn, a teacher at Smith College, succinctly captures the reasons for the inclusion of Shakespeare in today’s canon when she stated:

The genius of Shakespeare is extraordinarily sensitive to the hour and the age. Into his book, each age has peered, as into a mirror, to see its own face. The images in that mirror fade and are replaced as the decades go by. But the mirror is not discarded. There is a strange compulsion to look into it, to scrutinize this Shakespeare, no matter how cramped and dated the era may be. He responds by showing only so much of himself as is comely in the eyes of the particular world which reads him” (cited in Frey 541-542).

Truly, for these reasons, Shakespeare's works are unique. Although there is a variety of subject and plot within the Bard's repertory, there are some common problems that arise while students are reading Shakespeare's material. As George Kernodle stated in his article "Basic Problems in Reading Shakespeare," "While each play—indeed, each speech and each line—has its own characteristics, it is possible to isolate a few basic problems common to all the plays" (37). If teachers follow Kernodle's line of reasoning, one could conclude that since common problems exist, perhaps there are common solutions to help students solve the puzzles that Shakespeare's plays present to them. What are some of these solutions or specialized reading strategies that can be used with students in order to increase comprehension levels as they study Shakespeare in their English classes?

All of the strategies that have deemed successful appear to be built on the same basic principal: Shakespeare's young readers must be properly prepared before they begin to study the works of William Shakespeare (McKenna, 1976; O'Brien, 1984; Blinderman, 1975; Carter, 1983; Veidemanis, 1964). The suggested strategies for this preparation rest within three broad categories: the need for adequate background knowledge in poetry and meter, in Elizabethan history, and in stage directions; the need to understand the differences between the language of Shakespeare and the language of the modern era; and the necessity of performance orientated readings of the plays during the course of study.

First, the students must have adequate experience in reading poetry (Kernodle, 1949; Frey, 1984; O'Brien, 1984; Veidemanis, 1964) and understanding meter and rhyme (Kernodle, 1949; Swander, 1984) as well as how to use complex sentences. Kernodle states, "He [Shakespeare] uses balance, sequence, and much more extended effects of subordination and contrast than we expect to meet—all of which require a more elaborate and clear-cut handling of

grouping and inflection than modern prose requires” (39). Additionally, the students must also comprehend that Shakespeare emphasizes important words that need to be noticed through the study of meter (Kernodle, 1949; Millard, Zeigler, & Custer, 1984; O’Brien, 1984; Veidemanis, 1964). Swander demonstrates the importance of this when he states, “Give them the problem of scanning the first two syllables of Richard III—is he, in his first moment with us, a trochaic or an iambic villain?—and then they rise to the excitement of a whole new game. Suddenly meter opens a rich world of character and action, and the pursuit eventually reveals that literary and theatrical scansion are birds of a very different color” (530).

Additionally, students should be aware of important events in Elizabethan history and the life of Shakespeare (McKenna, 1976; Frey, 1984; Swander, 1984; Gilbert, 1984; O’Brien, 1984; Blinderman, 1975; Eastman, 1982; Renz, 1942; Veidemanis, 1964). A historical framework may provide a framework in which the students can better understand the societal conditions in which the Bard’s plays were written. Students should also be aware of the history of the theater in the Elizabethan era as well as an understanding of the development of theater over time (McKenna, 1976; Frey, 1984; Swander, 1984; Millard, Zeigler, & Custer, 1984; 1984; O’Brien, 1984; Blinderman, 1975; Carter, 1983; Veidemanis, 1964). Students need to be reminded that until the modern era, theater was one of the few entertainment options that were available. Theater was meant to be entertaining as well as enlightening; of course, the same is true in today’s world but the impact of the theater is not as great because of the myriad of entertainment outlets we have at our fingertips. Additionally, understanding the literary theories of tragedy, comedy, and romance will help modern readers to understand the conventions that Shakespeare worked with (O’Brien, 1984; Carter, 1983; Veidemanis, 1964). Another possibility to assist with background information is to have students examine Shakespeare’s treatment of sources by presenting

students with one of the works that Shakespeare drew upon before he wrote the play (O'Brien, 1984; Veidemanis, 1964). With this information now a part of the student's existing knowledge, the reader is more free to take time to understand the genius of language because s/he is aware of the plot and the outline that Shakespeare referred to as he was creating his works of genius.

The second general category of reading strategies that teachers could use to help students understand Shakespeare is to call attention to the differences between the speech of Elizabethan Era and today's language. Importantly, students must possess a familiarity with Elizabethan vocabulary because some words that are commonly used in the Shakespeare's plays have changed meaning over the years (McKenna, 1976; Frey, 1984; Swander, 1984; Gilbert, 1984; O'Brien, 1984; Blinderman, 1975; Eastman, 1982; Renz, 1942; Veidemanis, 1964). Students also should know that it is acceptable to manipulate the text so that they can better understand the play (Gilbert, 1984; Swander, 1984; O'Brien, 1984; Eastman, 1982; Veidemanis, 1964). Miriam Gilbert reminds us in the Shakespeare Quarterly, "By implying that the text is not sacrosanct, that it can be condensed or temporarily dispensed with, one is getting students to take off the white kid gloves with which so many people pick up a work by Shakespeare" (608). This text manipulation can occur in many forms. The following is a list of suggested adaptations that may assist in helping students more easily understand Shakespeare's language.

- Lamb's conversion of Shakespeare plays into prose (McKenna, 1976; Frey, 1984)
- Roger Greene's Tales of Shakespeare (McKenna, 1976; Eastman, 1982)
- Teacher retells the story while interspersing selected segments of the play (McKenna, 1976; Gilbert, 1984; Carter, 1983; Renz, 1942).
- Shakespeare Made Easy by Alan Durband (combines original text on left, translation on right) (Meyer, 1985; Frey, 1984)

- Movies, television adaptations (Frey, 1984; Gilbert, 1984; Carter, 1983; Veidemanis, 1964)
- Marchette Chute's Stories from Shakespeare (Carter, 1983)
- Scholastic Press's Heroes, Lovers, and Fools contain story versions of Hamlet, R&J, Othello, etc. (Carter, 1983)

Another strategy that could assist students with their Shakespeare assignments is the utilization of a performance-orientated reading of the play. As Michael McKenna states in his article, "Shakespeare in Grade 8," that the "greatest impact of his art comes to us through the characters and what they say—the drama of words" (McKenna, 206). Often, when plays are read in class by struggling students an unenthusiastic teacher, the readers often lack this drama—the proper emotions and phrasing as they give their lines (Kernodle, 1949; Frey, 1984; O'Brien, 1984; Blinderman, 1975; Veidemanis, 1964). Additionally, there are subtle emotions that students may have not experienced; therefore, are unable to convey in speech (Kernodle, 1949; O'Brien, 1984; Blinderman, 1975; Renz, 1942; Veidemanis, 1964). Swander argues, "Shakespeare's words, deliberately designed by a theatrical genius for a thrust stage with live actors and an immediately responding audience, cannot be satisfactorily explored or experienced in any other medium than its own" (540). With this in mind, experienced teachers believe that students should see the play done by professional actors or be participants in a carefully directed production in order to better understand the dialogue (Kernodle, 1949; Swander, 1984; Gilbert, 1984; Millard, Zeigler, & Custer, 1984; O'Brien, 1984; Carter, 1983; Renz, 1942; Veidemanis, 1964). Another alternative is to teach the plays in a seminar/workshop setting (Swander, 1984; Gilbert, 1984; Millard, Zeigler, & Custer, 1984; O'Brien, 1984). If this is not possible, students should be encouraged to read out loud to themselves, imagine the setting, follow stage directions,

and make facial expressions while they are reading (Swander, 1984; Millard, Zeigler, & Custer, 1984; Gilbert, 1984; O'Brien, 1984). This assists the reader in experiencing the play as it was meant to be. Shakespeare's plays are much more than words on a page; students can only truly experience the end that Shakespeare had in his mind as he created his masterpieces. Dialogue will be heard as it should be; therefore, it should be easier for the young reader to comprehend the plays.

There is evidence that the employment of specialized reading strategies can be used in the high school classroom to in order to increase students' comprehension levels as they study Shakespeare in their English classes. I believe that strategies like those advocated by the authors reviewed in this article could be effectively used to increase motivation and student comprehension of the Shakespeare's richly textured works. In my experience, middle and high school students are bored by Shakespeare before they begin to read the play. These plays have the reputation of being difficult to understand. I think activities that help students to become familiar with Shakespeare's sometimes-difficult language of the plays are very valuable and need to be used in the classroom. An exercise that centers on Elizabethan vocabulary or an activity that teaches students to manipulate the archaic sentence structures into modern speech patterns would help to alleviate some of the difficulties that students encounter with the plays.

Additionally, I believe that having the students watch the play in a theater would be a great way for them to view the works as they were meant to be experienced. Since theatrical productions are not readily available in non-urban areas, I think that watching a movie production of the play before the in-class study commences would be very helpful because the students would begin the play with a basic understanding of the plot and characters. Usually, English classes watch the movie as a reward following the study of the play, which gives the students a nice break, but it

may serve them better if shown before study commences. There are excellent versions of some of the often-studied plays available whose setting has been modernized, but, in many cases, the dialogue has remained the same. Baz Lurhman's "Romeo and Juliet" is an excellent example of this or 1999 production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" with Calista Flockheart could be well used in a classroom. Also, there is a production of "Hamlet" that stars Julia Stiles and Ethan Hawke and takes place within a high-powered business firm instead of a European kingdom. Stiles stars in another adaptation of Othello called "O" that is set in a private school and the rivalry between Iago and Othello occurs on a basketball court instead of Italy.

I have read in article, other than those reviewed here, that some teachers believe that the study of Shakespeare in the high school classroom should be abandoned. I wholeheartedly disagree with this viewpoint. Rather than abandon the practice of teaching Shakespeare in the core English classes, I think that educators could employ some of these suggested methods before they lead their class through a play such as Macbeth or Hamlet. Educator Esther Cloudman Dunn correctly asserts that, "What our own twentieth century education is likely to do about Shakespeare is still uncertain. Probably the method of studying him, or the complete omission of him, will follow the curves, depressions, and changing prejudices of our world...(as cited in Frey, 541). I believe that if students are adequately prepared for their studies, perhaps the negativity surrounding the works of the Elizabethan playwright will fade and a new appreciation for his works will grow in the hearts of the next generation of readers.

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