

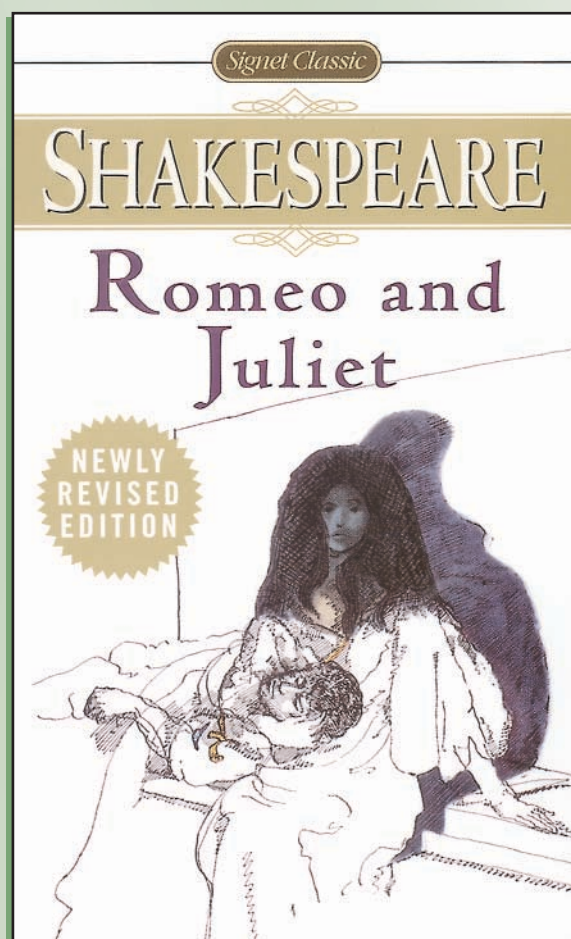


A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE SIGNET CLASSIC EDITION OF

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S

ROMEO AND JULIET

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INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is an excellent introduction to Shakespearean drama; teenagers can relate to its plot, characters, and themes. The play's action is easily understood, the character's motives are clear, and many of the themes are as current today as they were in Shakespeare's time. Therefore, it can be read on a variety of levels, allowing all students to enjoy it.

Less able readers can experience the swash-buckling action and investigate the themes of parent-child conflict, sexuality, friendship, and suicide. Because of the play's accessibility to teenagers, able readers can view the play from a more literary perspective, examining the themes of hostility and its effect on the innocent, the use of deception and its consequences, and the effects of faulty decision making. They can study how the characters function within the drama and how Shakespeare uses language to develop plot, characters, and themes. The most able students can develop skills involved in literary criticism by delving into the play's comic and tragic elements and its classically tragic themes: the role of fate and fortune, the inevitable nature of tragedy, and the isolation of the tragic hero.

This teacher's guide will be divided into several parts: (1) a brief literary overview, including a synopsis and commentary on the play; (2) suggestions for teaching the play, including activities, discussion questions, and essay topics to be used before, during, and after reading of the play; (3) ideas to extend the students' learning beyond the play, including ways to address its themes, ideas for teaching literary analysis, techniques for using the play as a bridge to other works, and ways to use the play as part of an interdisciplinary study; (4) suggestions for avoiding censorship; and (5) bibliographies, including additional pedagogical sources, other works of literature addressing similar themes, and interdisciplinary sources. Throughout this study guide attention will be given to the ability level of the students, and specific activities, discussion questions, and topics will be labeled as to difficulty.

- * Appropriate for all students.
- + Most appropriate for nonacademic students.
- # Most appropriate for above average students.
- ~ Most appropriate for academic students.

OVERVIEW

SYNOPSIS

The play takes place in Verona, Italy, in the late 15th century.

At the opening of the play, Romeo, son of the House of Montague, believes he is desperately in love with Rosaline, a young beauty who spurns his attentions. To rid him of his infatuation, his friend Benvolio suggests he turn to other women (I,i.). Romeo learns through an announcement carried by an illiterate servant of the House of Capulet, a family engaged in a feud with the Montagues, that a ball will be given that night by the Capulets at which Rosaline will be a guest (I, ii.). Romeo, hoping to see her, and Benvolio, hoping Romeo will find another, decide to attend the ball even though they haven't been invited. At the ball, Romeo, who wears a mask, sees and falls deeply in love with Juliet, who he later discovers is the daughter of the Capulets. Tybalt, Juliet's hot-tempered cousin, recognizes Romeo, but is deterred from doing any harm by the elder Capulet, who will not have his party ruined by a fight. Nevertheless, Tybalt bides his time and vows revenge (I,v.).

Later that night, while Juliet's parents are arranging her marriage to the aristocratic Count Paris, a love-struck Romeo steals into the Capulet's garden hoping to glimpse Juliet. He overhears Juliet's secret declaration of love for him and makes himself known to her. They exchange pledges of love and determine to marry secretly the next day (II,ii.). With the help of Friar Laurence, a holy man who hopes to heal the breach between the Capulets and Montagues, and Juliet's vulgar but well-meaning nurse, who wants nothing more than to see Juliet married, the two are wedded in the Friar's cell, unknown to the parents of either house (II,iii.).

Soon after his marriage, Romeo discovers his friends Benvolio and Mercutio in a fight with Tybalt, who has been looking for Romeo to call him to account for his intrusion on the Capulet bell. Because he has married Juliet and looks upon Tybalt as a relative, Romeo resists his advances. Mercutio, angered by Tybalt's insults and attacks on Romeo, draws his

sword. In an attempt to prevent the fight Romeo holds Mercutio back as Tybalt draws his sword and slays Mercutio. Romeo has no choice but to avenge the death of his friend. They fight, and Tybalt is slain (III,i.). Romeo flees to Friar Laurence's cell. Romeo's fate is sealed when the Prince of Verona banishes him from the city for his deed. The despairing Romeo spends his first and final night with Juliet before he flees to Mantua at dawn. Not knowing that Juliet grieves for Romeo and assuming her tears are for her slain cousin Tybalt, the elder Capulet prepares for Juliet to marry the "Country Paris" later that same week (III,v.). Juliet pleads with her parents to postpone the wedding, and, when they refuse, seeks the Friar's advice. He tells her to agree to the marriage, but to take a sleeping potion made from herbs he has gathered. The potion will mimic the appearance of death and she can be brought to the Capulet burial vault, while the Friar has Romeo brought back from Mantua (V,i.).

She takes the potion and is found, apparently dead, the morning of her planned wedding. She is "buried" in the same tomb as Tybalt (IV,iii.-IV,v.). Fate and accident prevent Friar Laurence's letter from reaching Romeo who hears of Juliet's death from his servant. Romeo decides to kill himself and seeks poison from an apothecary (V,i.). He slips back into Verona, finds Paris mourning Juliet at the tomb, kills him, enters the tomb, and finding the "dead" Juliet, takes the poison (V,iii.). The Friar arrives just as Juliet awakens, but he is unable to persuade her to leave Romeo. And, after the Friar leaves, Juliet takes her own life with Romeo's dagger (V,iii.). The Capulets and the elder Montague, whose wife has died that night of a broken heart over Romeo's banishment, arrive at the tomb to discover the entire younger generation dead. They agree to end their feud (V,iii.).

COMMENTARY

The play initially appears to be a typical Elizabethan comedy. The characters, though noble, are not of historical importance as in tragedies of the day. The early acts are filled with plays on words, the bawdy talk of Juliet's nurse, the revelry of a ball, "mooning" lovers, unlikely love scenes, and, in spite of the feud, a general air of humor and happiness. And, like in all Elizabethan comedy, there is the feeling that all is a game that will be won by the most clever player. We see the contrived strategies of Benvolio and Romeo as they mask themselves to attend the ball. We are privy to the countermove of Mercutio, who appears to be a major player in the game, as he talks Romeo out of love. Things happen quickly and good fortune seems to smile on Romeo as he not only finds the lady Juliet at her window, but hears her declaration of love for him.

But, Shakespeare begins to plant the seeds of tragedy. Romeo fears his dreams and speaks of a sense of foreboding,

...my mind misgives
Some consequence yet hanging in the stars
Shall bitterly begin his fearful date
With this night's revels and expire the term
Of a despised life, closed in my breast,
By some vile forfeit of untimely death.
(I,iv,106-111)

We meet the fiery tempered Tybalt who clearly states his intent to seek revenge against Romeo. And, the deception begins. Romeo and Juliet are secretly married by the good Friar whose perception is faulty when he imagines that the marriage will end the feud.

At the beginning of Act III the comedy turns to tragedy. Even the weather has become hot and "the mad blood stirring" (III,i,4). First, Mercutio is slain by Tybalt, and, then Tybalt by Romeo. Ironically, Mercutio, who seemed to be a pivotal player in the comedy, becomes not only the first to die, but his death makes all those that follow inevitable. "Inevitability" is the force which governs the world of tragedy. From the time of Mercutio's death the characters seem to have no control over the events as they speed by. A sense of doom is dominant; events occur before they can be stopped; perceptions are marred; errors in judgment are rampant; everyone is inflexible; everything is absolute, inevitable. The stage has been set for the tragedy.

BEFORE READING

Shakespeare's plays were written to be performed and enjoyed by his audience, in fact most were not published until seven years after his death. When *Romeo and Juliet* first appeared on the stage in approximately 1594, most of the audience was familiar with the story. It was a popular tale in Elizabethan times; many versions were available, the most widely known was Arthur Brooke's long narrative poem *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*. So, in spite of the fact that

Shakespeare's play might appear to the uninitiated to be a comedy, especially when Sampson and Gregory open the first act with their swash-buckling, most of his audience knew, without even hearing the prologue, that the lovers were "star-crossed" and that in "two hours' tragic of our stage" they would "take their life" and "bury their parents' strife" (Prologue, 6-12). It's only fair that we give our students the same advantage.

There are numerous ways to acquaint students with the play:

1. Tell the story to the class. If you are a good storyteller you can use your technique to bring *Romeo and Juliet* to life. If storytelling is not your forte, you can relate the plot by recounting parts and asking questions that involve the students in the process. For example: "Have you ever met a boy or girl who you thought was really neat, who you admired from afar, but when you tried to speak to him or her you were ignored? That's how our play begins, with Romeo rebuffed by Rosaline with whom he thinks he's in love. Now, suppose you knew that this boy or girl you liked was going to be at a party that you were not invited to, and a friend suggested you crash it. Would you? Well, our hero Romeo does." You can continue relating each act in this manner prior to reading it.
2. Several movie versions of the play are available, the most popular and most accessible is S. Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), now available on video tape. Since Zeffirelli changed much of the script when he wrote the screenplay, the changes can make for interesting discussion when the play is read.
3. *Romeo and Juliet* is Shakespeare's most performed play. You may be able to take your students to see it prior to reading it in class.
4. Many modern versions of the *Romeo and Juliet* tale have been written and produced. The best known 20th century adaptation is *West Side Story* (Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents and Stephen Sondheim). This musical adaptation is set in New York City in the 1950's. The feud is not between two families, but between ethnic gangs. Students can be introduced to this through film, reading the script, and listening to the soundtrack. Again, the differences between *West Side Story* and Shakespeare's play can lead to interesting discussion.
5. Students are frequently intrigued by the idea of a feud lasting several generations. In some parts of the country students may be able to discuss family feuds that are still a part of their lives. Since the introduction you have given to the play makes the feud between the Montagues and Capulets evident, an investigation of other famous feuds is likely to spark student interest in the play. You might begin by telling them about feuds with which you are familiar: the Shepherdson-Grangerford feud in Twain's *Huck Finn*, the historic feud between the Scottish clans of Campbell and MacDonald, or the Appalachian feud of the Hatfields and McCoys. Once you have discussed one or more feuds with the students, send them to the library to investigate others and report their findings to the class.
6. After students have been introduced to the story of Romeo and Juliet some of these can be discussed. First, examine themes that relate directly to their lives: suicide, sexuality, child/parent relationships and friendship.* Next, discuss literary themes: hostility and its effect on the innocent, the use of deception and its consequences, and the effects of faulty decision making.#~ Finally, examine the themes of classical tragedy: the role of fate and fortune, the inevitable nature of tragedy, and the isolation of the tragic hero.

Since *Romeo and Juliet* is frequently the student's first introduction to Shakespeare, it is especially important that students be taught how to read and enjoy his plays.

1. As discussed in the commentary, *Romeo and Juliet* combines techniques of Elizabethan tragedy and comedy. Assign students to one of two groups to investigate these techniques. The results of their investigation can be placed on chart paper and discussed.
 2. Most students are unaware of the organization and dramatic techniques of Shakespearean drama. Discuss with the students: five acts divided into scenes, rising action, climax at beginning of third act, falling action, chorus, prologue, soliloquy, asides, blank verse...
 3. Understanding the characters and their relationships is frequently a stumbling block for first time readers of Shakespeare. Introduce the characters to the students.*
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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 the 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, querulous, inflexible, old, looks at love as a good match

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

Other important characters

Paris: a count, betrothed to Juliet, foil to Romeo

Friar Laurence: Romeo's counselor, loved and respected, attempts to do what is "right", marred reasoning, misplaced virtue

Divide a sheet of chart paper in half lengthwise, place the House of Capulet on one side, the House of Montague on the other. You can use this later to chart the relationship of the characters.*

- Shakespeare used language to tell his story and to develop his characters. After the students are familiar with the story, show them places where Shakespeare uses*

PUNS:

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.
Under love's heavy burden do I sink.

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 boisterous, 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)

FORESHADOWING:

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)

METAPHOR:

It is the East, and Juliet is the Sun!
 Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven,
 Having some business, do entreat her eyes
 To twinkle in their spheres till they return.
 (Romeo, II,ii,3,15-17)

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,13-15)

Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,
 Towards Phoebus' lodging! Such a wagoner
 As Phakton would whip you to the west
 And bring in cloudy night immediately.
 (Juliet, III,ii,1-4)

NAMING:

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.
 Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
 What's 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 curshd 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)

LANGUAGE TO REVEAL SOCIAL CLASS AND DEVELOP CHARACTER:

(Nurse's peasant speech and 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 it brow
 A bump as big as a young cock'rel'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)

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

(Juliet's lyrical imagery)
 O, bid me leap, rather than marry Paris,
 From off the battlements of any tower,
 Or walk in thievish ways, or bid me lurk
 Where serpents are; chain me with roaring bears,
 Or hide me nightly in a charnel house,
 O'ercovered quite with dead men's rattling bones,
 With reeky shanks and yellow chapless skulls;
 Or bid me go into a new-made grave
 And hide me with a dead man in his shroud--
 Things that, to hear them told, have made me tremble--
 And I will do it without fear or doubt,
 To live an unstained wife to my sweet love.
 (IV,i,77-88)

(Illiterate banter of servants) Find them out whose names are written here?
 It is written that the shoemaker should meddle with
 his yard and tailor with his last, the fisher with
 his pencil and the painter with his nets; but I am
 sent to find those persons whose names are here
 writ, and can never find what names the writing
 person hath here writ. I must to the learned. In good time!
 (I,ii,38-45)

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

And for that offense
 Immediately we do exile him hence.
 I have an interest in your hate's proceeding,
 My blood for your rude brawls doth lie a-bleeding;
 But I'll amerce you with so strong a fine
 That you shall all repent the loss of mine.
 I will be deaf to pleading and excuses;
 Nor tears nor prayers shall purchase out abuses.
 Therefore use none. Let Romeo hence in haste,
 Else, when he is found, that hour is his last.
 Bear hence this body and attend our will.
 Mercy but murders, pardoning those that kill.
 (Prince, III,i,188-199)

(Intellectual command 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 work,
 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)

(Insolent, fiery talk of Tybalt)
 What! Dares the slave
 Come hither, covered with an antic face,
 To flear 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)

(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)

5. Discuss how Shakespeare's use of language reveals attributes of each character.
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WHILE READING

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

1. Try some informal classroom drama techniques: Choral Reading*—Prior to reading a scene with each character represented by a chorus of students. Present the scene chorally with every member of the class involved. Readers' Theater#--Assign a scene to a small group of students; each group should have one student per character; the scenes are rehearsed by the groups; each scene is read in order with the entire class participating. Story Theater#--Students are assigned to groups to rehearse scenes; two students are assigned each part. One reads the part, while the other acts it.
2. Read major scenes orally to the class. Ask students who read aloud well to do the same.*
3. Intersperse the oral reading with recordings of professional actors portraying the roles.

Writing and discussion activities can reinforce the students' understanding of the play. Have students participate in one or more of these activities.

1. Keep a journal to record the chronological sequence of events. Each day add to a class timeline of events.+*
2. Keep a diary of one of the major characters in the play, recording in diary form what s/he is doing and how s/he is feeling.+* Ask different students to read their entries at the beginning of each class.
3. Select a major character and keep a journal of his/her development, noting: scenes that illustrate character traits, how Shakespeare's use of language develops the character, how the character interacts with other characters, how the character relates to the themes of the play~ (#6, p. 6). Use the character relationship chart to plot and discuss each character's development (#3, pp. 6-7).
4. Select one of the themes of the play (#6, p. 6): current theme important to teenagers+#, literary theme#-, or theme of classical tragedy-. As you read, write about how Shakespeare addresses the theme. Keep track of how the characters and plot relate to the theme. Discuss this in small groups and with the class.
5. Keep a list of unfamiliar vocabulary.* Discuss the meaning and use of words each day. Begin a class list, including definitions and sentences.
6. Select one of the ways Shakespeare uses language.* As you read the play write down the act, scene, and lines. Discuss with the class.

AFTER READING

1. Using the diary you created for a character (#2, p. 12), write an essay about how the character changed throughout the play.+* Or, write an essay about what techniques Shakespeare used to reveal the character's traits.~ Discuss your essay with other students who worked on the same character, make a chart to show what you have discovered, post your chart, and discuss the character with the class.
2. Write an essay about the theme you select* (#6, p. 6). Discuss why this theme is important today.+ Discuss how Shakespeare developed the theme.# Discuss how the theme relates to the tragedy of the play.~
3. Develop one + or more #- scenes into a classroom drama, building on some of the informal techniques used earlier. You can read the parts as you act them +* or you can memorize the lines-. Divide into small groups with each group practicing the same scene+, two groups practicing each scene#, or each group practicing a different scene-. Discuss with your group: who will portray each character, how the character will act in the scene, how the character will deliver the lines, where the character will stand, how the character will move.* You also might want to discuss: how the character interacts with the other characters, how this scene leads to the next.~ Present the scenes to the class, video tape them, view them, and critique them.* In your critique you might want to discuss how faithful your staging of the scene was to Shakespeare's characterization, plot, theme and staging.#~
4. View a film or stage version of the play. Compare the version seen to the one read.* What are the differences?* Why did the director make these changes?* Were the changes faithful to Shakespeare's intent?#~

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

1. Become a Shakespearean critic.~ Read one of the "Commentaries" at the end of the Signet Classic. Discuss it with a small group of students. Pick a topic discussed in the commentary of interest to the group. Go to the library to see what other views you can find on the same topic. Write a group paper exploring the differences in the critics' views.
2. Compare *Romeo and Juliet* to *West Side Story*. * What differences do you see in character, plot, and theme? Why do these differences exist?
3. Search for feuds in other literary works.#~ What are the effects of the feuds? Discuss with the class and develop an annotated bibliography.
4. Examine *Romeo and Juliet* for literary or mythological allusions.~ Go to the library and see what you can find out about one or more of these allusions. Present the results of your study to the class.
5. Do some research on Shakespeare: the man and the playwright.* Present your findings to the class.
6. Do some research on Elizabethan theater.* Present your findings to the class.
7. See if you can locate Arthur Brooke's *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*. Compare it to Shakespeare's play.~ What changes did Shakespeare make? Why?
8. Read another Shakespearean comedy or tragedy.~ How does it differ from *Romeo and Juliet*? Which is more typical of the classical elements of comedy or tragedy? (#1, p. 6).
9. Watch another Shakespearean play on film or video tape.* Compare it to *Romeo and Juliet* in terms of: elements of comedy and tragedy-, use of language*, development of plot*, characterization*, theme*.
10. Do some research on one of the modern themes of the play*: suicide, teenage sexuality, or parent/child relationships. How have attitudes changed since Shakespeare's time? Write about your findings and discuss with the class.
11. Do some research on one of the literary themes of the play#-: family hostility and its effect on the innocent, the use of deception and its consequences, or the effects of faulty decision making. See if you can locate a modern example of this literary theme. Write about your findings and discuss with the class.
12. Do some research on a theme of classical tragedy-: the role of fate and fortune, the inevitable nature of tragedy, or the isolation of the tragic hero. Find an example of the exploration of this theme in a modern short story, novel, or play. Compare in writing the modern author's treatment of the theme to Shakespeare's treatment. Share your essay with the class.
13. Search your literature anthology for works that explore similar themes.* Develop a bibliography for each theme. Select one theme and read one or more works related to that theme. Discuss with the class.

A NOTE ABOUT AVOIDING CENSORSHIP

It is often assumed by English teachers that "classics," particularly Shakespeare, are immune to censorship. However, glancing through any list of frequently censored books proves that assumption false; *Romeo and Juliet* frequently appears on those lists.

Why is this play, regarded by the entire world as one of the great works of literature, frequently the target of censors? There are many answers. The timeliness of the themes of the play and the age of the characters make it a frequent target. The "sex scenes" between the young lovers are often attacked as inappropriate for teenage readers. Finally, most often targeted by the censors' arrows are the bawdy language and double-entendres, particularly in the first half of the play. We can argue that students rarely recognize these unless they are pointed, that the themes are important to consider if today's young people are to avoid the fate of the "star-crossed lovers," that teenagers are exposed to far more lurid sex scenes on television, and that the play is one of the greatest works of literature and therefore should be read in the English classroom.

All of these are excessent arguments; however, after the issue of the "inappropriateness" of the play has been raised by censors these arguments sound shrill and defensive. The best way to deal with censorship is to avoid it. How can it be avoided:

1. Develop a department or school selection policy in which you clearly indicate criteria for selecting literature to be read, as well as a procedure for dealing with complaints should they occur.
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2. Once the policy has been established, involve as many people in the selection process as possible. Include teachers, administrators, students and parents on your selection committee.
3. Write a brief rationale for using the play in the classroom. Emphasize the literary, historical and social importance of the play. Include comments by literary critics and educators. File this rationale with your department chairperson and/or school administrator.
4. Several weeks prior to requiring the students to read the play, send home a brief description to parents. Be sure to include parts of your rationale the fact that some of the language in the play might be offensive to some people. Invite parents to borrow a classroom copy of the play and read it prior to giving their children permission to read it. Be sure to indicate alternative selections for students who are not permitted to read the play (some other Shakespearean plays might be appropriate or other books on similar themes).
5. A week prior to reading the play in class send home permission slips for the parents to complete. Phrase the slips in such a way that signing and returning them indicates that permission has not been granted. Ask parents to suggest a preferred book or play of equal literary value.
6. Be sure to make adequate provisions, avoiding stigmatization, for students who are not permitted to read the play. This may mean having to work individually with one student, grouping the class to allow for the reading of two or more works, and/or placing the student(s) in another class during the reading of the play.

Should a censorship issue arise in spite of your precautions, be sure to do the following:

1. Follow all school/department policies.
2. Suggest an option for the child or children involved. Try not to be defensive or angry; keep reminding yourself that every parent has the right to object to what his/her child is reading.
3. Ask the individual(s) objecting to the work to complete a "Citizen's Request For Reconsideration of a Work" (available from the National Council of Teachers of English). On this form the individual states his/her objection and suggests a work of equal value that is not objectionable.
4. Report the complaint to your department chairperson and/or school administrator. Confirm your next steps with him/her. The next steps should be clear in your school/department policy.
5. Other than allowing the student or students involved to read another book, do not do anything until the "Citizen's Request Form" is returned. In most cases the forms are not returned.
6. If the form is returned, and the censor demands that the book be removed from the classroom, do not proceed alone. If you have followed the recommendations for avoiding censorship, you will have a large support group, and once the censor is made aware of how the work was selected and who was involved in the selection process, usually the issue is dropped.
7. If the issues is pursued, you and your school should continue to follow the policy, seeking professional help, usually through professional organizations. The final section of the bibliography includes specific references to help in avoiding censorship.

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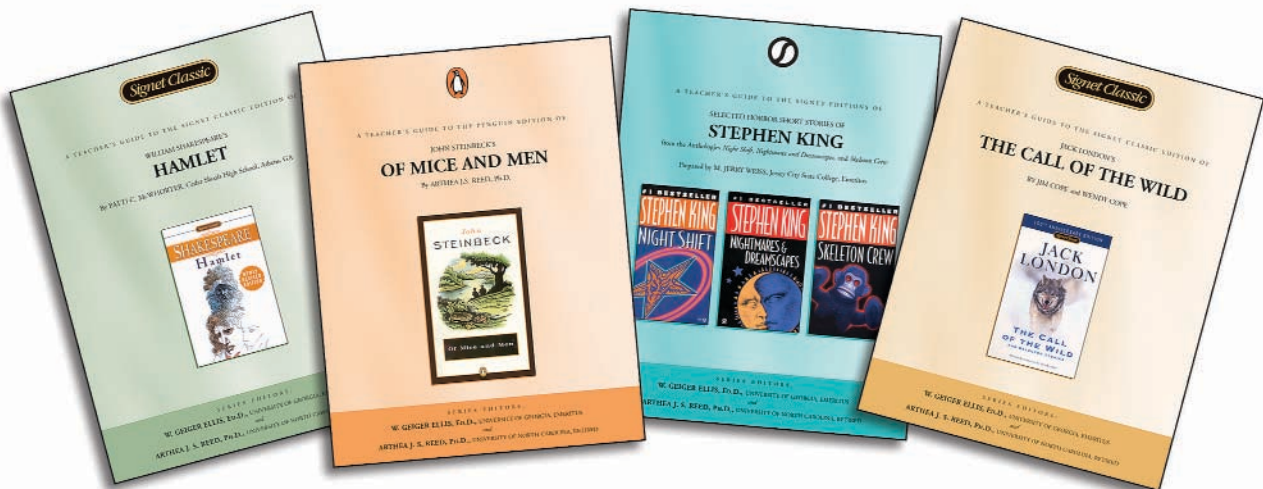
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