Three Great Plays of Shakespeare

William Shakespeare

Summary

Romeo and Juliet
In the Italian town of Verona, Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet, the son and daughter of two rival families, fall in love with each other. This will trigger off a chain of events which will lead to the lovers' deaths.

Part I
Romeo sneaks into Lord Capulet's yearly feast to see Rosaline, the girl he loves. There, he meets Juliet, the host's daughter. They fall in love and marry in secret the following day. Later that day, Mercutio, Romeo's friend, is killed by Juliet's cousin, Tybalt. Enraged, Romeo kills Tybalt and is banished from Verona.

Part II
To frustrate her parents' plans to marry her to Count Paris, Juliet pretends to be dead by drinking a sleeping potion. Romeo hears the news, returns to Verona and breaks into Juliet's tomb. There, he takes some poison and dies beside Juliet's body. Juliet awakens, sees her dead lover and stabs herself. When both families see the lovers' lifeless bodies they agree to end the feud.

Macbeth
In Scotland, noble Macbeth meets three witches who predict that he will become king. This prediction whets Macbeth's ambition to such an extent that he ends up committing lots of murders that will lead to his downfall and death.

Part I
Returning victorious from battle, Macbeth and Banquo are greeted by three witches who prophesy that Macbeth will be king of Scotland and that Banquo's offspring will reign. When Macbeth's wife hears the news, she plots to kill King Duncan that night at their castle. The couple succeed and blame Duncan's servants for the murder.

Part II
Once king, Macbeth has Banquo killed, but the murderers fail to kill Banquo's son. Banquo's ghost returns to haunt the king at a feast. In fear, Macbeth again seeks out the witches, who tell him he is almost indestructible. In the meantime, Macbeth kills the family of Macduff, who is raising an army in England with Duncan's son. Macbeth finally meets Macduff in single combat and is slain and Duncan's son becomes Scotland's new king.

King Lear
In Britain, King Lear and the Earl of Gloucester disown the one child who loves them most and protect and benefit the ones whose outward demonstrations of love are motivated by greed. Unfortunately, both become aware of their mistakes too late.

Part I
King Lear decides to divide his realm among his three daughters, according to how much love they profess to him. The two who pretend to love him are granted his kingdom; while the unselfish daughter who loves him best is banished from Britain. Aware later of his wrong decision, Lear is pushed to insanity by his two daughters' cruel behaviour towards him.

Part II
Lear's banished daughter, Cordelia, is raising an army in France to recover her father's throne. Meanwhile, Edmund and Lear's wicked daughters accuse Gloucester of plotting with Cordelia against them and have his eyes plucked out. Cordelia's army is defeated; she and her father are taken prisoners. Edmund secretly gives orders to have them killed. In spite of their victory, the selfish sisters and Edmund end up being destroyed by their evil nature and King Lear dies of a broken heart over Cordelia's corpse.

About the author
William Shakespeare is the most famous writer in the English language. He was born in 1564 and died in 1616 in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. In his late twenties, he went to London, where he began to write comedies,
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tragedies and historical plays and achieved great fame. His plays appealed to all social classes thanks to his vivid characterizations and his masterly use of the English language. Apart from being a playwright, he was also an actor and a brilliant poet.

The original texts
The plots of Shakespeare's plays were not invented by the playwright; they were adapted by him from stories which were well known in his time. 

Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth and King Lear were written by Shakespeare between 1593 and 1606 to be performed in London theatres and at the English court. They were published for the first time between 1597 and 1623 and have remained popular ever since. Film adaptations of the plays such as Baz Luhrmann's Romeo+Juliet (1996) and Roman Polanski's Macbeth (1972) have made Shakespeare's plays even more popular.

Background and themes

Themes the three stories have in common
- Love vs. hatred: Can hatred destroy love or is love more powerful?
- Order vs. disorder: Can a ruler's flaws or his weaknesses lead to civil disorder?
- Free will vs. fate: Do we govern the course of our lives or is life governed by external forces?
- Passion vs. reason: Is our reason a better guide than our strong feelings?

Themes in common between Macbeth and King Lear
- Ambition: To what lengths can we go in our search for power?
- People's potential for evil: How predictable is human behaviour?
- Guilt: How does a guilty conscience affect our well-being?
- Rightful rule vs. tyranny: Compare the protagonist to any tyrant in recent history. What led to his/her downfall?
- Moral blindness: Is it easy to discern between good and bad people?

Discussion activities

Romeo and Juliet (Part I)

Before reading

1. Discuss: Have students talk about Shakespeare and the play.
   a. Have students discuss what they know about Shakespeare. Who was Shakespeare? Where/when did he live? What did he write? What language did he write in? What do you know about Romeo and Juliet?
   b. Ask students to bring a map of Europe to place 1 England and Shakespeare's birthplace (Stratford on Avon) and 2 Italy and Verona (the setting of Romeo and Juliet).

While reading

2. Discuss: Have students discuss the conventions of marriage in their culture. 
   Lord Capulet says to Count Paris that his daughter is 'too young' to get married (page 2). How old do you think she is? Would she be too young to marry in your country today?
   Why does Count Paris ask Lord Capulet for his daughter's hand instead of asking Juliet? Is this common in your country?

3. Predict: Ask students to write down Tybalt's thoughts. When Lord Capulet tells Tybalt to let Romeo stay at the party, Tybalt gets 'very angry' but obeys his uncle (page 6). What is Tybalt thinking at this moment?

4. Discuss: Have students express their views on these topics: 
   Was Romeo really in love with Rosaline? Is his love for Juliet real? Do you believe in love at first sight? The nurse and Friar Lawrence don't let the lovers' parents know about the wedding (page 10). Is this right?

After reading

5. Write: Lord Capulet's invitation card
   Have students design a card that Lord Capulet can send his relatives and friends to invite them to his yearly feast instead of sending the servant (page 2).

6. Role play: Divide the class into 5 different groups. Each group describes the fight (pages 10–11) from one of the characters' point of view (Romeo, Tybalt's ghost, Mercutio's ghost, Lady Capulet and the Prince).

Romeo and Juliet (Part II)

Before reading

7. Guess: Have students read the words in italics on page 14. Who says these words, to whom and why?

While reading

8. Discuss: Have student talk about Friar Lawrence. Have students discuss Friar Lawrence's actions.
   If you were Friar Lawrence, would you tell Paris that Juliet is already married? (page 18) Is Friar Lawrence right or wrong in giving Juliet the drink to make her sleep for 42 hours? Would you drink a liquid of this type? (page 19)

9. Predict: Ask students to imagine the following situation. What will happen to Juliet if she wakes up before Romeo comes to fetch her from the tomb?

10. Discuss: Have students discuss the end of the story. Should Friar Lawrence be punished by the Prince? Do Romeo and Juliet's deaths have any positive effect?

After reading

11. Write: Ask students to imagine the following. When Romeo arrives at the Capulets' tomb he gives
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**King Lear (Part I)**

**Before reading**

19 **Guess**: Have students read the words in italics on page 46. What will happen in this part? Why does Lear say that Cordelia has died?

**While reading**

21 **Discuss**: Have students discuss the following.

- Why was it foolish of Lear to:
  a. divide his kingdom as he did,
  b. believe what Goneril and Regan told him,
  c. think that Cordelia didn’t love him and
  d. tell Cordelia she was no longer his daughter?

22 **Guess**: Have students discuss the following.

- Edgar’s situation is similar to Lear’s. What will be the result of the friendship between ‘Poor Tom’ and Lear?

**After reading**

23 **Write**: Have students write Edgar’s letter to his father explaining what really happened between both brothers (page 52).

**King Lear (Part II)**

**Before reading**

24 **Guess**: Have students read the words in italics on page 58. Who is talking to Macbeth? Can a human being not be born from a woman?

**While reading**

25 **Guess**: Ask students to predict what Gloucester is planning to do when he asks to be taken to the edge of a rock high above the sea (page 60). Get them to discuss why he has made this decision.

26 **Read carefully**: Have students find evidence in the text to discuss the following:

- King Lear says to his daughter: ‘I know you cannot love me. Your sisters were bad to me. You have a reason to hate me, but they have not.’ (page 67)

- What’s Cordelia’s reason for hating her father? Do you agree that Goneril and Regan have no reason to hate him? If so, why are they so cruel to their father?

**After reading**

27 **Write**: Regan opens a letter Goneril has sent to Edmund and reads it. (page 62) In pairs, have students imagine what the letter says and then write it down.

28 **Write**: And then? Ask students to imagine Cordelia hasn’t been killed by Edmund’s men. In pairs or in small groups, get them to write new endings to the story.

**Macbeth (Part I)**

**Before reading**

12 **Guess**: Have students read the words in italics on page 28. What are the colours red and white connected to? What will the story be about?

**While reading**

13 **Discuss**: After reading Banquo’s words on the witches on page 28, have students discuss the powers of witches.

- Can the witches bring trouble and death? Can they predict the future?
- Macbeth and Banquo pay close attention to the witches’ words. Would you?

14 **Discuss**: Have students discuss this:

- According to Lady Macbeth, Macbeth’s defects are being ‘too kind, too gentle’ (page 28). Why does Lady Macbeth consider them defects?

**After reading**

15 **Role play**: Discuss with students what Banquo would say to his wife after meeting the witches. Then get them to dramatize the dialogue.

16 **Write and Role play**: In pairs, get students to imagine King Duncan wakes up when Macbeth is about to kill him. Ask them to write the dialogues and dramatise them.

**Macbeth (Part II)**

**Before reading**

17 **Guess**: Have students read the words in italics on page 36. Who is talking to Macbeth? Can a human being not be born from a woman?

**While reading**

18 **Guess**: Ask students to imagine and then discuss Macbeth’s thoughts when Macduff tells him he was not born in the normal way.

**After reading**

19 **Write**: Macbeth today

- Have students imagine that Macbeth is king today and goes to see a psychologist after seeing Banquo’s ghost. Ask them to write down the conversation.