

How to Read and Understand Shakespeare

Course Guidebook

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In his 16 years at W&L, Professor Conner has taught a wide range of courses, including American and African American Literature, Modern Irish Literature, the Bible as Literature, and Literature and Philosophy. In 2005, he restructured the department's introductory Shakespeare course into a dynamic and interactive seminar on Shakespeare as both a poet and playwright, emphasizing the dramatic elements in the plays and producing an annual Shakespeare play performed by students. Professor Conner teaches a regular course on performing Shakespeare and has taught and lectured on Shakespeare to a variety of audiences. A dedicated advocate of global study, he created the Spring Term in Ireland Program, which he has directed six times, taking W&L students to Ireland to experience Irish literature, culture, and history. At W&L, Professor Conner received the Outstanding Teacher Award in 2004 and the Anece F. McCloud Excellence in Diversity Award in 2009.

Professor Conner's scholarship focuses on 20th- and 21st-century narrative in several national traditions. He is the editor or coeditor of four books: *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*, Charles Johnson: *The Novelist as Philosopher*, *The Poetry of James Joyce Reconsidered*,

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How to Read and Understand Shakespeare

Scope:

William Shakespeare is considered the greatest writer of his age, the greatest writer in the English language, and perhaps the greatest writer of all time. For over 400 years, he has held the preeminent place in world drama. His plays are known the world over and are a standard for timeless art. He is taught at every level of education in every country, and it is a near-universal opinion that the plays of Shakespeare are great art and are something we should all read and understand.

However, how many of us really know how to engage with a Shakespeare play? How many of us feel confident in approaching Shakespeare, in reading his work, in viewing his plays? The fact of the matter is that although the world urges us to read and love Shakespeare, his plays are difficult, demanding, strange—indeed, most of us struggle just to make sense of Shakespeare, let alone to see the many reasons why he is held in such high regard.

This course seeks to make Shakespeare understandable to the general reader. It starts with a simple premise: Shakespeare actually teaches us how to understand his plays. He gives us clues and tools at every step of the way that can help us unlock the mysteries of his art. It's as if Shakespeare provides us a toolbox with a host of tools inside that can be used to understand not just one play, but all of his plays. Properly understood and utilized, these tools can help us read, understand, and love Shakespeare's work.

For example, virtually every Shakespeare play has a double plot, often a “high” and “low” plot that mirror or contrast with one another. By employing the double plot tool, you will see the ways in which a play such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* parallels the human world with the fairy world or how a play such as *King Lear* explores two parent-children conflicts simultaneously. Similarly, at the heart of

Shakespearean comedy is the block to young love; by applying this tool, you will see that the response to this block can determine whether a play becomes a tragedy, like *Romeo and Juliet*, or a comedy, like *As You Like It*—or even a play that eludes such easy categories, like *Measure for Measure* or *The Winter's Tale*. You will see that Shakespeare's comedies often contain a "green world," which offers an escape from the negative society that would resist young love, whereas Shakespeare's tragedies show the inability to find such a green world, instead finding only places of terror, such as the witches in *Macbeth*, or places of chaos, such as the stormy heath in *King Lear*.

In these lectures, you will learn about Shakespeare's own stage, about its conventions, props, and particular tools that often dictated what sorts of scenes Shakespeare could compose. You will also learn about his staging practices and all the ways in which Shakespeare makes acting itself a theme of his plays. Such tools as the play within the play, place and person, and the character contrast will help you see how theatricality itself is at the heart of Shakespeare's imagination. You will explore the ways in which Shakespeare can be performed, the different ideas of acting that can be applied to a Shakespeare play, and how best to read Shakespeare and which techniques can bring out the meaning of his words when spoken aloud.

You will also explore Shakespeare's incomparable gift with language. The words are the primary tool for Shakespeare's expression, and while this may seem to be the greatest barrier to understanding Shakespeare's plays, in fact, you will see that with a few simple tools at your disposal, you can comprehend and appreciate Shakespeare's astonishing uses of language and truly see how he achieves his great works of literature.

Finally, you will put all of the tools to bear to understand the tremendous range and gravity of Shakespeare's ideas. Such key tools as appearance versus reality, the arc of character, and politics as theater will help you see the complex and penetrating ideas that inform every Shakespeare play.

Over the course of these 24 lectures, you will examine in detail 12 of Shakespeare's greatest plays—including *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Tempest*—and you will be exposed to about at least another dozen. This means that this course covers two-thirds of Shakespeare's entire corpus of plays. Each lecture contains several specific tools that help you uncover the meaning in the plays, with detailed explanations of how the tools work and careful application of the tools to the play under consideration. You will also see how the tools apply to other plays. One of the guiding principles of this course is that a tool that works for one play will work for virtually every play; thus, as the lectures build, so too does your ability to analyze and understand all of Shakespeare's work.

Unlike many Shakespeare courses that seek to inform the reader of the lecturer's view of the plays, this course seeks to empower you so that you are able to understand Shakespeare's plays on your own. Whether reading the plays on the page or watching them on the stage or screen, you will be able to grasp the details of the play as well as the deepest, most compelling themes and structures. Your ability to comment on and explain a Shakespeare play will grow immensely. Most importantly, Shakespeare will become yours, and you will feel empowered to engage his plays and to have all the delight and drama of Shakespeare in your life. ■

Romeo and Juliet—The Tools of Tragedy

Lecture 6

In analyzing *Romeo and Juliet*, you will learn about the fundamental importance of Shakespeare's poetic language, how to watch for the introduction of characters and how Shakespeare builds the play person by person, how to see the way person and place interact, and how scene is tied to character and character is revealed by scene. You will also learn the importance of watching for a character's arc of development and for the key tragic dynamic of fate versus free will. These tools can help you unlock the power of Shakespeare's first great tragedy and, in fact, all of his great tragedies.

The Balcony Scene

- It may just be the most famous scene in all of Shakespeare: A young man, really not more than a boy, has just seen a young woman at a party, and now he has stolen into her walled garden to try to see her once more. The young woman comes out of her bedroom door onto her balcony, overlooking the garden. She doesn't know the young man is there. She addresses the night, the stars, herself, her imagined lover, and while that lover watches from below, she speaks these famous words: "O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?" With this scene, the whole sense of *Romeo and Juliet* suddenly shifts; the play itself is transformed.
- In a Shakespeare play, the order in which characters are introduced on the stage and the social position those characters occupy can give us essential insights into the deeper meanings of the play. This is referred to as the introducing characters tool, and it's a very powerful tool for understanding the way a Shakespeare play functions.
- In *Romeo and Juliet*, first come the lowest class of servants, mere comic figures; then higher manservants or friends, like Benvolio; then we move into the lower figures in the prestigious families, like

Tybalt; then the heads of the families, old Montague and Capulet, appear; and finally, the prince, the supreme head of social and political power. It's a pyramid structure, from the broad social base to the narrow social pinnacle—a hierarchy of authority.

- By watching carefully how the introduction of characters corresponds to their social rank, we can see a major theme of that play even before that theme is expressed in the play's language.
- In *Romeo and Juliet*, the first act of the play suggests that we are going to see a play that is concerned with the public rivalry between great ruling families; we are primed to see a contest between mighty opposites—Capulet versus Montague. In effect, Shakespeare had taught his audience what this sort of play ought to be like, so by the end of Act I, we might think we know how to “read” this sort of play. To an extent, we'd be right: The feuding families motif is the crucial backdrop to *Romeo and Juliet*.
- However, when we come to the balcony scene at the start of Act II, we see that Shakespeare is in fact writing a new kind of tragedy: intimate, personal, and driven by a profound sense of human character. In the balcony scene, the sense of the drama shifts from a public spectacle to a very private, intimate scene, and this is another important tool for understanding Shakespeare—the place and person tool: The main idea is that the setting of a scene often has significant thematic implication. What do we literally see, or imagine, in this scene?
- The walled garden where the action takes place functions symbolically as a haven for the young lovers, a place of innocence and protection where their fragile young love can flourish and grow. The world outside the garden is the place of violence, of the feud, of death and destruction, but inside the garden, the lovers have safety—for a time. This shift of the play's focus from the public to the private, from the exterior to the interior, is not unlike the shift in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from the city of Athens to the green world of the fairy forest.

- This a new kind of tragedy, personal and driven by human character, through the uses of language—another version of the words, words, words tool. We see yet another level of poetic language that Shakespeare displays: When Romeo first sees Juliet walk onto the balcony, he expresses his most eloquent poetry of the play, offering a rich comparison of Juliet in an extended conceit, or poetic analogy.
- Shakespeare shows Romeo using the very cosmos for his comparison to Juliet.

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.

- He continues this cosmic comparison, saying that her eyes are entreated by the very stars to go and shine in their place and that the brightness of her cheek and of her eyes could turn the night into day.
- This language is so different from Romeo's bawdy and earth-bound language of infatuation and sexual desire used in his speeches about Rosaline. The language is all about elevation, literally making Juliet into an angel of heaven and figuratively elevating their love into that heavenly sphere, away from this fallen world—which is one of the great themes of this play.

Fate versus Free Will and Character Development

- Two major concepts are crucial tools for studying Shakespeare: the role of fate versus free will and the arc of a character's development. *Romeo and Juliet* presents highly elevated, ennobling language of

love, which we might associate with the comedies, but the play is a tragedy.

- Shakespeare announces his argument about the tragedy of love: Juliet says she will have Romeo swear he loves her—not by the inconstant moon but, rather, “by thy gracious self, / Which is the god of my idolatry.” We might think this is a further high poetic expression of love, and indeed it is: The Christian ideal of love claims that all love should ultimately tend upward toward God. If our love stops at the merely human level, then it is merely idolatry, the worship of the lower realm. This is what happens with Romeo and Juliet; they become one another’s idols. This is characteristic of the great tragedies.
- Whereas in the comedies we see characters who can balance extreme emotions, in the tragedies, we see precisely the inability to achieve balance. This drive toward almost self-annihilating desires is one of the hallmarks of Shakespearean tragedy.
- In both *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*, there are young lovers whose love is blocked by the older generation. In both, the lovers attempt to escape the world of the authoritarian city. In both, the mythic play of Pyramus and Thisbe lurks in the background—the story of separated lovers, feuding fathers, confusion, and tragic suicide. However, the plays go in such different directions, and the difference begins in the third act.
- In *Romeo and Juliet*, Act III opens on a hot day in the public square, and amid this heat and tension, Tybalt kills Mercutio, and Romeo, in a rage, kills Tybalt—and this is just hours after Romeo has secretly married Juliet, thereby becoming Tybalt’s kinsman. At this time, Romeo is the most hated person for Juliet’s family, and the prince orders him banished from Verona on pain of death.
- When Romeo realizes what he has done, he cries out, “O, I am fortune’s fool.” This announces a major tool for understanding Shakespeare’s concept of tragedy: Watch for the tension between

fate and free will in a character's life—the extent to which they are subject not to their own wills, but to the inscrutable and insurmountable powers of fate. The suggestion is that no matter what we do, we cannot escape the tragic path laid out for us.

- This tragic story is heart wrenching to watch from the audience because we know that the young lovers are so close to surviving, but the world they live in won't allow them to survive. Romeo's bitter despair by the play's end shows the degree of the play's tragedy: In effect, in this play, there is no "green world" to escape to. Tragedy shows us a world in which our human wills are puny and insignificant. Tragedy is dominated by the role of fate: We are what we have been condemned to be.
- However, we must be careful in assigning this category to Shakespeare too easily. Romeo feels himself to be "fortune's fool," but there is a higher register in Shakespeare's great tragedies, and his most stirring characters are the ones that rail against and resist being the mere pawns of fate. Macbeth, Hamlet, and King Lear all rise above mere fate, even if their efforts to resist might prove fruitless in the end.
- Even Romeo gives voice to this, though his actions don't reflect that fortitude. When he learns, mistakenly, that Juliet has died, he cries, "Then I defy you, stars!" This is the true tragic voice, the hero who resists his determined fate, even when he knows such resistance is futile. However, Romeo is not the great tragic hero of this play. Romeo's growth occurs in Act II, when he shifts from his adolescent lust to a more mature language of true love, but through the rest of the play, Romeo is caught by powers he cannot resist, and he alternates between a childish outrage at the world's injustice and a cynical resignation to it.
- Juliet, on the other hand, is a character who continues to grow throughout the play, reaching new heights of eloquence and power at every step. This is the next tool to emphasize when working with tragedy—the arc of character tool: Watch carefully the way that

Shakespeare's main characters develop and grow over the course of the play, and pay attention not only to a character's psychological rise and fall (that is, the internal changes), but also to the ways a character's external role changes (that is, how someone's status in or relation to society can alter throughout a play).

- The great characters in the tragedies go through an arc of development, beginning in ignorance and moving toward knowledge. Often, this knowledge is negative. Juliet begins in ignorance—an ignorance of the world of sexuality, an ignorance of what it means to make adult decisions, an ignorance of death and of the cruel ways in which the world works.
- By the third act of the play, she has grown so bold and brave that she will refuse her father's will to marry the man he chooses for her—another version of the scenario in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—even when her father rages, storms, and swears he will throw her out into the street for disobeying him. By the fourth act, we see that it is Juliet who must decide things for the couple and who must brave the tomb and a drug-induced deathlike trance in order to save their love.



This painting depicts Romeo and Juliet parting on the balcony in Act III of the play.

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- The play's true tragedy is that this beautiful, profoundly hopeful young love will be killed by the hatred of the world surrounding it. By attending to the arc of Juliet's development, we see the way the play moves toward its tragic climax. In the end, Juliet takes her life not out of the weakness of despair, as Romeo does, but out of the firm commitment to be true to what she has sworn. That is the stuff of tragic heroes.
- It's this resolve that allows her to take the sleeping draught and be buried in the Capulet family vault, despite the terror of the ordeal. If Romeo shows us the character trapped in tragedy, confined to his fate and raging against an unjust universe, Juliet shows us the heroic effort to escape tragedy, to seek the liberation of love and free will, and to refuse to succumb to despair.
- These are the trajectories of all of Shakespeare's great tragic characters. Juliet stands at the start of a line of remarkable tragic figures, eloquent and daring to the end, and is the first of a series of remarkable tragic women. Watching the growth of the tragic woman is a key tool for understanding these great tragedies.

Tools

introducing characters: Pay close attention to the order in which characters are introduced on the stage and the social position they occupy. What meaning arises from this sequence? How does the order of introduction into the play affect the play's meaning?

place and person: Pay careful attention to the way the setting of a scene relates to the characters in the scene. How does Shakespeare use the setting or scene to reveal the nature of a character? How do characters change depending on the scene they are in?

words, words, words: Shakespeare's central focus on language also takes the form of an extended conceit, or poetic analogy, such as when Romeo meets Juliet at the ball. Pay close attention to how this comparison in words

functions. What does the comparison tell you about Romeo and how he feels toward Juliet? What does Shakespeare gain by using language in this way?

fate versus free will: Pay attention to the ways Shakespeare's characters are caught between the inexorable quality of fate and their own ability to choose their destinies. This is one of the central elements in all tragedy, from the Greeks onward. How does Shakespeare present this struggle? Are his characters able to overcome it? How does this dynamic fit into Shakespeare's concept of tragedy?

arc of character: Watch carefully the way in which Shakespeare's main characters develop and grow over the course of the play. Pay attention not only to a character's rise and fall—that is, his or her internal changes—but also to the ways a character's external role changes—that is, how his or her status in or relation to the social structure can alter throughout a play. What patterns do they follow? Is it a rise and fall, or is there a more subtle pattern at work? How is this arc related to power? How is it related to the movement from ignorance to knowledge?

tragic woman: Juliet is a great example of the tragic woman—that is, the central female figure in a tragedy whose character seems to define the play or much of it. Pay close attention to the role of the woman in tragedy. How does her status as a woman both limit and expand her possibilities? How does she function? How do the men respond to her? Why was Shakespeare so drawn to powerful women in these plays?

Suggested Reading

Adamson, Hunger, Magnusson, Thompson, and Wales, eds, *Reading Shakespeare's Dramatic Language*.

Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*.

Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do the order and means by which characters are introduced affect meaning in Shakespeare's plays? Read the opening scene of any play by Shakespeare and try to see from the order and way in which the people are introduced how this might affect the meaning of the play.
2. What is the significance of a character's arc of development? What can this arc tell us about the character and about the sort of play in which that character appears? Choose one of Shakespeare's great characters—King Lear, Richard III, Cymbeline, Rosalind, Falstaff—and try to describe the dramatic arc, or trajectory, of that character.