

# Education Pack

## Exploring Language

The following practical classroom exercises are designed to help you explore the language in *Romeo and Juliet* with your group.

For some of the activities, you will need a large space to work in. The activities are differentiated by outcome and most of them would work from Key Stages 3 to 5.

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## Contents

What the words tell us	Page 2
Using language as a weapon	Page 3
Antithesis: love and hate	Page 5
What is iambic pentameter?	Page 7



## What the words tell us

### Exploring language in *Romeo and Juliet*

#### Responding to sounds

Contemporary culture demands that we are visually literate. We are used to analysing, processing and responding to visual images - on TV, in films, on our high streets, in magazines and even on the sides of buses.

Unlike the Elizabethans our ears do not easily pick up on the clues to meaning that lie within the rhythm and structure of Shakespeare's language.

In the Elizabethan era, levels of literacy were much lower than today and fewer people had access to books. Therefore people were more used to gathering information through listening rather than reading. Audiences would have been better able to pick up on clues to meaning that lie within Shakespeare's language because they were more attuned to listening for changes in rhythm and cadence. Their responses to the sounds and rhythms within language were probably more like our responses to music - there was an extra dimension over merely the meaning of the words.

#### Shakespeare's choices

Shakespeare used rhythm and lexicon (choice of words) to signpost what was happening in his plays. For example, when the iambic rhythm that a character speaks is broken it can signal that something is psychologically amiss. When Lord Capulet gets angry with Juliet for refusing to marry Paris in Act 3 Scene 5, it is reflected in the broken rhythm of his speech.



Watch this scene on the RSC website with your group:

*Act 3 Scene 5*

([www.rsc.org.uk/explore/engage/romeo\\_2008.html](http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/engage/romeo_2008.html))

Language can also give us information about character - characters who speak lots of vowels often have big imaginations, like Romeo.

Shakespeare also emphasises what is happening in a scene by his choice of language. In the second fight scene (Act 3 Scene 1), he creates conflict in the sound and shape of the words that Mercutio and Tybalt fire at each other.

The following group activities will help you explore the language in *Romeo and Juliet*.



## Using language as a weapon

Shakespeare cleverly creates conflict in the sound and shape of the words that Mercutio and Tybalt speak to each other in the second fight scene (Act 3 Scene 1). Work with your group through the following exercises to explore how the shape and sounds of the words Shakespeare chooses can have a specific impact.

### Aim: To explore the power of sound to change an atmosphere

- Ask the students to stand in a circle and all make the sound 'oooooooo'. What atmosphere does this create?
- Now ask them to open their mouths and create an 'ahhhhh' sound. How does this change the atmosphere?
- Still working together as a whole group, ask them to make the 'ooooo' sound mean the following:
  - "Goodness I haven't see you for a long time"
  - "I really like you!"
  - "I can't stand you!"

### Aim: To use language to make a dramatic impact

#### Consonant sounds

Ask students to work in pairs, standing opposite each other. Ask them to try vocalising the following:

- Punch the letter **B** to each other
- Fire an imaginary dart at the other person's eyebrows with the letter **K**
- Imagine you are squeezing the other person with the letter **S**

Discuss with the whole group:

What effect do these different sounds have when we say them like this?

What do we feel as we say them?

#### Vowel sounds

Working individually experiment with saying Romeo's first line:

"O me, what fray is here?", trying to emphasise the vowel sounds.

Ask them: What effect does this have on the speed that you say the line?

Saying a phrase with lots of vowels in it helps an actor to show that they are having a certain thought in detail. It shows they are thinking on the word. Characters who speak lots of vowels often have big imaginations.



## Using language as a weapon (continued)

### Aim: To explore using language as a weapon in Act 3 Scene 1

- Ask the group to stand in two lines opposite a partner. One line are playing Mercutio and are asked to learn the words: "Tybalt, you rat catcher will you walk."
- The other line are playing Tybalt and are asked to learn the words: "What would'st thou have with me?"
- Ask everyone to walk around the room whispering their line to as many people as possible. After a minute or so, ask them to return to their place in the line when they are familiar with saying the words.
- Next ask them to say their phrases as if the words are weapons: The Mercutios must emphasise the **consonants** and fire their lines **like daggers** at the Tybalts who respond by saying their line emphasising the **vowels** and **stretching** the phrase out as if to say, "meeow".

Discuss with the group:

Which words did they feel the emphasis was on?

What did it feel like to say the words like this?

How do these two characters feel about each other here?

How was this shown in the language?

Shakespeare creates conflict in the sound and shape of the words these two characters speak.

Now ask the group:

What happens next in the play?



## Exploring Antithesis: the language of love and hate

This exercise explores how Shakespeare uses antithesis to show how Juliet feels about Romeo after he has killed her cousin Tybalt.

- Hand out the speech by Juliet on page 6. Remind the group of the context of the speech: Juliet is waiting for Romeo to come and consummate their marriage when she discovers the news that Tybalt her cousin has been killed by Romeo, her new husband. **Read the speech aloud** around the group, punctuation mark to punctuation mark (ie: swapping reader at each punctuation mark).
  - Working in pairs, ask students to put two chairs opposite each other. One of the pair reads the speech aloud. The other must listen to what they are saying and move between the two chairs whenever Juliet introduces a word that presents an **opposite**. So, sit on one chair when a word to do with love/beauty/gentleness is said and move to the other chair when a word to do with hatred/ugliness/violence chair is said. They must move chairs again when another word is said to do with love/beauty/gentleness and so on.
  - Now swap over so both people take a turn reading the text while the other moves between the chairs.
  - **Discuss** with the whole group:
    - What do they notice?
    - How did they feel doing that exercise?
    - How does Juliet feel?
    - How does Juliet feel about Romeo?
    - What is she expressing in this speech?
- What do you think she will do next?  
Why does Shakespeare uses antithetical phrases in this speech - what does it tell us about Juliet's state of mind?  
What does it tell us about what she feels about Romeo?

**Extract from Act 3 Scene 2****JULIET**

O serpent heart, hid with a flow'ring face!  
Did ever dragon keep so fair a cave?  
Beautiful tyrant, fiend angelical!  
Dove-feathered raven, wolvish-ravening lamb!  
Despised substance of divinest show!  
Just opposite to what thou justly seem'st,  
A damned saint, an honourable villain!  
O, nature, what hadst thou to do in hell  
When thou didst bower the spirit of a fiend  
In mortal paradise of such sweet flesh?  
Was ever book containing such vile matter  
So fairly bound? O that deceit should dwell  
In such a gorgeous palace!



## What is iambic pentameter?

Shakespeare wrote his plays in a rhythm called 'iambic pentameter'. He chose this rhythm because it was similar to natural speech but also because, like a gallop, it moves the plot forward at an exciting but steady pace.

We still use iambic rhythms today without realising it.

Try saying, "I'd really like a lovely cup of tea." That's an iambic rhythm.

Now try beating that phrase out and you'll find it has 10 beats, in 5 soft/hard pairs like a heartbeat.

### Iambic sentences: read aloud and beat it out

On your board or flipchart, write up the following iambic sentences.

Ask your group to work in pairs to try beating them out as they say them aloud (10 beats, in 5 soft/hard pairs like a heartbeat):

- I've got to see a man about a dog.
- I really hope that England win the cup.
- I can't believe she's back with him again.
- He didn't even stop to say hello.

Then ask the group to come up with their own iambic sentences and share them with the group. Write up a selection on the board or flipchart.

Pick one of the sentences and ask the group to stand in a large circle.

Try galloping the iambic rhythm into the middle of the circle – altogether, speak the sentence aloud and gallop in time with the rhythm.

### Iambic sentences: read aloud and beat it out

Give each student a copy of the speech by Juliet in Act 2 Scene 5 (see page 8).

Juliet has sent the Nurse to meet Romeo to discover news about their wedding plans and is now awaiting her return.

Standing in a circle ask everyone to speak the first line together as they gallop into the middle of the circle. Does the line fit an iambic rhythm?

Now try the same thing with the next line – does this fit?

Continue through the speech.

Ask the group: What does the rhythm tell us about how Juliet is feeling as she is awaiting news from Romeo?

Are there any breaks in the rhythm?

Explain that these hiccups in the rhythm are signposts to what Juliet is feeling.

What words are emphasized when the rhythm breaks?

What do they tell us about how Juliet is feeling?

**Extract from Act 2 Scene 5****JULIET**

The clock struck nine when I did send the nurse;  
In half an hour she promised to return.  
Perchance she cannot meet him: that's not so.  
O, she is lame! love's heralds should be thoughts,  
Which ten times faster glide than the sun's beams,  
Driving back shadows over louring hills:  
Therefore do nimble-pinion'd doves draw love,  
And therefore hath the wind-swift Cupid wings.  
Now is the sun upon the highmost hill  
Of this day's journey, and from nine till twelve  
Is three long hours, yet she is not come.  
Had she affections and warm youthful blood,  
She would be as swift in motion as a ball;  
My words would bandy her to my sweet love,  
And his to me:  
But old folks, many feign as they were dead;  
Unwieldy, slow, heavy and pale as lead.  
O God, she comes!