Social Structure in Shakespeare’s World and Plays

Summary
Understanding Shakespeare’s world is essential to gaining a clear understanding of his plays, language and relationships in them. It is my experience that most of the confusion students encounter when dealing with Shakespeare can be attributed to a general ignorance about Shakespearean England. As a playwright and artist, Shakespeare was affected by his world and the traditions, beliefs, politics and mannerisms of his day permeate his work. This lesson plan attempts to close the gap between literature and history. The goal of this lesson is to acquaint students with the social structure and hierarchies of Shakespeare’s world, the characteristics of those groups and the social expectations of rank and status. These ideas are connected to Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream in the hope that students will see the effects of social order on language, character, relationships and action within the play. The skills learned in this lesson will provide a foundation for further study of Shakespeare’s work and may help reduce student anxiety associated with a study of Shakespeare. Instructors using this lesson plan should focus on creating a clear picture of Shakespeare’s social world and on making frequent connections to the text. It is imperative that students leave the class with an understanding of the effects on and relationship between Shakespeare’s world and his work.

Time Frame
1 class periods of 90 minutes each

Group Size
Large Groups

Materials
• Numbered note cards (one for every student in the class)
• Scotch tape
• Classroom computer with LCD projector and projector screen
• Power point presentation, associated handouts, worksheets (attatched)
• Student’s individual copies of "A Midsummer Night's Dream"
• Cued Video clip of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (Act III scene i)
• Television and VCR
• Slips of paper with Improvisation scenarios written on them

Student Prior Knowledge
This lesson plan is intended for intermediate to advanced drama students. Students will have read through "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and teacher should position this lesson halfway through their unit on the play. Students will have a working knowledge of the plot, character relationships, and Shakespeare’s use of language (verse, prose, hyperbole, metaphor, important textual references).

Intended Learning Outcomes
• When presented with texts involving characters representative of different social classes, students will consistently be able to verbally discuss with teacher and peers the social characteristics (powers, privileges, education, economic status etc) of those characters and how those characteristics may affect relationships within the text.
• Students will understand Shakespeare’s use of language to comment on the social status of characters within the play A Midsummer Night’s Dream as demonstrated through their close
investigation of the text (Act 1 sc 1 and Act III sc 1) resulting in observations regarding the use of titles and prose or verse.

· Students will demonstrate their understanding of the affect of social structures on characterization and action during an improvised scene requiring rank appropriate behavior, movement, speech and action.

· Students will develop improvisational skills, audience skills, and character building through participation in improvisation scenes.

· Students will use technology through active attention to power point presentation and demonstrate understanding of material through appropriate responses during text analysis and improvised scene.

Instructional Procedures

1. "Hook"- Group Rank Game (10 min)
Each student in the class has a card with a number on it taped to their back. The numbers will range from 1- the total number of students in the class. Each student will not know what number they have on their back, and other students must keep that knowledge a secret from one another. The goal of the game is to discover your "rank" (the number on your back). In order to do this, students will "mingle" about the room as if they were the citizens of an Elizabethan city. Students with the highest number on their backs have the rank of King or Queen, those slightly below that should be regarded as nobles, those in the middle- would be seen as the middle class and so on. The student with the number 1 on their back is the village idiot. Students mingle about the space interacting with each other as the number on their peer's backs dictate. Throughout the process, students try to determine their own number by the way other students are treating them.

After five minutes (depending on the size of the class), end the learning activity and have students take a knee where they are. Process the activity as a group, by asking students to guess what their number was. See how accurate their guesses are and discuss how they came to the conclusion they did.

2. Lecture with aid of power point presentation (25 minutes)
Hand out "Chain of Being", "wheel of Fortune" and "titles" handouts. Lecture about the social structure of Elizabethan England with aid of the attached power point presentation. The power point provides the framework of the lecture and should be enhanced by additional information.

3. Small Group Discussion/Activity (15 minutes)
Hand out "Wheel of Fortune" worksheet and split class into groups of 3-5. Have students discuss, based on the "Rank" game and the lecture, similar social hierarchies that exist in their school today. Have students identify and rank social groups in their school and place in appropriate spaces (top to bottom) on the "wheel of fortune". Possible groups may include: jocks, cheerleaders, student body officers, paper staff, science geeks, drama kids, band, ROTC etc. Students should note the power, popularity and characteristics of each of the groups they identify and include them on the worksheet.

After ten minutes, bring groups back together and compare each group's rankings and descriptions. Describe and differences between rankings and talk about the connections between today and Elizabethan England in terms of social hierarchies. Why do students think it still exists? Is it a good thing? Why?

4. Individual text work (15 minutes)
Students will first review their own copy of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" Act I Scene I, lines 5-64. With a pencil, students will underline each time a character addresses another character, either by name or with a title. Students should refer to their "Title" handout while doing this.

After 7-8 minutes, have class discuss differences in how characters address one another and what this says about each person's status and their relationship to one another.

5. Prose vs. Verse Analysis (10 min)
Students will watch a clip of the film version of "A Midsummer Night's Dream", Act III scene i. After the
clip the class will have a five minute discussion about Shakespeare's use of prose and verse according to the station of characters and their relationship to one another. Students should be asked to think of another example or scene in which Shakespeare switches between verse and prose.

6. Activity/ Informal Assessment (15 minutes)

Note: depending on time- this can be done at the beginning of the following class period.

Students will choose a partner for an improvised scene based on what they learned so far. Each pair will be given one combination of different titles. The conflict for each paring will be the same: two people arrive at a crowded inn late one cold night. There are no rooms available- only one wooden bench and one blanket. Students must play the scene as their titles or rank dictate and in so doing resolve the conflict. Who will get the blanket, how will they get, and in what manner will the two characters address, interact, and treat each other. Students will only have 2-3 minutes to prepare. Pairs will perform scenes. After each scene have class discuss what the social status meant to the conflict and resolution of the scene.

Suggested improvisation scenarios:
- Lord and Lady • Lord and Merchant • Lord and Peasant • Lady and Peasant • Lady and Merchant • King and Peasant • King and Duke

Strategies for Diverse Learners

English language learners may be aided in this lesson with a native language copy of the text (‘A Midsummer Night's Dream) and a translation of the power point presentation. LEP students will also benefit from the diversity of group work activities inherent in the lesson plan.

Assessment Plan

Assessment of student learning and understanding will be conducted through the informal assessment of participation in the improvised scenes. Instructors should look for rank appropriate characterization during the scene. Characteristics of appropriate behavior may include:

- Use of appropriate titles
- Showing deference for characters of higher rank
- Higher status characters having more polished manners and tastes
- Higher status characters using elevated speech
- Lower status characters portraying a lack of manners

The resolution of the conflict should also demonstrate an understanding of the affects of social status on character relationships and outcomes. For example:

- Higher status character gets blanket and bench in the end
- Character associated with merchant class buys another blanket
- Knight shows deference and chivalry to a lady- lets her have bench and blanket
- Lower status characters show extreme deference and weakness in pursuit of objective when paired with characters of higher rank

Further assessment will be conducted with a formal exam at the end of the unit and will include material presented in this lesson’s lecture. Essay questions about the affect of social structure as seen in A Midsummer Night’s Dream will test student’s higher level thinking skills and understanding of abstract concepts presented in the lesson.

Bibliography

Encyclopedia Britannica presents: Shakespeare and the globe: Then and Now.
http://search.eb.com/shakespeare/macro/