

# Classroom Activities & Resources

## Teaching Romeo And Juliet With Graphic Novels

Comics are a sequential art form. Unlike the cartoon, which is a single image, comics tell a story unfolding in time through the use of sequential images. Much like storytellers who use language to establish pacing, characterization and mood, comic artists use visual tools such as panel size and shape, spacing between panels, perspective shifts, and thickness of line to give the reader not only a visual experience but also an emotional one. Comics, like narratives, give readers of all abilities opportunities for interpreting and analyzing.

Comics do more than simplify a story into images. Because comics are told through a sequence of still images, readers of comic books learn to mentally connect isolated images, filling in the gaps with details from their own experiences. This process, known as **closure**, can personalize Shakespeare for readers who struggle with complex texts. The accompanying pictorial language of a comic book can also help readers learn new words through visual context clues. Thus, comics and graphic novels can be useful—and rigorous—tools for reluctant readers and English language learners.

There are several excellent graphic novel adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*. As you introduce the following exercises in your classroom, consider using one or more of the following graphic novels:

- **Hinds, Gareth, and William Shakespeare.** *Romeo and Juliet*. Somerville, 2013.
- **Leong, Sonia.** *Manga Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet*. New York, 2007.
- **Sexton, Adam, and Yali Lin.** *Romeo and Juliet: The Manga Edition*. Hoboken, 2008.

### 72. STORYTELLING THROUGH PICTURES

In small groups of four, find Romeo and Benvolio's first conversation (Act 1, scene 1, lines 151-229) in your graphic novel. Read their conversation aloud, with one group member reading Romeo's lines and another reading Benvolio's lines. Switch readers, and read through the scene again.

Now, begin to discuss the section you have just read, exploring the following questions:

- Who is Romeo? Who is Benvolio? What do we know about each of them from this one scene alone? Which lines or images support your ideas about each of them?
- Where are Romeo and Benvolio? What do you see in the artist's drawings that support the location you have chosen?

*[To the teacher: Assign each group a page of the scene. Most graphic novel editions of Romeo and Juliet spread this scene across many pages. If your edition does not, assign by half-page sections.]* Looking now just at your assigned section of the graphic novel, choose one person in your group to read Romeo's lines, and another person to read Benvolio's lines. Choose one person to describe Romeo's actions, and another to describe Benvolio's. What movements does each of them make? What tone of voice do they use? What is each feeling? Go through your page panel by panel, capturing as much characterization as possible. Switch roles and repeat.

Looking at your page as a whole, discuss with your group:

- What scenic details did the artist include?
- What time of day is it?
- What do the backgrounds, whether literal or abstract, convey about the scene or the characters' states of mind?

Close your book. Drawing on your previous analysis of the scene, tell the story depicted in your panels in a round robin, using as much detail as you can. Don't worry about remembering Romeo and Benvolio's lines accurately; instead, paraphrase as you go. After this initial round robin, discuss with your group what details were left out that you wish to include in your next telling. You may consult your book if you wish.

Tell the story in a round robin again, making sure that each group member gets the chance to tell a different section than they told the last time. This time, deliver Romeo and Benvolio's lines with feeling, characterizing them through your tone of voice and energy.

Now, as a class, tell the full story of the scene in sequence. Every person in the class should contribute to their group's retelling of their section. Don't worry about memorizing the story; instead, make the story your own!

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As a class, reflect on this activity. Some questions to consider:

- What clues in the images helped you understand the actions in the scene? How did the artist convey motions through still images?
- Did the shape of the panels influence how you understood the character's emotions? How so?
- Did you encounter any unfamiliar words? How did you deduce their meaning?
- This artist's rendering is only one way, of many, to depict this scene. If you were the artist, where might you set the scene? How might you represent the characters differently?

**CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R1, R2, R7, SL1, SL4, L4**

## 73. COMPARING TWO TEXTS

*[To the teacher: See Appendix L for printable images from two different graphic novel editions of Romeo and Juliet. Split the class into small groups and give each group one copy of each scene.]*

Much like a theater director, a graphic artist has to make choices about how to tell a story. The tools of theater include acting, blocking, scenery, costumes, lighting, props and sound. The tools of comics include panel size, shape, and spacing; light and shadow; angle of focus; facial expressions and body language; line, shape, and color; and text style and placement. These elements interact to involve the reader in the story.

Read each graphic representation of Act 3, scene 1, the scene in which Romeo realizes Mercutio is dead and decides to avenge his death. Though the language comes from the same scene in the play, each artist has made unique choices to bring Shakespeare's story to life on the page.

Each small group will become an expert on how one tool or a group of related tools is employed in each representation of the scene. Prepare to present on one of the following tools, as assigned by your teacher:

- **Panel size, shape, and spacing:** What does the artist depict inside larger panels? In smaller panels? How do smaller, more segmented panels feel compared to longer, expansive panels that fill the width of a page? How do the shape and/or quantity of panels express emotion and pace of action? Are there any panels that include overlapping scenes?
- **Light and shadow:** How does the artist employ light and shadow to draw the reader's focus to important details? What does the use of contrast tell us about the characters' emotional states?
- **Angle of focus:** The angle of focus is the "camera" angle in the scene. It places the reader in relation to the scene. If angle of focus gives a bird's eye view, for instance, the reader may feel detached from the scene—an outside observer. What is the angle of focus in each panel? What effect does the angle of focus have on the reader? How does the artist use of close-up or wide-angle panels to convey important details about the scene?
- **Facial expressions and body language:** How does the artist depict Romeo, Mercutio, Benvolio and Tybalt? What does their body language tell us about them? How would you describe their emotions? Which characters do you think the artist wants the reader to connect with emotionally?
- **Line, shape and color:** Lines can have "character." A thinly drawn line will create a different feel than a bold line. How does the style of line change in different panels? How does the style of the line impact your understanding of the scene? How does the use of line, shape, and color convey the feeling of motion throughout the scene? (Comic book theorist Scott McCloud argues that color draws more attention to shape, and can limit the feeling of motion in a scene. Looking at Gareth Hinds' rendering, do you agree?)
- **Text placement and style:** Comics are an entirely visual medium. How does each artist convey the sounds of the scene through text placement and style? How does the shape of the speech balloons help you understand the tone of voice each character uses?

Present your findings to the class, teaching them about the tool of comics that you studied. After each group has presented, discuss your findings:

- In some comics, the pictures illustrate the words. In others, words clarify a picture. But in most comics, the pictures and words are interdependent. How would you describe the relationship between text and image in each artist's rendering?
- After analyzing each comic in depth, what do you think each artist wanted the reader to experience and feel?
- Which rendering did you respond to most strongly? Why?

**CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R3, R6, R9, SL4**

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## 74. TEXT TO TABLEAUX

Comic artists have to use panels efficiently to convey action. In an animated movie, each minute gesture would be captured in a frame. But comics don't have that luxury: readers would get bored! An artist has to use each panel to establish important details about a scene and convey the scene's main events. In sequence, the frozen panels of a comic strip tell a story.

The closest theatrical parallel to a comic panel is the tableau. In a tableau, people freeze in a position that tells a story, using their frozen bodies to express actions, relationships, and emotions.

As a class, read Act 3, scene 2 aloud, beginning with the Nurse's entrance. Read the scene aloud in a circle, changing readers at each full stop. Discuss the scene. Some questions to consider:

- What are the main events of the scene?
- How does Juliet feel at the beginning of the scene? How do her feelings change over the course of the scene?
- What does the Nurse decide to do at the end of the scene? Why does she make this decision?

In groups of four, decide on the five main events of the scene to represent in tableaux. Create the tableaux, using your bodies to express the actions and emotions of the scene. Like a comic book artist, who must attach text (representative of speech) to a frozen image, decide on the text you want to attach to each image. (This will require a lot of cutting! Choose only the lines that you think are most important to tell the story.) Practice performing your tableaux in sequence. The group members who are not in the tableaux can speak the text from the sidelines! Share your tableaux with the class. What similarities and differences did you see among the groups?

*[To the teacher: One effective method of sharing tableaux can be through the "Curtain Down, Curtain Up" method. When you say "Curtain Down," everyone in the audience closes their eyes while the group gets into position for their first tableau. Count down from 10 and then say "Curtain Up." The audience then opens their eyes to look at the tableau in front of them. Repeat for each tableau. This method allows the audience to see each tableau as a truly isolated image.]*

**CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R2, R3, SL5**

## 75. MATCHING IMAGES TO TEXT

*[To the teacher: Choose a scene from your graphic novel—we recommend the section of Act 5, scene 3 when Paris apprehends Romeo at the Capulet's crypt. Any scene where the artist clearly establishes location and time of day will do, provided that the scene includes speech. Using whiteout, eliminate all dialogue, leaving the speech bubbles empty. Distribute copies to your students.]*

As you discovered when creating tableaux from text, it can be challenging and rewarding to condense a scene into still images. Comic book artists are experts at paring action down into panels. Looking at these images without the accompanying text, what can you infer about the scene? Where are the characters? What do they seem to be doing?

Using a script, look for the scene that you feel best matches the images. Use lines from the scene to fill in the speech bubbles. Graphic novels model concise language, which requires lots of cutting! Which lines are necessary to tell the story, and which lines can be cut? Look for language that compliments the artist's rendering.

Share your work in small groups. Did you make the same choices? Discuss why you chose the lines you used. How did the artist's rendering guide you?

**CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R1, R7**



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## 76. FINAL IMAGE, PART 2

*Romeo and Juliet* ends with this declaration:

*Some shall be pardoned, and some punished:  
For never was a story of more woe  
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo. (5.3.308-310)*

In a theatrical production of *Romeo and Juliet*, the final “stage picture” might take place in or outside of the crypt, the final location in the play. You might see the crypt and the people inside: *Romeo and Juliet*, the Capulets, the Montagues, the Prince, the Friar, and some pages and guards. But a graphic novel isn’t bound by the same constraints as the stage. The final image of a graphic novel can zero in on specific people or symbols in the scene, or even depict an altogether separate scene in the past or future.

After reading *Romeo and Juliet*, what are you left with? If you were a comic artist, how could you use a final image to impact the reader and give them closure? In the play, the Prince speaks the final words. However, in a graphic novel, his words could be attributed to anyone. They could even be written as a caption instead of as dialogue.

Considering how one image can symbolize a larger idea or theme, sketch a final image to accompany the closing words of *Romeo and Juliet*. Don’t worry about your artistic skill—instead, embrace what makes your artwork unique.

**CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R2, W9**



Ben Huth as Balthazar, Zach Appelman as Tybalt, and James Elly as Abraham in Chicago Shakespeare Theater’s 2010 production of *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Gale Edwards. Photo by Liz Lauren.