

Wherefore Art Thou Romeo?

The Story of a Young Person, Some Older People, and a Shakespeare Assignment

Cynthia Dooley

Michael says that when he walked into our GED class on the first day, his reaction was one of horror. All the students looked a lot older. Michael is 17, and he was used to being around students his own age.

For the first few classes Michael sat quietly, but it wasn't long before the teacher put us into small groups to work together on an English assignment. Michael found himself grouped with three other students—all of whom were old enough to be his parents or even grandparents. Their assignment was to come up with a presentation on "Shakespeare in the New Millennium."

The older students were far more familiar with Shakespeare than Michael was. The students recalled what they could about Shakespeare's most popular plays, such as "Romeo and Juliet" and "Hamlet." Michael felt like he didn't have a lot to contribute.

Jamie, one of his classmates, asked Michael if he remembered reading any of Shakespeare's work in high school. Michael said no. He was used to reading works of more modern authors.

Michael went home that afternoon feeling anxious about his English assignment, but one thing all 17-year-olds do know is the "World Wide Web." He opened his laptop and got to work,

"Hmm," thought Michael, "this dude has a strange way of writing."

"Googling" the writings of Shakespeare. It didn't take long before Michael found the famous play, "Romeo and Juliet." Michael read some excerpts and thought, "Hmm, this dude has a strange way of writing; this is not easy to read or understand."



Romeo and Juliet are from feuding families, so their parents would never allow them to marry. In the famous balcony scene, Juliet asks,

*"O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet."*

In this context, "Wherefore art thou Romeo" means, "Why do you have to be called Romeo?" or "Why couldn't you be from a different family?" Try writing the rest of the verse in your own words.

After printing some excerpts from the play, Michael took them to class the next day. The group worked together to interpret the excerpts. Then Michael suggested that they re-write some of the passages in a more modern way. The group thought that was a great idea. But Michael took the idea even further. He suggested that they choose a favorite act from the play, re-write it in

today's language, and then enter the work into a computer software program, which they could put to music. Their multi-media presentation would illustrate the love and tragedy between the play's main characters, Romeo and Juliet.

Michael and the rest of his group met after class at his home. They were all playing with the software program, combining excerpts from the play with pictures and music. It took only a couple of hours, and they had what they felt was a great presentation to turn in.

A couple of the teammates dressed in costume for the presentation using some items they found at the town thrift store. Their assignment was so well done that the English instructor asked them to present their assignment to the next incoming class a couple of months later, thinking it would be inspirational to the new students.

Everyone needs to feel accepted. Everyone wants to feel like they have something to offer.



Michael was able to contribute a lot to his class even though at first it looked like he didn't have anything to offer. We older adults think that we know it all, based on many years of experience. However, we should be open to learning from those who seem less experienced. They can and will surprise you!

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Your Turn to Translate Shakespeare

Match the Shakespearan phrase on the left with the correct translation on the right.

I will wear my heart upon my sleeve.

It is painful to have an ungrateful child.

How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child.

Hey everyone, listen!

Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears.

Suddenly

Display your feelings openly.

All of a sudden

It might be attractive, but it might not be worth anything.

All that glitters is not gold.

If you are in love, there are certain things you don't notice.

Star crossed lovers.

Is it better to live or die?

Love is blind.

To be or not to be, that is the question.

A very lucky couple.

<www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/phrases-sayings-shakespeare.html>