

FONTES ACADEMY

Shakespeare's Kinds of Plays

Comedy • Tragedy • History

A companion reference packet for the Fontes Academy
Charlotte Mason Shakespeare course.

Includes overview, comedy, tragedy, and history
reference sheets for student use.

SHAKESPEARE'S THREE KINDS OF PLAYS

A COMPLETE COMPARISON: COMEDY, TRAGEDY & HISTORY

Shakespeare wrote in three main genres: comedies, tragedies, and histories.

Each kind of play has its own purpose, tone, characters, and ending—yet all explore what it means to be human.

CATEGORY	COMEDY	TRAGEDY	HISTORY
PURPOSE	To delight and entertain. Comedies show that even when life is confusing, love and kindness can bring joy and harmony. They end happily and remind us that forgiveness, understanding, and second chances can overcome obstacles.	To move and provoke deep emotion. Tragedies show the serious consequences of human actions and help us understand the struggles of life. They end in sorrow, often with the death of the main character.	To inform and inspire. Histories show real events from England's past. They explore leadership, power, and how the choices of kings and leaders shaped the nation. They help us learn from the successes and mistakes of the past.
TONE & MOOD	Light, playful, humorous, and uplifting. Filled with wit, puns, songs, and joyful energy.	Serious, intense, and often dark or somber. The tone creates sorrow, fear, tension, and deep reflection.	Majestic, dramatic, and proud—often with a sense of national importance and respect for great leaders and events.
MAIN THEMES	Love, friendship, forgiveness, misunderstandings, identity, personal growth, the victory of good over difficulties, and the benefits of kindness and grace.	Love, power, revenge, pride, fate, jealousy, betrayal, suffering, death, and the importance of choice, responsibility, and facing the truth.	Power, leadership, loyalty, betrayal, war, justice, ambition, patriotism, change, and the impact of decisions on a whole nation.
TYPES OF CHARACTERS	Often ordinary people, young lovers, witty servants, and clever or foolish characters. They usually learn, grow, and become better versions of themselves.	Usually noble or important people (kings, princes, generals, etc.) with a tragic flaw (a weakness like pride, jealousy, or ambition) that leads to their downfall.	Kings, queens, princes, nobles, generals, and statesmen. Characters face real political challenges and must make difficult choices for their country.
CONFLICT	Personal conflicts or misunderstandings that are solved through wit, forgiveness, help from others, or the discovery of the truth.	Serious internal or external conflicts that cannot be fully resolved. The hero often fights against fate, other people, or their own flaws.	Conflicts over power, the throne, territory, loyalty, or justice. Includes battles, rebellions, political struggles, and national crises.
PLOT & STRUCTURE	Complicated at first with twists (mistaken identity, disguises, mix-ups), but ends with everything set right—usually with marriages or reunions.	Builds toward a tragic turning point. Events lead to a climax where the hero makes a final choice or suffers a final loss, resulting in a tragic ending.	Usually follows real events in chronological order. The plot may cover many years and important national events.
LANGUAGE & STYLE	Witty wordplay, puns, songs, humorous banter, and playful language.	Poetic, powerful, and emotional language that expresses deep feelings, big ideas, and inner struggles.	Grand speeches, formal language, and patriotic words that honor leaders, battles, and the nation's history.
EXAMPLES (Shakespeare Plays)	• A Midsummer Night's Dream • Twelfth Night • Much Ado About Nothing • As You Like It • The Taming of the Shrew • The Merchant of Venice	• Romeo and Juliet • Hamlet • Macbeth • Othello • King Lear • Julius Caesar	• Richard II, Richard III • Henry IV (Parts 1 & 2) • Henry V • Henry VI (Parts 1–3) • Henry VIII • Julius Caesar
FAMOUS QUOTE	"The course of true love never did run smooth." – A Midsummer Night's Dream	"For never was a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her Romeo." – Romeo and Juliet	"What you do now can change the world tomorrow." – Henry V
WHAT WE LEARN	That love, kindness, and forgiveness can heal problems. No matter how confusing life gets, hope and joy are always possible.	That our choices matter. Pride, anger, jealousy, and revenge can destroy us, but compassion, wisdom, and humility can lead to a better life.	That the past shapes the future. Leaders' decisions affect many people, and with courage, wisdom, and honor, we can make a positive difference.

TOGETHER: Comedies make us laugh and give us hope. Tragedies make us think deeply and feel strong emotions. Histories teach us about our past and inspire us for the future.

TOGETHER, Shakespeare's plays show the full range of the human experience.

SHAKESPEAREAN COMEDY

Love. Laughter. Confusion. Happy Endings.

Shakespeare's comedies are full of joy, clever wordplay, and twists that bring love and harmony in the end. They remind us that mistakes can be funny, love can be complicated, and kindness always wins.



KEY FEATURES



Happy Endings – Almost every comedy ends with weddings, reunions, and joy.



Love & Relationships – Love causes confusion but leads to lasting happiness.



Mistaken Identity & Disguise – Characters pretend to be someone else, creating hilarious misunderstandings.



Witty Wordplay – Puns, clever jokes, and playful banter make the audience laugh.



Journeys & Adventure – Characters often leave their homes and learn important lessons along the way.



Forgiveness & Reconciliation – Problems are solved, friendships are restored, and everyone is united in the end.



Lighthearted Tone – Even when challenges arise, the mood stays cheerful and hopeful.

EXAMPLE: A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM



- Fairies use magic in the forest, causing people to fall in love with the wrong person.
- Lovers get confused (and the audience gets a lot of laughs!).
- Mistaken identities lead to funny situations.
- In the end, everyone is married or happy, and peace is restored in Athens.

"The course of true love never did run smooth."

— A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

WHY DO WE LOVE COMEDIES?



Comedies leave us feeling good! They show us that even when life is messy and confusing, kindness, forgiveness, and love can fix things. They celebrate the best in people and remind us to laugh along the way.

They end with joy because hope always wins! ♡

MORE FAMOUS SHAKESPEARE COMEDIES



Twelfth Night – Love, disguise, and mistaken identity lead to laughter and happy endings.



The Taming of the Shrew – A battle of wits between spirited characters ends in marriage.



Much Ado About Nothing – Friends, enemies, and misunderstandings are all straightened out.



The Merchant of Venice – Love and mercy triumph over greed and prejudice.



As You Like It – In the Forest of Arden, characters find themselves, fall in love, and live peacefully.

FUN FACT!

In Shakespeare's time, audiences loved comedies because they offered a break from hard news and daily struggles. Laughter was powerful medicine!

THINK ABOUT IT...

What mistakes in your life turned out to be blessings?
What can we learn from Shakespeare's comedies about love, friendship, and forgiveness?





SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

Noble characters. Deep conflict. Sorrowful endings.

Shakespeare's tragedies explore serious themes and the struggles of human life. They often involve great characters who face powerful forces beyond their control. Through their choices, flaws, and fate, they teach us painful but important lessons about life, love, power, and loss.



KEY FEATURES



Serious, Important Themes – Tragedies deal with big ideas like love, power, justice, fate, revenge, honor, and the clash between duty and desire.



Noble or Admirable Characters – The main characters are often of high status and good qualities, but they have a tragic flaw.



A Tragic Flaw – A character's weakness or mistake (like pride, jealousy, or rashness) leads to their downfall.



Suffering, Conflict, and Loss – Tragedies show deep emotional pain, dangerous conflicts, and the consequences of choices.



Death of the Main Character(s) – The tragedy almost always ends with the death of the protagonist or important characters.



Evokes Pity and Fear – The audience feels sorrow and fear, leading to deep reflection and understanding of life.

EXAMPLE: ROMEO AND JULIET

This play tells the story of two young lovers from feuding families. Their love is strong, but their families' hatred, their own secret choices, and a series of misunderstandings lead to heartbreaking consequences.



"For never was a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her Romeo."
— ROMEO AND JULIET

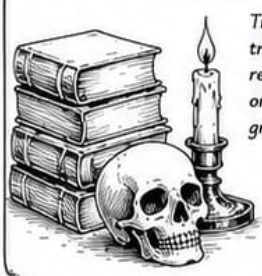
- Star-crossed lovers from feuding families fall deeply in love.
- A series of tragic choices and misunderstandings lead to heartbreak.
- Both Romeo and Juliet die in the end.
- The tragedy brings their families to see the pain of hate and finally make peace.

WHAT MAKES IT TRAGIC?

Romeo and Juliet are good, loving people, but they are trapped in a world of hatred and pride. Their love cannot overcome the powerful forces around them. Their story shows how quickly life can change and how even the best intentions can end in sorrow.



WHY DO WE STUDY TRAGEDIES?



Tragedies help us face the hard truths of life. They show us the results of pride, anger, hatred, or poor choices. By watching great characters suffer, we learn compassion, wisdom, and caution. They stir our hearts and help us grow in understanding of what truly matters.

"The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones."
— JULIUS CAESAR

MORE FAMOUS SHAKESPEARE TRAGEDIES



Hamlet – A prince seeks revenge for his father's murder but struggles with doubt. Themes: revenge, madness, loyalty, the meaning of life.



Macbeth – A brave general is tempted by ambition and prophecy, leading to murder and ruin. Themes: ambition, guilt, fate.



Othello – A noble general is destroyed by jealousy and deception. Themes: jealousy, trust, betrayal.



King Lear – An aging king's pride and poor judgment lead to betrayal, madness, and great loss. Themes: power, family, loyalty, suffering.



Julius Caesar – A great leader is betrayed by those he trusts. Themes: power, politics, friendship, betrayal.

THINK ABOUT IT...

- ✧ Why do you think even good people make bad choices?
- ✧ How do pride, jealousy, or anger hurt relationships?
- ✧ What can we learn from the mistakes of Shakespeare's characters?
- ✧ How can understanding suffering help us become more compassionate?





SHAKESPEAREAN HISTORY

Kings. Battles. Power. The Past.

Shakespeare's history plays dramatize real events from England's past. They explore leadership, loyalty, ambition, and the consequences of power.

By telling the stories of kings and nations, Shakespeare helps us understand how actions in the past shape the future.



KEY FEATURES



Based on Real Historical Events – These plays are grounded in actual English history, taken from chronicles and historical records.



Focus on Kings, Queens, and Leaders – The plays show how rulers lead, make decisions, and deal with challenges.



Wars, Battles, and Political Struggles – Conflicts for power, territory, and the throne are central to the stories.



Themes of Power, Loyalty, Betrayal, and Ambition – Characters must choose between personal desires and their duty to their country.



Change and Legacy – Often ends with a new ruler or a change in England, showing that history is always moving forward.

EXAMPLE: HENRY V

One of Shakespeare's most famous history plays. It follows King Henry V as he transforms from a reckless young prince into a wise and courageous leader.



*"We few, we happy few,
we band of brothers!"*

— HENRY V

- Based on the life of King Henry V.
- Shows his rise to power and his victories, especially at the Battle of Agincourt (1415).
- Famous for his inspiring speech to his soldiers (St. Crispin's Day speech): "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers!"
- Explores leadership, duty, courage, and what it means to be a good king.
- Ends with Henry's success and the strengthening of England.

WHAT ARE HISTORY PLAYS?



History plays combine fact and drama. Shakespeare takes real events from England's past and brings them to life on stage. He focuses on key moments—wars, crowns, rebellions, and speeches—that shaped the nation.

These plays remind us that the choices of leaders affect everyone and that the past can teach us important lessons.

WHY DO WE STUDY HISTORY PLAYS?



- ✦ They show us how leaders rise to power—and how they can fall.
- ✦ They help us understand the importance of wise choices, courage, and loyalty.
- ✦ They teach us that history is more than dates—it's people, decisions, and their consequences.
- ✦ They inspire us to think about the kind of leaders and citizens we want to be.

MORE FAMOUS SHAKESPEARE HISTORY PLAYS



Richard III – The rise and fall of a man who will do anything to get and keep power. Themes: ambition, manipulation, conscience, downfall.



Richard II – A king struggles to hold onto his crown and learns hard lessons about pride and responsibility. Themes: kingship, weakness, fate.



Henry IV, Part 1 & 2 – Follow Prince Hal's journey from a carefree young man to a responsible leader. Themes: growth, friendship, duty.



Henry V – A courageous king leads his country to victory at Agincourt and becomes a symbol of national pride. Themes: leadership, honor, courage.



Julius Caesar – Set in Rome, this play is about politics, power, and betrayal. Themes: loyalty, ambition, power.

THINK ABOUT IT...

What makes a good leader?



How do leaders' decisions affect their people and their country?



Can one person's choices change the future?

What can we learn from the past to make better choices today?

