

Title: Exploring Climate Change Through Embodiment of Titania's Speech in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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Background/Rationale:

This instructional plan seeks to help students examine the implications of human behavior and, particularly, human relationships, as causal agents of negative climate change through study and embodied representation of a monologue from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This layered activity is designed to explore the intersection between Titania's "These are the forgeries of jealousy" speech in Act 2, scene 1 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and contemporary manifestations of climate change. Through combined group exploration of the texts and physical interpretation through performance, students may collaborate to bring to life small chunks of the speech in a way that helps them understand not only Titania's message to Oberon in the play, but Shakespeare's possible message about human agency in climate disasters. Furthermore, student engagement with current informational texts related to specific natural disasters related to climate change broadens their frame of reference and deepens their knowledge of those disasters. Tying these current concerns to the literature not only helps students understand the reality of climate change, but also makes this 400-year-old text more relevant to their lives.

Teachers have compelling evidence to justify designing curriculum that allows students to learn not just the science, but the political and social aspects of climate change. By creating space in class for theatre practices that engage students with literature and with current events, students are able to develop the artistic lens-building necessary to build aesthetic consciousness and broaden their imagination in order to negotiate their understanding of what is likely to become an increasingly scary and disjointed world.

Age/Level:

This instructional plan is most appropriate for 9th or 10th grade, but could be used in 7th through 12th grades. Common Core Standards listed below are from the 9-10 grade band.

Subject area(s):

The primary subject areas addressed in this lesson are English language arts, science, and drama, but the workshop would best be conducted in an English classroom. The Common Core Standards for English Language Arts privilege informational texts in their recommended reading regimen. While we rightfully often think of informational texts related to climate change as scientific literature, many of the more dramatic and unfortunate problems related to a changing climate make it into local and national news, public service announcements, and popular culture. One problem that students face when trying to learn about climate change is that the issue is too broad and too complicated to wrap one's mind around with clarity. Therefore, an advantage of this workshop approach using Titania's speech is that we may break the speech into its constituent parts and then assign those parts to small groups of students for further investigation

on the specific climate change issues addressed in the speech. Finally, by using performance and embodiment, students will have the opportunity to integrate ideas about both the play and the informational texts while creating meaningful connections to these ideas in relation to their own bodies and the real world.

#### Literary Lens:

The field of ecocriticism has expanded over the past three decades, in part due to the growing recognizability of the climate crisis, and in part because of the growth in interest in scholarly study of nature literature, climate justice, and interdependence. Shakespeare has been of particular interest in ecocriticism. Natural settings and events such as the blasted heath and equivocating “fiends” of nature in *Macbeth*, the ominous and unnatural storms in *King Lear* and *Julius Caesar*, the disruption of natural order in *Troilus and Cressida* have each provided material for ecocriticism, as have the utterances of particular characters, such as Jacques, the melancholic, in *As You Like It* and Titania, Queen of the Faeries, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Thus, one monologue delivered by Titania during an argument with her estranged husband, Oberon, King of the faeries, is the focus of this workshop due to its relevance to current climate change concerns.

Employing a theatrical lens will further student engagement with Shakespeare’s script and the informational texts. Embodying texts through drama workshops in the English classroom diversifies modalities through which students experience text, creating a synergy of text, movement, and sound. The collaborative and physical or “embodied” learning that this workshop requires gets students out of their seats and puts them in the shoes of actors, but beyond that, students also get to make the decisions that directors make to create physicalized performance of text for deeper understanding.

#### Objectives/Learning Outcomes:

Students will be able to apply an ecocritical lens to study a speech from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Students will be able to collaborate in groups of 3-4 students to embody elements of a speech from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Students will be able to locate/identify/research relevant sources on climate change as identified in Titania’s speech.

Students will be able to synthesize ideas from Titania’s speech with informational texts into a workshop performance.

Students will be able to reflect on what they have learned about Shakespeare’s speech and current climate problems through performance, discussion, and writing.

#### Relevant Common Core Standards:

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1**

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4**

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1**

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2**

Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

**Introduction/Frame/Engage:**

The activities described in this lesson plan may be nested within an instructional unit on climate change, or may be addressed within a treatment of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a core text in a survey class. Teachers may ask students to freewrite for a short time (5 min) on their previous knowledge of climate change. They could then discuss student responses to the prompt and inform them that the focus of the lesson will be to explore the intersection between Titania's speech from MND and current climate problems. Supplemental resources available are addressed in the sections below.

**Main Content/Exploration/Timeline:**

**Day One**

1. Either project or hand out a hard copy of Titania's speech to students with sections of the speech indicated as follows:

**TITANIA**

These are the forgeries of jealousy,  
And never, since the middle summer's spring  
Met we on hill, in dale, forest or mead,  
By paved fountain or by rushy brook,  
Or in the beached margent of the sea  
To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind,  
But with thy brawls thou hast disturbed our sport.  
**Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,**  
**As in revenge have sucked up from the sea**  
**Contagious fogs<sup>1</sup>** which, falling in the land,

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<sup>1</sup> Toxic pollution

Have every pelting river made so proud  
 That they have overborne their continents.<sup>2</sup>  
**The ox hath therefore stretched his yoke in vain,**  
**The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn**  
**Hath rotted ere his youth attained a beard.**<sup>3</sup>  
 The fold stands empty in the drowned field,  
 And crows are fatted with the murrain flock.<sup>4</sup>  
**The nine men's morris is filled up with mud,**  
**And the quaint mazes in the wanton green**  
**For lack of tread are undistinguishable.**<sup>5</sup>  
 The human mortals want their winter cheer.  
 No night is now with hymn or carol blest.<sup>6</sup>  
**Therefore the moon, the governess of floods,**  
**Pale in her anger washes all the air,**  
**That rheumatic diseases do abound;**<sup>7</sup>  
 And thorough this distemperature we see  
 The seasons alter: hoary-headed frosts  
 Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose,<sup>8</sup>  
**And on old Hiems' thin and icy crown**  
**An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds**  
**Is, as in mock'ry, set.**<sup>9</sup> The spring, the summer,  
 The chielding autumn, angry winter, change  
 Their wonted liveries,<sup>10</sup> **and the mazed world,**  
**By their increase now knows not which is which;**<sup>11</sup>  
 And this same progeny of evils comes  
 From our debate, from our dissension.<sup>12</sup>  
*We are their parents and original.*

Assign students to groups of three (or four if class size is not a multiple of three). The 12 marked sections of the speech starting with the line “Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain” and ending with “From our debate, from our dissension” will be assigned to the groups, one for each group. For a smaller class size, you may cut some of these sections from the speech. (5 minutes)

2. To initiate the feel of a workshop in class, it would be good to set up a tableau vivant of Titania and Oberon, using two students to play the roles. Teachers may also have one

<sup>2</sup> Flood

<sup>3</sup> Ruined crops

<sup>4</sup> Dead animals

<sup>5</sup> Cancelled sporting events

<sup>6</sup> Human misery

<sup>7</sup> Flood bourne disease

<sup>8</sup> Altered seasons

<sup>9</sup> Record heat

<sup>10</sup> Altered seasons

<sup>11</sup> Human confusion

<sup>12</sup> Human agency

student take the role of Titania and read the entire speech for the first reading, or the teacher may perform the first read-through for the class. (5 minutes)

3. Having divided the speech and assigned each chunk of text to groups of 3-4 students, and after its initial reading, the teacher should tell students that they will be responsible for performing their chunk of text (beat) by physically representing the natural disaster that Titania refers to in their section. For example, with the lines “The human mortals want their winter cheer; / No night is now with hymn or carol blest,” students could embody carolers or people engaging in happy winter activities and then having them disrupted. Give students time to develop their performance of what is referred to in their section of the speech (10-15 minutes).
4. Once students have developed and practiced their parts, the teacher may position the class standing in a circle and perform a choral reading of the speech, with each group reading/performing their section in the order that it appears in the speech. Have all students read the final line, “We are their parents and original” while performing a mutually agreed-upon gesture. (10 minutes)
5. Discuss with students what embodying the text through this choral performance has taught them about the speech. (10 minutes)
6. Following the first performance of the speech, the teacher should assign students to do research on the kind of natural imbalance referred to in their section, finding informational texts related to contemporary instances of flood, famine, seasonal impacts, pollution, etc., or the teacher may provide those informational texts (see links below). The amount of responsibility or independence teachers afford their students in pursuing identification and investigation of the natural disasters described in the monologue requires a judgment call on the part of the teacher, based on students’ prior knowledge of climate change and their research skills. (5 minutes)

- Toxic pollution: <https://www.lung.org/clean-air/outdoors/what-makes-air-unhealthy/toxic-air-pollutants>
- Flood: <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/29/672063876/flash-floods-hit-communities-devastated-by-camp-fire>
- Ruined crops: <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/11062018/climate-change-research-food-security-agriculture-impacts-corn-vegetables-crop-prices/>
- Dead animals: <https://www.lsuagcenter.com/nr/rdonlyres/1dbda86c-3b8a-4b75-afe7-9fdc5ad92cb8/32673/pub2949rlivestockdiseaseafterdisastersfinal.pdf>
- Cancelled sporting events: <https://www.bizjournals.com/houston/news/2017/08/29/baseball-football-games-moved-out-of-houston-due.html>
- Human misery: <https://www.newsweek.com/how-save-humanity-15000-scientists-urge-action-vast-human-misery-takes-over-709403>
- Flood borne diseases: [https://www.who.int/hac/techguidance/ems/flood\\_cds/en/](https://www.who.int/hac/techguidance/ems/flood_cds/en/)
- Altered seasons: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/climate-change-has-doubled-snowfall-in-alaska/>

- Record heat: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-warm-weather-met-0222-20170222-story.html>
- Altered seasons: <https://climatechange.lta.org/climate-impacts/shifting-seasons/>
- Human confusion: <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/climate-change-and-mental-health#.XASayxNKh-V>
- Human agency: <https://www.globalchange.gov/nca4>

## Day Two

1. When students return to class the next day, having read their informational text related to their chunk of the speech, the teacher may have students discuss in their groups the connection between the informational text and their section of the speech. Tell them that during the next read-through, they are going to either paraphrase parts of their informational text or pick selected quotes from it to read and perform. Give them time to develop their scripts and performance choices. For example, these performances may take the shape of the group reading their “script” in choral fashion while acting out the health problems or the sources of pollution mentioned in their script. (25 minutes)
2. When students are ready, the class should perform the speech again, this time stopping after each assigned chunk is read, so that the groups can perform their informational text before the next group reads its chunk of the speech and performs their informational text. It may be good to have a universal “pass it on” signal so that each succeeding group knows when the group before them is “finished” with their segment. The class may want to perform it twice if they are not satisfied with their first performance. (10 minutes)
3. Once this reading is complete, and students have experienced the connection between the speech and the informational text, the class may stop to discuss what they experienced and what they have learned about climate change from their informational texts. (15 minutes)

## Day Three

1. In the next, final iteration, the students should work in their groups to pick only 1-5 words from their constructed speeches/performances of the informational text, so that the flow of Titania’s speech is not greatly interrupted. They will need time to rehearse their speeches and echoes. (10-15 minutes)
2. The class will then perform the same physical actions as they did in Step 2 from Day Two above, but they will only vocalize these selected “echoes” from the informational texts (see chapter, page 21, for an example). (10-15 minutes)
3. When the final performance is completed, students may discuss what they have learned, and how pairing the speech from the play and the informational texts furthered their understanding of both texts. Students may also write reflectively about what they have learned from this “deep dive” into text. They may discuss how physicalizing the informational text and linking it to the speech made the information more real for them, or they may want to discuss the concept of human agency in climate change.

Note on the positioning of students for the activity: As mentioned above, in a physical space, these enactments would best be done with the class standing in a circle, with individual groups standing together and playing their parts in succession while reciting the words. Variations include having each group quickly move to the center of the circle when their turn comes. In that case, they would not need to be standing together in the circle as a group while other groups take their turns. For best results, teachers can take their students to an outdoor space for the choral performance of the speech. In a virtual environment, breakout rooms would allow students to devise ways to use the visible space of their screens to create the illusion of these climate manifestations.

#### Discussion/Evaluation/Closing:

Questions to consider during in-class discussion after the final performance:

- How has combining the speech and the informational texts helped you better understand both texts? Were there benefits to using your body as a means to represent the texts? How so?
- What is the nature of human agency in climate change? How has this activity helped you reconsider human agency in climate change?
- If we read Titania and Oberon as being active agents of climate change, can we support this claim taking into consideration the events that follow Titania's speech?
- Having considered this particular speech using ecocriticism as a literary lens, can you identify any other passages in the play which can be read using this lens?
- How can we use literature and writing to inspire others to engage in climate change activism?
- In your research, what else did you learn about climate change that your group was unable to incorporate into their performance?
- Have these performances encouraged you to learn more about the ways in which you can play an active role in fighting against climate change? Why or why not has this activity motivated you to be proactive?

After the final performance, students may also want to engage in an informal jigsaw activity. Students can be placed in groups of 3-4 members who are “experts” on different natural disasters. For example, you might have a group with one student who learned about toxic pollution, one student who learned about ruined crops, one student who learned about extreme drought, and one student who learned about floods. In these groups, students can share more detailed information about the issue they learned about or researched with their peers. This allows students more insight and clarity into what they may have learned from watching the performances of their peers.

The final performance may also be followed by a discussion on the limits of privileging one reading of Shakespeare’s text over other potential interpretations. Such a discussion could help students understand the play as having more than one possible reading and would allow students the opportunity to share their own interpretations of Titania and the veracity of her words within the world of the play.

#### Explanation/Presentation/Assessment:

Any of the discussion questions included in the section above can be given to students as writing prompts.

Students could also write reflectively about what they have learned about the speech and/or about climate change in its many manifestations.

An optional extension to this instructional plan could be to shift the focus of the post-activity discussion onto what contemporary climate issues are not included in Titania's speech, such as wildfires, intense heat, melting of the polar ice caps, etc. Students could then rewrite Titania's speech as though it were given today, and such a writing or performance assignment could lead to further inquiry into current manifestations of climate change.

Similarly, students could also be tasked with investigating the ways in which climate change affects their particular communities. The informational text from the American Lung Association linked in this lesson plan under "toxic pollution" may be a starting point as it allows students to input their zip code and learn about the toxic chemicals being released in their communities. Upon further inquiry, students may present their findings in traditional essay-format or they may choose to develop a performance or presentation. As an added element to this assignment, or as an assignment of its own, students could also investigate any active advocacy or activism opportunities in their community or surrounding area as a way for students to think of climate change as something they have agency in changing for the better.

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