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Professional Book Review

Sharon M. Draper's *Romiette and Julio*: Teaching Shakespeare and Popular Culture to Reluctant Readers and Writers

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In my second year of teaching, I had the good fortune to hear Sharon Draper speak at the 2001 Michigan Reading Association (MRA) Conference in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Though Draper has written many young adult novels showcasing popular culture, her book talk that day focused upon her new novel Romiette and Julio, which she wrote as an alternative to Romeo and Juliet after a student asked why the class was reading the work of and writing papers about "a dead white guy." Sound familiar? I thoroughly enjoyed Draper's MRA book talk, but I could never have predicted the remarkable difference it would make in my teaching life and my students' literacy histories when I was transferred two years later to my district's high school and asked to teach a remedial English class. In this class, Romeo and Juliet was required reading and my ninth graders just hated it. Somewhere in the midst of the complaints, yawns, and groans, I remembered Draper's book talk about Romiette and Julio, so I found my autographed copy on the family bookshelf and spent the weekend reading it and researching on the web (see works cited). In the end, I assigned the book to my students, all of them reluctant readers and writers, and they loved it, so much so that it is now a staple in my English 9 class.

I recommend Sharon Draper's Romiette and Julio to any English teacher interested in engaging reluctant readers and writers. As this essay will show, it is a powerful text that parallels Romeo and Juliet. However, Romiette and Julio is set in the United States during the 21st Century, and so the text is an excellent springboard regarding not only the storyline of the "star-crossed lovers," but also current trends and popular culture.

Book Summary

The premise of this novel is a young Mexican-American boy named Julio who moves from Texas to Cincinnati, Ohio. As a new kid at school, he has trouble fitting in and making friends, so he gets online and goes to a teen chat room where he meets some students from Cincinnati.° He makes a connection with one girl in particular, and they start talking in a private chat room and discover they attend the same school. When Romiette and Julio meet in person, they know they are fated to be together, just like their Shakespearean counterparts, but they, too, are thwarted in love. A local gang, better known as The Devildogs or The Family, does not like anyone who is not African-American, and they are really disturbed that Romiette, who happens to be one of their black sisters, would be hanging out with a "foreigner." The Devildogs decide Romiette and Julio should not be together, and they threaten the two. The couple has a decision to make: either stop seeing each other and no longer be friends or pay the price. The two come up with a plan but as *LAJM* readers might guess, nothing goes as envisioned and Romiette and Julio become caught in a terrifying chain of events, putting their lives at risk. Surprisingly enough however, they still live happily ever after at the end.

Teaching Romiette and Julio:

To motivate my students to read and write about the novel, I first provided a brief synopsis of Romeo and Juliet and then let them share what they knew about the play. Most of my students relied heavily on Baz Luhrman's modern-day movie version of Romeo and Juliet. The use of gangs, guns, and violence were things that my students could identify with from the movie. However, since the movie was still in Shakespearean language they did not always understand the conversations. After

the class had a good understanding of the play, we started reading our novel. I created a large chart on the board that had character names and descriptions from Romeo and Juliet. As we read and encountered new characters in our book, the students became very competitive to be the "scribe" and write the descriptions and connections on the Romiette and Julio side of the chart. Here are a few highlights:

Juliet: She is 14. She is a Capulet. She falls in love with Romeo. Her parents are wealthy and well known. Her father has arranged for her to marry an older man. She is sweet and innocent.

Romiette: She is 16. She is African-AmericanHer last name is Cappelle. Her parents are wealthy and famous. She is well known. She is sweet and innocent. She falls in love with Julio

Romeo: He is 16. He is a Montague. He falls in love with a Capulet (family enemy).

Julio: He is 16. He is a Montague. He is Mexican-American. He falls in love with a girl from a different ethnic background.

Benvolio: He is a good friend to Romeo. He breaks up a fight between Capulet and Montague servants. He wants peace. He likes people to pay attention to him. He has a good sense of humor.

Ben Olsen: He is a quick talker. He is a good friend of Julio's. He has ever-changing hair color, pierced nose, and tongue. He seeks attention. He does not like violence. He has a good sense of humor.

The Prince: He is royalty in Verona, Italy. He issues an order that anyone caught fighting will either be banished from Verona or will be killed.

Mr. Prince: He is the principal of the school. He issues an order that anyone caught fighting at school will be suspended

Lady Capulet: She is Juliet's mother. She is very kind and worries about her daughter's future and upcoming wedding. She is more concerned with her own image and life than her daughter's life. She leaves the raising of Juliet to the nurse.

Lady Cappelle: She is Romiette's mother. She is very kind and worries about her only daughter. She often comforts Romiette when she is scared. She is a sweet woman who loves her family.

The Nurse: She is Juliet's constant companion. She helps Juliet, keeps Juliet's secrets, and is one of the few people that supports Juliet's love for Romeo Destiny: She is Romiette's best friend. She helps Romiette with her problems, keeps Romiette's secrets, and supports Romiette's relationship with Julio.

Balcony scene: This scene takes place in the Capulet garden. Juliet is standing on the balcony and Romeo is below her. He then compares her beauty to a rose. Balcony scene: This scene takes place in the lunchroom. Julio is found standing on a table holding a single long-stemmed red rose. He then presents the flower to Romiette.

When I teach a novel, I continually have my students answer questions, identify themes/conflicts/characters, develop essays, and take quizzes to help them grasp the concepts of the novel. With Romiette and Julio and my group of reluctant readers and writers, I took a different approach and spent more time discussing how the events connected to the students' lives and having them journal about their personal experience. They also wrote informal response papers on a topic of their choosing. I wanted my students to gain confidence in their writing abilities and be able to express their personal opinions on the topics. Here are some of the issues we discussed and wrote about:

- Racism: Is there racism in the book? Is there racism in our school? How does racism affect our lives? Is there anything Romiette or Julio

could have done to avoid the racism? Is there anything we can do to eradicate racism?

- Gangs: How do gangs form? Why do people get into gangs? Why did the gang in our book gain control? Why could no one stop them? Do we have gangs in our school or small community? How can we take power away from gangs? Have you ever felt uncomfortable at school because of a group/gang of students? How did you deal with the problem?

- Love: Is there really love at first sight? Can you truly fall in love while in high school? How important is dating in high school? Can you have a girlfriend/boyfriend and still have other friends? Are there such things as unhealthy relationships? How does love feel? Are Romiette and Julio truly in love? Are Ben and Destiny really soul mates?

- Friendship: What is true friendship? Are Romiette and Destiny true friends? How do you know? Is Ben someone you would choose as a friend? Are Romiette and Julio friends as well as a couple? What do you look for in a true friend? Have you ever been wrong about a friend?

- Drugs: Was there any evidence in this book that drugs were a problem? Are drugs a problem in our school? How do drugs affect your lives?

- Individuality: How is Ben an individual? Do you know anyone like Ben? How do you feel about people who don't conform to "the norm"? Are you all individuals or do you follow the crowd? Why is it important for people to be different? How did Draper deal with the theme of individuality?

While discussing all of these topics and questions my students stayed active with several writing assignments to help them understand the novel. A few of the assignments were:

- Plot Timelines- The class created an event line so they could understand the events and their sequence. After reading each chapter we would add to the event chart that was on the wall.

- Poster Presentations- In groups of three the students presented chapters. They summarized an assigned chapter and created a poster depicting the most important events from that chapter. They presented the information and hung their posters by the event line.

- Crossword Puzzles- Each student created a crossword puzzle at the web-site puzzlemaker.com. The puzzle had to deal with characters and plot elements. Then each puzzle was copied and they worked all twelve puzzles (excluding their own).

- Venn Diagrams- In addition to the character chart (described earlier), the students created Venn diagrams posters displaying their understanding of the similarities and differences between the two pieces of literature. These posters were displayed in the classroom.

After accomplishing the minor activities it was time for the capstone activity. I planned a project to help enhance their literacy development and incorporate popular culture. Half the class created a PowerPoint presentation explaining Romeo and Juliet while the other half was assigned Romiette and Julio. Each group took themes and connected them to situations that directly impacted them. They could use music, movies, magazines, newspaper, or other type of media to help them portray the connection. In their cooperative learning groups they focused on one of the novels and explained literary devices (characters, exposition, rising action, high point, falling action, conflict, resolution, etc), themes, popular culture and how the book connected to their lives. Each group presented their PowerPoint project, and was graded by their peers. The class was grading on life connections, media use, comprehension of the novel, and preparation/effort. All activities such as, playing

on the computer, creating charts/ diagrams, holding discussion pertaining to their life, using media to connect themes to popular culture, and reading an exciting book allowed my reluctant learners to find joy and excitement in not only reading and writing, but Shakespeare as well.

Conclusion

I still remember my students' reactions when I assigned Romiette and Julio for the first time:

"Are we reading today?"

"Can we read another chapter?"

"May I borrow a book to read ahead this weekend?"

"I love this book!"

"This is the best book I have ever read."

"This is the first book I have read all the way through!"

These were just a few of the representative comments from my reluctant readers and writers, but they serve as a concrete reminder of the old teaching adage; If it is a good idea, and it works with the students, steal the lesson plan! With this thought in mind, I hope *LAJM* readers will consider assigning Romiette and Julio. My students loved it and were actually sad when we finished it. In other words, they had so much fun reading they forgot they were learning. When I find a novel that brings this much excitement and joy into my classroom, my teaching approach, and students' attitudes, I can quickly claim that it is a book that all teachers must try with their students. It is my hope that with my unit plan and the web-sites, other teachers will bring this novel into their classroom and find the success that I have found.

This article is based on a MCTE presentation that I presented in 2003 and 2004.

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Helpful Websites

Romeo and Juliet vs. Romiette and Julio.
http://www.ucs.louisiana.edu/~hxr0133/centerlesson.PDF

Romiette and Julio Activity Chart.
http://www.cleveland.k12.oh.us/allianpluse/rallau01/activitytem.htm

Sharon Draper.Com.
http://www.sharondraper.com

About the Author:
Kelli Kilbourn is a middle school teacher in the Houghton Lake Community Schools.This article is based on a program she started whie that she started two years ago while working at the high school.She has also presented at the MCTE conference the past two years on this program, and other ways to get reluctant readers and writers interested in Shakespeare.