Concept/Vocab Analysis


Organizational Patterns: The play is divided into five acts. Act I introduces Claudio’s fate to die for his infidelity. Act II brings in the twist that Angelo, the deputy, will pardon Claudio if his sister, Isabella, will sleep with him. In Act III, Isabella refuses to relinquish her chastity for her brother’s life, and a plan is made to have Marianna, Angelo’s former fiancé, go in Isabella’s place to meet Angelo. Act IV has everyone putting on masquerades and deceptions, and Act V, of course, resolves all the problems with everyone married. The acts are divided into scenes, which vary in length from two to twenty-one pages. This edition of the play includes a list of players at the beginning, stage directions when characters enter and exit, and vocabulary clarifications footnoted at the bottom of each page. Some of the play is written in prose, some in iambic pentameter, and some in other forms of poetry.

Issues related to the study of Literature:

Theme: This story contains several themes, some of which are:

1. Chastity: Isabella – “If I would yield to him my virginity, Thou mightst be freed!” (III.1.97-8)
   Claudio – “What sin you do to save a brother’s life, Nature dispenses with the deed so far That it becomes a virtue” (III.1.133-5).

2. Authority: Isabella – “Could great men thunder As Jove himself does, Jove would never be quiet, For every pelting, petty officer Would use his heaven for thunder, Nothing but thunder… Man, proud man, Dressed in a little brief authority… Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven As makes the angels weep…” (II.2.110-4, 117-8, 121-2)

3. Justice: Angelo – “’Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus, Another thing to fall… What’s open made to justice, That justice seizes…” (II.1.17-8, 21-2)
   Duke – “So our decrees, Dead to infliction, to themselves are dead, And liberty plucks justice by the nose, The baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart Goes all decorum” (I.3.27-31).

4. Mercy: Isabella – “Why, all the souls that were forfeit once, And he that might the vantage best have
took, Found out the remedy. How would you be, If he, which is the top of judgment, should But judge you as you are? O think on that, And mercy then will breathe within your lips, Like man new made” (II.2.73-9).

Setting: They play takes place in Vienna. The action takes place specifically in a jail cell, but the other settings are vague: the street, a room, etc.

Foreshadowing: Foreshadowing occurs throughout the play.
1. Angelo asks that “some more test [be] made of my mettle” before he is given praise (I.1.48).
2. The Duke mentions that it will be interesting to see if “power change purpose” in the heretofore passionless Angelo (I.3.54).
3. Angelo tells Escalus that when he himself offends as Claudio has offended, “Let mine own judgment pattern out my death And nothing come in partial” (II.1.30-1).
4. Isabella asks Angelo to look within himself to “ask [his] heart what it doth know That’s like [her] brother’s fault,” and tells him that if he finds a trace of her brother’s sin there, then he should not condemn Claudio (II.2.137-8).
5. Isabella shows how she will respond to the situation by saying, “Better it were a brother died at once Than that a sister, by redeeming him, Should die forever” (II.4.106-8).

Point of View, Narrative Voice: The play is told through dialogue between the characters.

Tone: Although Measure for Measure has been labeled as a comedy, much of the story is almost melodramatic. There are eloquent arguments for justice and mercy, impassioned speeches of fright and anger, and bawdy dialogue between the town’s licentious inhabitants. The different types of language and topics used are a result of Shakespeare’s diverse audience. Lofty, lyrical poems were written for the aristocrats, while the bawdy jokes were written for the peasants (although the aristocracy was, of course, amused by them as well).

Irony: The greatest irony of the story is that Angelo attempts to commit the very same crime for which he is convicting Claudio. It is also quite ironic that the Duke ends up pardoning most of the crimes that occur when he had stated that one of his purposes in “traveling to Poland” was to give Angelo the chance to enforce laws that had long been dormant.

Affective issues related to the work:
- Isabella considers her chastity more important than life itself – What do students consider, if anything, more precious than life? Does everybody agree on things
that are more important than life? How would they feel if others condemned their point of view? How would they feel if their life was going to be forfeited for something that they didn’t think was that important?

- Angelo, at the beginning of the play, believes that he would never do what Claudio did, but then he realizes that he wants to do just that. Have the students ever had an experience where they thought they were stronger than they really were going into a situation? What happened? How did they react?
- Angelo treated Mariana terribly, but she still decides to marry him. How do students expect people to treat them?
- In Act II, Scene 2, Angelo and Isabella have a debate on justice and mercy. When do students think justice should be most important? When should mercy be used? Have the students had experiences when they thought the law was “sleeping” and justice needed to be enforced? What should be done if laws/rules are no longer obeyed – what solutions can the students come up with?

Vocabulary issues:
- Since the play was first printed in 1623, it is not written in modern English. While many of the words and phrases have fallen out of use or have taken on different meanings, many of these potentially problematic areas are clarified within the footnotes. In spite of this help, however, the language is difficult for those who are not familiar with it. Many, if not all, of the students, will need help in order to understand the text.
- Shakespeare earned his fame for a reason, and the text contains many beautifully written passages. I would spend a lot of time reading aloud with the students, giving them an opportunity to say the words themselves and hear out loud what kind of effect word choice can have in a passage.

Major Concepts:
- One of the major concepts addressed in the play is that of humanity’s ability to judge one another. Angelo proves himself incapable, and even the Duke fails to judge in a balanced manner. This concept questions the right of authority figures to judge others. I would be a bit careful with this idea, but I think that it is good for most people to question their right to judge, so I’d probably discuss it with the class.

Background Knowledge:
- It will be very helpful to know a bit about the marital issues presented within the play. Laws on marriage were a bit different in the early 17th century, and if they are not understood, then it would be very confusing that Isabella and Marianna accept that a “friar” encourages Marianna to sleep with Angelo. It would also bring light into the situation between Claudio and Juliet.
- A historical background of the setting into which the play was introduced could add to an understanding of the issues presented, including the recent ascension to the throne by James, and the ascension of Shakespeare and his players, the King’s Men, to court.
- I think that it’s standard procedure to review poetic formats, especially iambic pentameter, while teaching a Shakespearean play.
- It would be good to do some research on the theatrical world of the era, and what kinds of things would be different in the theater at that time versus what we would expect to see today. A study specifically of the Globe Theater is definitely called for.

**Implications for students of diversity:** There is a little bit of class distinction within the story, but I would feel like I was trying to force an issue if I tried to bring up something about diversity other than the fact that people often have different priorities.

**Gender Issues:** We could discuss the stereotypes presented by the characters – what is expected of the men versus what is expected of the women, what thoughts and actions are portrayed as virtuous in the men versus the women, and what kind of power and influence is controlled by the men versus the women.

**The Central Question/Enduring Issue:** One of the great questions raised during the course of the play is “Should he or shouldn’t he?” Should Angelo convict Claudio for his crime? Should the Duke convict Angelo for his crime? Neither one ends up executing the criminal they are judging, but what should have been done? This question demands that students examine justice and mercy and the place that they have in both the creation and execution of laws.

- It is also very important to me to help kids begin to think. Too little of that happens these days. Often, people are influenced by the opinions of others and the propaganda that comes in from all sides that they don’t establish priorities or personal agendas. I think that Isabella’s character really invites reflection into the questions, “What is really important to me? What are my priorities? In what ways will I allow others to influence these priorities?” I know that adolescents are extremely prone to peer pressure and propaganda. I think that it would be great for high school kids – as I suspect this play would be taught in 10th or 11th grade – to think about what really is important to them, and whether or not they are going to allow others to sway them.

**Research Issues/Project Ideas:**

1. Students will do a series of interviews, asking about peoples’ priorities. They will document the results, and draw conclusions from what they
discovered. They will include an experience when their own actions reflected their personal priorities.

2. Project: Choose a student to be the “judge.” Present a hypothetical situation, and ask that the “judge” resolve the situation. Then, have other students discuss why they agree or disagree with the judgment. What kinds of things would they have liked to know more about before judging? Do they recognize personal biases influencing their judgment? Repeat with different students as “judges.” Have students write personal reflections on the experience. What difficulties were presenting in judging? Would they feel comfortable having their judgments made into laws? What kinds of attributes would they want to see in a judge? What kinds of attributes would they want to see in someone judging them?

3. Project: Divide students into groups. Have each group choose a scene, “translate” the text into modern language, and act it out for the class. After each scene, discuss with the actors the decisions they made in acting it out – Did their ideas about the characters change during the project? If so, how? Did acting it out change the way they understood the scene? Were there areas that confused them or presenting difficulties? What were they, and why? What did they learn as a result of the experience?

4. Project: If possible, attend a performance of Measure for Measure as a class. Have students write a review of the performance and experience.

5. The title refers to a passage in the New Testament: St. Mathew 7:1-2. Have students write an analytical essay, supported by quotes from the text, explaining why they think the title is appropriate for the play.

6. Project: Have students, in groups, write an alternate ending to the play. What do they think would be a fair ending? How will they have the Duke judge the situations at hand? The play is supposed to be a comedy – will that affect their decisions? Have each group read their alternate ending for the class.

7. Project: Students will prepare a poster representing their personal priorities, what is important to them. They will write a page explanation and present a three-minute explanation to the class.

Information/Functional Texts:

1. Excerpts from history texts explaining the marital issues presented in the play, explaining what constituted a legal marriage in the 1620’s.

2. Film about the theatrical world during Shakespeare’s era (for example: The Globe Playhouse [videorecording] directed by Colman, Ronald, 1891-1958.).

3. Books about the Globe. For example:
   A young adult book, so there are simple descriptions and colored illustrations.

The encyclopedia of books about the Globe Theater. Includes charts and pictures, and all the detail you could possibly want about the theater and the way things were done there.


This is a beautiful book with colorful photographs, charts and pictures. It’s about the contemporary reconstruction of the Globe, but the pictures are really beautiful, which makes it worth your while.

4. Web sites. Good ones are listed in the Biography.