

The Winter's Tale – Suggested Teaching Approaches

Introduction - Split the class into three groups. Give each group one of the following titles:

Song of Spring; Summer Story; Autumn Experience.

Each group then has to write a list of the contents or events that they think would feature in their story. Give them 15 minutes to complete this.

When the 15 minutes is up, choose the group which were given Song of Spring and get the members of the other groups to guess items from the list drawn up by the Spring group. Repeat the process with the other two seasons.

Finally, give the whole group the title The Winter's Tale and get them to suggest a list of contents. Put these on the board. A whole lesson could be spent on these activities.

Act One

Scene One

All editions highlight the ambiguity of the opening scene. In order to avoid confusion, it might be better to photocopy the scene without the glossary. This makes it easier to guide the discussion towards a positive reading of the language.

Scene Two

This scene has to be split into sections for study. I suggest the following:

Lines 1 -210

The focus here has to be Leontes' rapid descent into insane jealousy. Make sure that a strong reader takes Leontes' part because there are some very tricky speeches in this section.

Having read the section, ask the class to give you a synopsis of the action. Ask them to tell you what the main difficulties were.

Leontes' speeches - Students love these to be spoon-fed and they always search for precise meanings, they want a rational explanation of Leontes' outbursts. The challenge here is to make them trust what you have to say. Obviously, Leontes' speeches can not be given an entirely rational explanation. In this scene, he is in the middle of an emotional crisis; he is suffering from an all-consuming jealousy and thus does not speak rationally. The whole point about Jealousy is that it destroys the ability to reason, it makes a person unstable and this instability is reflected in Leontes' broken, disjointed utterances. Once this process has been completed, take a fresh look at the opening scene. Not everything in this play is as it appears.

You can prepare the class for this by getting them to role-play a similar situation.

Person A: You are a jilted lover. Your boy / girlfriend has been seen dating another person. You are extremely upset about this.

Person B: You are the best friend.

Role-play a conversation in which the matter is discussed.

If they are too embarrassed to role-play, they could always produce a scripted conversation and read it back to the rest of the class.

Lines 211 - 363

Leontes' refusal to listen to sense.

Main focus has to be Leontes' use of language. The repeated references to Herman's "adultery" are particularly hard-hitting.

At the end of this section, it is a good idea to stop and consider Leontes' jealousy. A guiding question could be:

To what extent is Shakespeare's portrayal of Leontes' jealousy convincing?

Students often dismiss the whole thing as unbelievable. Encourage those who say that whether or not it is convincing is a side issue. After all, it is a play! Also try to keep the focus on depiction.

The above title could then be set as an essay.

Lines 363 - end of the scene.

This section is straightforward. Camillo tells Polixenes to escape while he can.

Act Two

Scene One

Another scene in which Leontes refuses to listen. He ignores the pleas of his wronged wife and those of his ministers. Once again, Leontes' language deserves close attention in this scene.

Task - Ask the class to collate some positive and negative quotes under the heading: Herman Described. A discussion of the contrasting perceptions usually encourages a lot of useful comment on the language in this scene.

Scene Two

Paulina is the central focus here. She emerges as something of a heroine in this and later scenes. Her heart-felt protestations always engage the admiration of students.

Give the class this scene. Let them read it in small groups and allow them the opportunity to comment without your support. They should easily cope.

Scene Three

Make sure that you have strong readers for the parts of Leontes and Paulina in this scene.

Approach: Encourage genuine audience participation in this scene. The class must boo and hiss at the appropriate moments in this scene. It's fun and it gets the message across!

Task - Collate another set of quotations, which reveal Leontes' poisoned state of mind.

Act Three

Scene One

Another straightforward scene. However, the language used here points forward in the play. Ask the students to comment on the moods created by what is said in this scene.

Scene Two

Lines 1 - 123

This memorable section is one worth spending some time on. It is worth moving some furniture so that the class resembles a courtroom. The trial of Hermione is at the heart of this section and students could be asked to do the setting themselves. How would a director engage further sympathy for Hermione here?

Afterwards - How does Shakespeare make us feel sympathy for Hermione in this scene?

Lines 124 -171

The revelation. What feelings are the audience made to experience in these lines?

Lines 172 - 242

Repentance begins - To what extent is it possible to forgive Leontes at this stage?

Scene Three

Antigonus's death and the discovery of Perdita by the Shepherd.

The key development here is the shift in tone. Antigonus dies but one can not help but feel that he deserves to. He now believes in Hermione's guilt and is seemingly punished for doing so. However, the mood of the scene is not negative. The manner of the Clown's description of Antigonus's death and the introduction of comic characters heralds the beginnings of the play's shift from Winter to Spring. (Try to get them to see that. Don't tell them it, lead them to that realisation.)

Act Four

Scene One

Time's speech. One worth doing with them.

Scene Two

A scene that pointedly deals with the "appearance and reality" thread which runs right through the text. Polixenes and Camillo decide to disguise themselves so that they can spy on Florizel. They are going to appear something that they are not.

Task - in what ways has the play dealt with this concept already? Who has judged an appearance and allowed his imagination to determine it to be a reality? What were the consequences of this? What might the play be saying about this concept?

Scene Three

Autolycus's Song - the shift from coldness to warmth is touched upon here. What feelings does the song create and how does it create them?

The appearance and reality thread emerges again here. What are its consequences here?

Scene Four

Lines 1 - 51

What is the mood of the two lovers? What indication is there that Polixenes may not be that different from Leontes after all? NB disguise features again.

Lines 52 - 180

Having read this section, it would be advisable to guide the students through the flower-giving ceremony. When you have finished, spend a little time discussing the presentation of Perdita. What is said about her? Look closely at the language used to describe her.

Lines 181 - 345

Focus here on the mood that is created and engage in some discussion of Autolycus. What does he add to the play? (Remember, he is disguised here)

Lines 346 - 444

Polixenes eventually throws off his disguise and passes judgement on Florizel and Perdita. It would be useful here to refer to Polixenes' words in Act 1 Scene 2. In conversation with Hermione he claims that he and Leontes "were as twinned lambs." Ask the class to discuss this idea in the light of what they have just seen. They could begin to draw up a list of the similarities and differences between the two.

Lines 444 - 597

Camillo's role is significant here. It is advisable to compare what he does here with what he does in the opening Act. This can lead into a discussion of his function in the play as a whole.

Lines 598 - 691

A section that allows for discussion of: Camillo, Autolycus and disguise.

Lines 692 - end of scene

Autolycus's trickery is the major source of interest here. What bearing do his actions have on the mood of the play? Discussion of this should build on previous analysis of his character. At the end of this scene the students should have a clear idea of his role in the play as a whole.

Act Five

Scene One

Lines 1 - 122

The question of sympathy for Leontes can be discussed again. Paulina is also worth further consideration here.

Lines 123 - end of scene

Look at the variety of moods that are created in this scene.

- In what ways are the feelings of the audience manipulated here?
- What evidence is there to suggest that Leontes and Polixenes are very much alike in their ways of thinking?

Scene Two

The reconciliation is reported. Why? The answer to this question is more obvious after the reading of the final scene. It might be wise to return to it after that.

Scene Three

Having read this scene, you will need time to get over the groans of an adolescent audience, which craves realism. It is your job to try to make them see that the success of a theatrical production does not necessarily depend upon the extent to which it is realistic. Even some of the greatest films ever made have managed to succeed even though they have stretched the boundaries of believability. Therefore, the question to discuss at the end is:

To what extent does this scene provide an appropriate conclusion to the play?

Look at:

- the completion of the movement of the text from winter - spring. The language in the scene pinpoints this shift. In this scene we have rebirth and regeneration and this replaces the wintry effects of Leontes' jealousy at the play's beginning.

- the how's and why's which some of us are left asking are irrelevant. After all, this is a Tale, it is theatre. This is an unbelievable ending but it is in many ways an unbelievable play! Show how the incredible events of the text add to its effectiveness as a piece of theatre.