

DOCUMENT RESUME

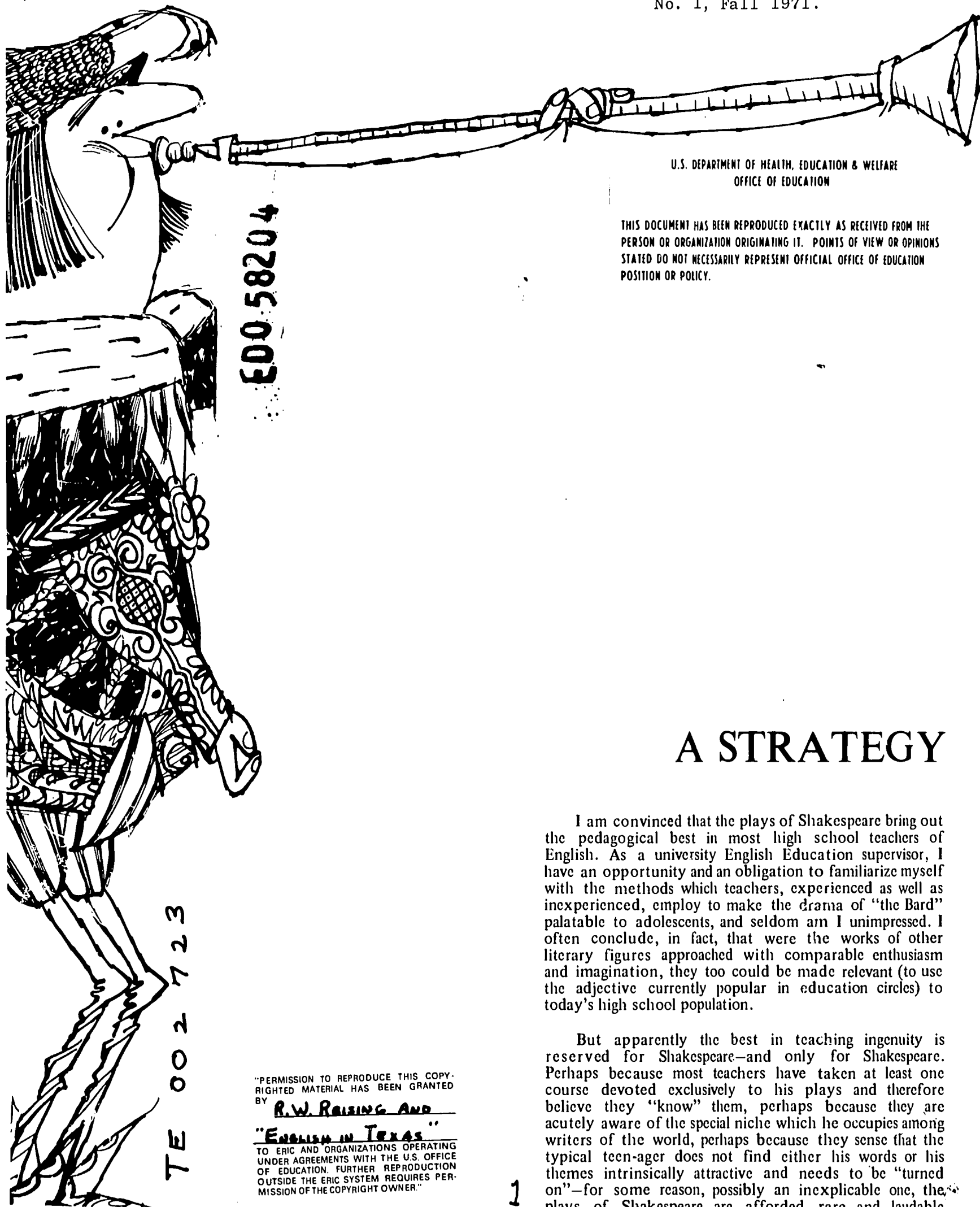
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ABSTRACT

This document discusses techniques for teaching Shakespeare at the secondary level. It is suggested, by way of innovation, that a teacher working with a Shakespearean drama (1) ask each of his students to select and bring to class a magazine or newspaper picture of a contemporary person (e.g., an athlete, a politician, a police officer, a nurse (who in the student's judgement possesses traits similar to those of a character in the play being studied); and (2) ask each student to write a paragraph or an essay in which he defends the identification that he makes. Such an assignment aids in keeping Shakespeare alive to his modern readers and places emphasis on people, an emphasis which should be paramount in today's literature classroom. (Author/CK)



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A STRATEGY

I am convinced that the plays of Shakespeare bring out the pedagogical best in most high school teachers of English. As a university English Education supervisor, I have an opportunity and an obligation to familiarize myself with the methods which teachers, experienced as well as inexperienced, employ to make the drama of "the Bard" palatable to adolescents, and seldom am I unimpressed. I often conclude, in fact, that were the works of other literary figures approached with comparable enthusiasm and imagination, they too could be made relevant (to use the adjective currently popular in education circles) to today's high school population.

But apparently the best in teaching ingenuity is reserved for Shakespeare—and only for Shakespeare. Perhaps because most teachers have taken at least one course devoted exclusively to his plays and therefore believe they "know" them, perhaps because they are acutely aware of the special niche which he occupies among writers of the world, perhaps because they sense that the typical teen-ager does not find either his words or his themes intrinsically attractive and needs to be "turned on"—for some reason, possibly an inexplicable one, the plays of Shakespeare are afforded rare and laudable

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KEEPING SHAKESPEARE ALIVE AND WELL IN THE SEVENTIES.

R. W. Reising

To the stockpile of mod strategies appropriate to the secondary school teaching of Shakespearean drama, I would like to make my contribution. My suggestion is that a teacher working with a Shakespearean play (1) ask each of his students to select and bring to class a magazine or newspaper picture of a contemporary person (e.g., an athlete, a politician, a police officer, a nurse) who in the student's judgement possesses traits similar to those of a character in the play being studied; (2) ask each student to write a paragraph or an essay in which he defends the identification that he makes. Such an assignment can, in my opinion, lead students to concede that the playwright's characters are as plausible and viable today as they were three and a half centuries ago, to sense that they contain a potent timelessness that moderns can ill afford to overlook.

At my urging, a student teacher of English recently featured the assignment in a unit--concluding examination on *Romeo and Juliet*. She was so pleased with the writing products that emerged in her ninth-grade class that she eagerly provided me with several samples, one of which appears below for readers to evaluate. The student responsible for it had selected a magazine picture of the Henry Cooper-Cassius Clay (or Muhammad Ali) boxing match of several years ago to inspire his paragraph:

In my picture of Ali and Henry Cooper fighting, I see not only Tybalt and Mercutio fighting but some of their feelings also. Tybalt is loudmouthed and always wants to fight as is Ali. Cooper, an Englishman, uses jokes as much as Mercutio. The picture also reminds me of the fight. Ali (Tybalt) is really smashing Cooper (Mercutio) to a pulp. This was Cooper's last American fight as it was Mercutio's last fight. Later Ali (like Tybalt) meets his end in another fight. Ali and Cooper are different in as many ways as Tybalt and Mercutio. Ali is American and Cooper is an Englishman, while Tybalt is a Capulet and Mercutio a Montague.

As the sample paragraph indicates, the assignment places emphasis upon people, the emphasis which, according to many English Education authorities, should be paramount in today's literature classroom.¹ In the words of J. N. Hook, "I think now that our emphasis in teaching literature should be on the people in it . . . Literature, I am saying, if we don't kill it in our classrooms, shows our students a multitude of truths about people [Hook's underlining]." ² Simultaneously, the assignment aids in keeping Shakespeare alive and well in the 1970's, an always difficult but usually rewarding challenge for the profession. (*Dr. Reising is Associate Professor of English and English Education at Pembroke State University, Pembroke, North Carolina.*)

¹See, for example, Alan B. Howes's *Teaching Literature to Adolescents: Plays* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1968), p. 6.

²J. N. Hook, note in *English Journal*, LX (May, 1971), 648.

FOR COMPOSITION

pedagogical treatment. That that treatment is markedly different from the treatment discernible in a typical undergraduate or graduate seminar focusing upon the same material does not nullify or weaken my point. The students in such a seminar are involved in it because they have elected to be. High school students, in contrast, usually study Shakespeare not because they want to do so but because they are required to do so, more times than not wishing, at least at the outset of their examination of *Julius Caesar* or *Macbeth*, that they could substitute *Hot Rod*, *My Confession*, or literary fare of similar profundity. Thus the high school teacher of Shakespeare has ample reason to see his task as different from that of his university counterpart, who has little worry about capturing his audience. While the latter can give his every energy to probing the dramatist's subtleties, the former must concentrate on making him intelligible, meaningful, and enjoyable to his charges. If to achieve his end the high school teacher not merely allows but also encourages curious happenings to occur in his classroom--everything from the building of huge replicas of the Globe Theater to the writing and staging of satirical take-offs on the death of Caesar (in a cowboy setting no less!)--he is not to be castigated but to be lavishly praised.