

Project Vox Lesson Plan

The Nature of Love: Tullia d'Aragona + *Romeo & Juliet* (90 min.)

Grades: 9-10

Suggested Courses: English Language Arts courses (including AP)

Lesson Description

Fifty years before Shakespeare published *Romeo and Juliet*, Italian poet and philosopher Tullia d'Aragona published her *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love*. In this dialogue, d'Aragona writes herself in conversation with Benedetto Varchi, an illustrious man in Florence. She argues that the highest form of love is rational.

In this lesson, students will discuss the nature of true love — whether it is rational, passionate, or both. What is love, according to d'Aragona in the *Dialogue*? Does her view capture what love really is? Do Romeo and Juliet have that kind of love? Were Romeo and Juliet truly in love? Why or why not?

As a prerequisite, students should have read the entirety of Romeo and Juliet.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this activity, students should be able to:

- Cite textual evidence to support comparison of d'Aragona's philosophical arguments and *Romeo and Juliet*.
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases by rewriting philosophical passages.
- Evaluate d'Aragona's arguments and assess the validity of her reasoning.
- Initiate and participate in philosophical discussions that require posing questions and responding thoughtfully to peers.

Activity Materials

- Handout 1: [D'Aragona Defines Love](#)
- Handout 2: [D'Aragona on the Infinity of Love](#)
- Handout 3: [D'Aragona on Dishonest vs. Honest Lovers](#)
- [Slides](#)

Standards

CCSS (9-10): RL. 1, RL. 7, RI. 1, RI.4, RI. 8 SL. 1, SL. 3

North Carolina: RL.9-10.1, RL.9-10.6, RI.9-10.5, SL.9-10.1

Activity Flow

Optional: Preparation for Class/Homework

1. Instruct students to come to class with two passages from *Romeo and Juliet* that discuss or hint at the definition or nature of love.
2. Instruct students to write a paragraph response to the prompt, *what is love?*

Section 1: Bell Ringer (~10 min)

1. Write in the middle of the board in large letters: LOVE. Give students three sticky notes each and have them write short answers to the question: what is love? (5 min)
2. Have students place their sticky notes around the word “LOVE” on the board.
3. Students should then work together to group the sticky notes into similar categories and label the categories. (5 min)
4. Take a photo!

Section 2: Historical Background (~5 min)

1. Introduce the author and the text. Using [Slides 2-4](#) as an optional reference, share the following information:

Slide 2: Tullia d’Aragona (1501/1505-1556)

Tullia d’Aragona was a 16th-century poet, philosopher, and *cortegiana honesta* [honorable courtesan], a sex worker recognized and praised for her intellectual abilities. Born in Rome around the turn of the 16th century, she traveled to intellectual centers throughout the Italian Peninsula, where she gained the favor of powerful figures who helped advance her work to publication.

Slide 3: *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love* (1547)

In this dialogue published fifty years before Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Tullia d’Aragona writes herself in conversation with Benedetto Varchi, an illustrious man in Florence. She responds to a 1542 dialogue written by Speroni, a prominent male Renaissance writer, which argues women are only capable of an animalistic, irrational love. Against this, d’Aragona skillfully shows that women are capable of rational love. The excerpts for this lesson focus on what it means for love to be rational and centered on the Good.

Source: Tullia d'Aragona, *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love*. Edited and translated by Rinaldina Russell and Bruce Merry. The University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Slide 4: Historical Context

Renaissance philosophy is characterized by a return to ancient texts and the *vita activa*—the active life, where philosophical topics and social practice intersect, as exemplified by d'Aragona's dialogue on how to love ethically. Likely because of its practical focus, Renaissance philosophy is generally excluded from traditional philosophy syllabi.

D'Aragona belonged to a privileged tradition of women intellectuals whose status as noble courtesans enabled access to literary and philosophical circles. For early modern women, the seemingly disparate genres of poetry and philosophy offered socially acceptable platforms for the expression of profound ideas. Women philosophers at this time were not recognized as philosophers but as writers.

For more background, see the [Project Vox entry on d'Aragona](#) and her philosophy.

Section 3: Primary Text Engagement (60 min per handout)

Select one or more excerpts to examine. This lesson plan includes three excerpts, which correspond to three different handouts. The excerpts can either stand alone or build upon each other.

Handout 1 (60 min): [D'Aragona Defines Love](#)

1. Prompt students to read the excerpt, fill out the table, and answer the **Respond** questions, either in small groups or individually (15 min). Discuss answers (15 min).
2. Prompt students to answer the **Reflect** questions, either in small groups or individually (15 min). Discuss answers (15 min).

Handout 1: Suggested Answers

For d'Aragona, love is..	Suggested rewrites	Suggested examples
A desire	A state of mind where you want something that you don't already have.	Examples can range from material things like food, clothing, and other goods, to immaterial things like love, happiness, and

		success.
to enjoy with union	To take pleasure in being together as one.	Examples can range from material unions like to hug someone, to immaterial things like finishing a friend's sentence or "sharing a brain cell."
something that is truly beautiful	Something that is objectively good, aesthetically or morally.	Students are likely to think of grand natural beauty like the Northern Lights or a famous work of art like the <i>Mona Lisa</i> or Michelangelo's <i>David</i> .
or that seems beautiful to the lover.	Something that is subjectively good, aesthetically or morally.	These answers may be more quotidian, and reference things that are particular to individual people. Your favorite song that other people may not like, a family member, a childhood memory.

1. What kind of beauty do you think d'Aragona has in mind? Why?

D'Aragona could be talking about physical beauty or immaterial beauty, like a beautiful soul or a beautiful mind. Students may think that both are, or only one is, relevant. Is finding a lover physically beautiful necessary for love? Is it unnecessary, or does it even make for a worse love? Is immaterial beauty the foundation for a better love? Why or why not?

The answer to this question also depends on what kind of love we have in mind here—romantic love, platonic love, or love for objects like a childhood blanket. Does this definition make sense for romantic love? What about platonic love (friendship)? Or love of things like songs, movies, or objects? Is beauty relevant to all of these kinds of love?

2. What is the difference between something truly beautiful and what seems beautiful? How are we to tell the difference? Why do you think d'Aragona includes both in her definition?

This question should get students thinking about the difference between objective and subjective beauty, and how we come to decide what is objectively beautiful. When talking about physical beauty, often people talk about "objectively beautiful" people as those who fit the societal standards for beauty. Is this really objective? Does objective beauty exist? It may be easier to say that objective beauty exists when discussing something like the Northern Lights. Students may think that most people would say the Northern Lights are beautiful, and that they are therefore objectively beautiful. Is what is truly beautiful then just what everyone would agree upon? Will we ever be able to know what is truly beautiful?

"What seems beautiful to the lover" implies that not everyone would find what the lover finds beautiful. One could find an avant garde piece of art beautiful even though it looks like trash to someone else. What is truly beautiful may always seem beautiful to the lover, but what seems beautiful to the lover may not always be truly beautiful.

3. Do you think Romeo and Juliet love each other in the way d'Aragona describes? Why or why not?

Here students can reflect on passages they chose if they did the optional homework. If not, have students think of events or things they remember from the text to support their answers.

To help answer this question, have students refer back to the broken down definition. Do they love each other because of a desire or something else? If desire, is it to enjoy with union something that is beautiful or seems beautiful?

4. Does everything we love have to be beautiful in some way, or can we love things that are not beautiful at all? Can you come up with an example of something you love that does not seem beautiful or is not truly beautiful?

Someone may love a sport not because they think that basketball is beautiful, but because they enjoy watching it. Someone may have a hard relationship with a family member who they do not find beautiful but love nonetheless. Are these examples of true love? If so, should our definition of love accommodate them?

After answering this question, ask students if it makes them more or less convinced of d'Aragona's argument.

Relevant *Romeo and Juliet* Passages for Reference (from The Folger Shakespeare):

1.5.51-60

ROMEO

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear—
Beauty too rich for use, for Earth too dear.
So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows
As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows.
The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand
And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand.
Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight,
For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.

2.6.30-34

JULIET

Conceit, more rich in matter than in words,
Braggs of his substance, not of ornament.
They are but beggars that can count their worth,
But my true love is grown to such excess
I cannot sum up sum of half my wealth.

3.2.8-16

JULIET

Lovers can see to do their amorous rites
By their own beauties, or, if love be blind,
It best agrees with night. Come, civil night,
Thou sober-suited matron all in black,
And learn me how to lose a winning match
Played for a pair of stainless maidenhoods.
Hood my unmanned blood, bating in my cheeks,
With thy black mantle till strange love grow bold,
Think true love acted simple modesty.

Handout 2 (60 min): D'Aragona on the Infinity of Love

1. Prompt students to read the portions of the excerpts and answer the questions as they go, either individually or in small groups (20 min).

Note that the original 16th century text is in the left-hand column, with a colloquial translation in the right-hand column. The translation is meant to help students understand the text more easily, and students should read both. Students are prompted to note questions about the translation as they read. Does the translation make sense? Do you understand how we get from the original to the translation, or is something confusing?

2. Discuss answers, using teacher guidance below to encourage conversation (15 min).
3. Prompt students to answer the **Reflect** question, either individually or in small groups (5 min). Discuss the question, encouraging students to find textual evidence to support their answers (20 min). See selected Romeo and Juliet passages below to add to the discussion if needed.

Handout 2: Suggested Answers

1. That love goes on forever implies that you can always love more. Is there something you love that you can't imagine loving more?

Students may think that they already love a family member or a pet as much as they possibly can, and there is no way that they can love them more. D'Aragona thinks that this is impossible. What does it mean to love something as much as possible? How do we quantify the volume of love?

2. Do you think people are satisfied after getting what they want? What is it about the nature of love that causes a lover to never be satisfied?

The first question asks students generally about satisfaction. The second asks specifically about lovers. They might respond to the first question that there are some things that we want that perfectly satisfy us when we get them. For example, if someone craves ice cream, they are often satisfied after eating the ice cream. D'Aragona has something specific in mind here about the nature of love.

One way to get at this question is to prompt students to brainstorm what the goal of love is. What is it that lovers want? What are the desires of lovers? For a food craving, the goal is to eat the food. For love, what is the goal? Is the goal just to love or is it something else? Answering this question will help students understand what it is that we get when our desire for love is satisfied, and what may happen after that.

3. How does never being satisfied lead to an emotional rollercoaster?

The emotional rollercoaster is caused by a strong desire that, once satisfied, gives way to another strong desire. We expect satisfying our desires to lead to satisfaction, but in the case of loving we are never satisfied, so we can never settle.

4. **Reflect:** Are Romeo and Juliet like the lovers d'Aragona describes? Are they never satisfied? Does the play end in tragedy *because* they are never satisfied?

D'Aragona argues that lovers are never satisfied, and so they live on an emotional rollercoaster and can feel contradictory feelings at the same time. There are many ways to answer this question, and students should be encouraged to think creatively about the text rather than come up with the "right" answer.

One way of answering is to say that the rollercoaster of Romeo and Juliet being together and apart mirrors the emotional rollercoaster that d'Aragona describes. Romeo and Juliet desire to be together, but when they come close to satisfying their desire, something circumstantial gets in the way. This could be a metaphor for a lover's desire never being fully satisfied. Romeo and Juliet are never fully satisfied because they never get to be together and, tragically, they die trying.

Another way of answering is to say that literally, rather than metaphorically, Romeo and Juliet are on this emotional rollercoaster. They experience intense emotional states during the courting and marriage from the happiness of being together to the despair of being apart. These emotional states alone may show that they are never satisfied.

Relevant *Romeo and Juliet* Passages for Reference (from The Folger Shakespeare):

2.2.138-142

JULIET

But to be frank and give it thee again.
And yet I wish but for the thing I have.
My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep. The more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite.

2.6.9-15

FRIAR LAWRENCE

These violent delights have violent ends
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,
Which, as they kiss, consume. The sweetest
honey
Is loathsome in his own deliciousness
And in the taste confounds the appetite.
Therefore love moderately. Long love doth so.
Too swift arrives as tardy as too slow.

Handout 3 (60 min): D'Aragona on Dishonest vs. Honest Lovers

1. Prompt students to read the portions of the excerpts and answer the questions as they go, either individually or in small groups (20 min).

Note that the original 16th century text is in the left-hand column, with a colloquial translation in the right-hand column. The translation is meant to help students understand the text more easily, and students should read both. Teachers have the option to discuss the translation with students after each passage: Does the translation make sense? Do you understand how we get from the original to the translation, or is something confusing?

2. Discuss answers, using teacher guidance below to encourage conversation (10 min).

3. Prompt students to answer the **Reflect** question, either individually or in small groups (20 min). Discuss the question, encouraging students to find textual evidence to support their answers (10 min). See selected Romeo and Juliet passages below to add to the discussion if needed.

Handout 3: Suggested Answers

1. Why do you think d'Aragona calls this kind of love "dishonest"? What is dishonest about it?

Dishonest love is dishonest because the lover is lying to themselves—they may think that they are feeling the good kind of love, "honest" love, but it is not. What they feel is closer to lust than true love. It is passionate, not reasoned. Further, d'Aragona says that dishonest love can easily end and turn to hate. If love can turn to hate, is it really love? Dishonest love may be dishonest in that it is not really love but the lovers think or are pretending that it is.

2. D'Aragona's language of two lovers merging into one is similar to the idea of lovers "completing each other" or saying that someone is your "other half." What does it mean to "complete" someone or to say that someone is your "other half"?

The idea that a person is able to be completed by another implies that there is something missing in the first place. To say that someone is your other half is to say that you yourself are only a half, and not a whole.

3. Dishonest lovers only want pleasure and babies. Honest lovers want to complete each other. Do you agree with d'Aragona that honest love is better than dishonest love?

Students may reject the idea that one is "better" than another. They may think that honest love makes for a stronger long-term relationship, but not think that it is better than dishonest love. Or they may be against the idea that a lover completes you, and think that love as desiring pleasure and babies is more "honest" than d'Aragona's "honest love."

4. Do you think that Romeo and Juliet were honest or dishonest lovers? Did they want to complete each other or only want pleasure?

Here students can compare Romeo's love of Rosaline to his love of Juliet. Romeo loved Rosaline for her beauty alone and fell out of love with her quickly. What is different about his love of Rosaline than his love of Juliet? The Friar describes him as "doting" over Rosaline rather than "loving" her. Students, however, may think that he loves Juliet in the same way and it will be just as brief. Here is a good place to look at the text to examine the difference in the language Romeo uses to talk about Rosaline versus the language he uses to talk about Juliet.

Common objections to Romeo and Juliet being in true love are that they barely have any time to get to know each other to truly be in love and that they are just teenagers and acting rashly. Encourage students to return to d'Aragona's definition. Does one kind of love require more time to build than another? Honest love does not rule out love at first sight; it is the shape of the desire that is different.

5. According to d'Aragona, satisfying honest love is impossible and the striving to become one will go on forever. If she is right, can this explain the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet?

It is impossible for them to satisfy their desires to become one. The circumstances of Romeo's

banishment can be seen as a metaphor of the reality of their physical separation. They will keep desperately striving to become one without an end in sight, and the only escape from the striving is, tragically, death.

This question assumes that Romeo and Juliet are honest lovers, which students may disagree with. Encourage them to answer the question, and ask afterwards if they still think that Romeo and Juliet are dishonest lovers. This is a good exercise for those students to embody the position that they disagree with.

Relevant *Romeo and Juliet* Passages for Reference (from The Folger Shakespeare)

Compare Romeo's love of Rosaline to seeing Juliet for the first time:

1.1.234-247

ROMEO

O, teach me how I should forget to think!

BENVOLIO

By giving liberty unto thine eyes.
Examine other beauties.

ROMEO

'Tis the way
To call hers, exquisite, in question more.
These happy masks that kiss fair ladies' brows,
Being black, puts us in mind they hide the fair.
He that is stricken blind cannot forget
The precious treasure of his eyesight lost.
Show me a mistress that is passing fair;
What doth her beauty serve but as a note
Where I may read who passed that passing fair?
Farewell. Thou canst not teach me to forget.

1.5.51-60

ROMEO

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear—
Beauty too rich for use, for Earth too dear.
So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows
As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows.
The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand
And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand.

2.3.69-90

FRIAR LAWRENCE

Holy Saint Francis, what a change is here!
Is Rosaline, that thou didst love so dear,
So soon forsaken? Young men's love then lies
Not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes.
Jesu Maria, what a deal of brine
Hath washed thy sallow cheeks for Rosaline!
How much salt water thrown away in waste
To season love, that of it doth not taste!
The sun not yet thy sighs from heaven clears,
Thy old groans yet ringing in mine ancient ears.
Lo, here upon thy cheek the stain doth sit
Of an old tear that is not washed off yet.
If e'er thou wast thyself, and these woes thine,
Thou and these woes were all for Rosaline.
And art thou changed? Pronounce this sentence
then:
Women may fall when there's no strength in men.

ROMEO

Thou chid'st me oft for loving Rosaline.

FRIAR LAWRENCE

For doting, not for loving, pupil mine.

ROMEO

And bad'st me bury love.

FRIAR LAWRENCE

Not in a grave
To lay one in, another out to have.

Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight,
For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.

Section 3: Exit Ticket (5 min)

1. Prompt students to reflect and write their answer to the question below ([Slide 5](#)). Collect answers as they leave the classroom. Alternatively, have students discuss in small groups or as a class.

Is the love between Romeo and Juliet true love? Why or why not?