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Character in Hamlet: Family & Loss

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by Sarah A. Weidmann

What if your uncle killed your father? Even if you hadn't spent a world of time with your dad you looked up to him as if he was a god. What if you found this out because your father rose out of the grave as a ghost? It was actually some foot soldiers and a schoolmate that saw him first and this is testing your religious faith, which has been strong in the past. What if your mother married that same murderous uncle? You are your mother's only son and you had been so close. This betrayal makes you look at your mother in a new negative light. What if you've killed your girlfriend's/boyfriend's father by mistake and then they went into an insane reverie beyond repair? Your affection for your girlfriend had been a happy distraction until family got involved. Your rage at your mother made this accident happen! What would you feel? Overwhelming sadness, anger...How would you act? Depressed, crazy...Here lie major plot events and resulting temporal moods in *Hamlet*. When the play is presented in this way, twelve and thirteen year olds should be intrigued.

I've chosen the topics of loss and family complications to address in my curriculum unit. A theme my students will address from the get go will be: The loss of a family member prompts us to think of the worth of our own lives. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, characters deal with family and loss. These emotional complications shape their choices. We mostly see these choices through the eyes of the shaken prince, Hamlet. At this vulnerable time in his life he feels and then performs the emotions of hysteria, melancholy, woundedness, vengefulness, everything but thumbs-up. Even if Hamlet is truly feeling these emotions, he may be acting out what this behavior looks like. Students should be able to identify and analyze these performances by looking at evidence in the text.

The textual structure of this play addresses family and loss through events and devices, such as the ghost sightings and the play within a play. The plot events pelt us with familial complications, the agony of loss, and the arbitrariness of life. Characters deal with this differently. Hamlet is haunted. Gertrude self-medicates. Horatio appeals to reason. The Ghost of Old Hamlet commands. The text provides us with questions, coping mechanisms, and the play. By exploring structural choices that Shakespeare made, students will have a better understanding of the ideas behind the text, the author's intentions.

I plan to present the story of Hamlet to students as a series of traumatic life events, creating a buzz of interest in the room. Then we'll tackle text. We'll begin with a section of Hamlet's first soliloquy from Act I Scene II:

Let me not think on't -- Frailty, thy name is woman! -- A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she follow'd my poor father's body, Like Niobe, all tears: -- why she, even she -- O,

God! a beast, that wants discourse of reason, Would have mourn'd longer--married with my uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father Than I to Hercules: within a month: Ere yet the
salt of most unrighteous tears Had left the flushing in her galled eyes, She married. O, most
wicked speed, to post With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!

These words show the character mourning the loss of a parent. He remembers how much his father loved his mother. He considers what a strong and vibrant man his father was. He is intensely upset about his mother's choice to marry his uncle, a man he believes pales in comparison to his late father. His anger towards his mother bubbles up. Students' study of individual words and phrases will scaffold their understanding of the text. The text illuminated, through direct instruction and close-reading the same lines again and again, will begin to connect to many students' identities. It is these personal connections that will motivate them to persist when the text is a struggle.

This past year my school has witnessed a great deal of loss. Current and former students have lost parents to illness and tragic accidents. Our community has lost members due to gun violence and gang activity. As educators we see our students for many more hours than their families do during the waking hours of weekdays. Hence we have become the emotional backbone for this recent period of time, modeling ways to cope. In some circumstances, however, we may not know how to help students dealing with loss. Loss and the complexities of familial ties bring out all sides of a person—and not just these students, after all. There is an instability that informs choices large and small and we are all forced to perform somehow in order to get by. This basic human fact happens to be at the heart of *Hamlet*.

I have taught at National Teachers Academy (NTA) for four years now and will continue in the fall, my fourth year in my current position as seventh grade reading, writing, and social science educator. NTA is located on the south side of Chicago in the South Loop community. As the school website describes, in 2002 NTA opened under the direction of a consortium of 15 school partners including universities in an effort to deliver strong professional development for teachers at a neighborhood school. In 2007 CPS moved management to the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) based on the AUSL strong teacher residency program. NTA became a Training Academy for neighborhood schools, training residents. These schools are not turnarounds (schools that have been taken over by AUSL trained teachers) but were opened with the purpose of developing highly effective teachers for the challenging urban environment. I myself have no affiliation with AUSL besides teaching in their network of schools for CPS.

We have 600 students in grades Pre-K through eighth. Over 91% of our students qualify for free/reduced lunch. Our student population is 90% African American. We have a large percentage of displaced African American families who once lived in project housing that has since been demolished who reside with friends, family members, and/or in shelter-housing. There is high gang activity in and around our neighborhood, which is at an apex between Chinatown, McCormick Place, Downtown, and Bronzeville. NTA welcomed an additional 85 students two years ago as a result of the CPS school closings. Gentrification on the northeast end of our community has brought changes with it. One of those shifts is NTA's acceptance of a Regional Gifted Center (RGC). The RGC started in kindergarten, added first and second grade for the last two years and will have a third grade classroom as well this coming school year. The RGC brings in a more diverse population that is new to our school and a topic of great interest to our middle school students who are used to being the face of NTA. One of my girls this year asked if "white people were taking over NTA".

I mentioned that there were a number of students dealing with loss and familial complications during this past school year. There is one student in particular that inspired this unit, though. I share his story because I

believe it is one that a lot of us know. When Will (pseudonym) became a student of mine this year it was our second go around. As a fourth grader he had been comparable to his schoolmate, Chris (pseudonym): sensitive, silly, small, bright, innocent, athletic, sweet, and a deep thinker. His father visited with ear to ear smiles each quarter to check in at conferences. Will's dad seemed like such a charismatic magnetic man. He talked about Indian food being Will's mom's favorite cuisine, how they loved to go out as a family.

Last year I heard that Will had had an extremely negative experience with his sixth grade teachers, especially one who he said "made up stuff about him to get him out of the room". He had also grown immensely and now looked like a behemoth man at the age of twelve. He'd been recruited onto a great citywide football team that did so well they traveled. During one of the weekends away Will was taken advantage of sexually by one of the coaches. This happened the summer before he went to school last year. Around the same time his mother had an affair which resulted in his gaining a baby brother who turned out to be a terror. His father left his mother and moved in with a white teacher lady. That couple in turn broke up and then he began dating another white teacher lady who talked down to Will frequently in their home space.

By the time I began to teach him again, he had had little to no counseling about being molested. He decided that he outright hated his mother because he believed she hated him. His mother had no idea how to interact with him anymore so their relationship fell apart. He lived with his dad and the new woman. This new woman, his last year teacher, and the previous woman his father had dated all treated Will in such a way that he had an extreme aversion to white teacher ladies (like me). When his behavior and respect level wavered his father threatened him physically and told him to "man up". He acted out by keeping his hands in his pants during class, saying overtly sexual things to girls, making overtly sexual jokes to his friends who were guys, and shutting down in the class by sleeping or refusing to do any work. Some days he looked at me and talked to me with such contempt that I went home feeling psychologically battered.

Will began to tell the counselor at school that he was hearing voices. When he made poor choices in class he said he was told to do those things by the voices. Sometimes in class he would write me a note saying that the voices "just wouldn't stop today". His written responses to essay questions became personal accounts of his mother disowning him and hating her for what she did. Of course he felt this way. He'd been let down by so many adults in his life. Even though I was trying to prove to him that I was an adult he could trust, he associated me with the women his father dated whom he hated and with the male coach who molested him because I am a woman who's married to another woman. I currently feel that Will is performing the role of a schizophrenic to deal with trauma. This is one young person in our world dealing with all of these issues at the age of twelve. We all know him or someone like him in some ways, or perhaps we are him. Regardless, he's a Hamlet in character.

How does the character of Hamlet change throughout the play? Are there systematic changes in his persona? How does he differ in Act I from Act II, III, IV, or V? Let's discuss character before exploring the changes that this character goes through. Character could be a discussion of type or the individual. In Shakespeare character blends type and individuality. Character, any of his individual characters, might be a type on the surface but have uncharacteristic tendencies and depth. With the amount of time spent on Hamlet's thoughts and actions in this play, we have no problem dissecting moments in the text that suggest character, which is in his case changeable.

How far does Hamlet come, emotionally, from the beginning to the end? "[aside] A little more than kin, and less than kind!" (1.2.64-65) This is how we're introduced to our man Hamlet, through sarcasm and in the breaking of the fourth wall. What is the equivalent to breaking the fourth wall in real life do you think? Maybe

it's an accountable awareness of one's actions. "Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems'." (1.2.76) Here he is proving to himself and others the authenticity of his actions. He is actively mourning and infuriated with the need to turn this emotion off for the sake of holding court in a "normal" way, the petition of the boys (Laertes and Hamlet) to go back to school and news from Norway. He is disgusted by what he considers incest on his mother's part. When Hamlet sees the Ghost of Old Hamlet he reacts through doctrine, "Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,/Bring with thee airs of heaven or blasts from hell,/Be thy intents wicked or charitable,/Thou com'st in such a questionable shape that I will speak to thee." (1.4.39-44) What is revealed is the story of his father's most heinous murder by his own brother. He is called by the Ghost to avenge this murderous act. His mind still questions whether this apparition is his father in purgatory or a devil and yet he cannot deny the horrible facts that have been revealed. He is in a distracted state after this information and the characters around him beg to know what went on but he cannot tell them. He "swears" to the Ghost he will deliver on this act of revenge, but he does not seem happy about this. He teeters between agony and hysteria.

No one has ever said that Hamlet is stable. His temporal behaviors are a sort of neuroses. In Act II he is not just down but in a mania of a kind. He is indeed an intellectual so maybe he is on an intellectual high of sorts. He toys with Polonius. He plays (intellectually) with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (who are interchangeable) and then is angered by their lack of authenticity--knowing that they were sent for by the king. He instructs The Players, commenting on the ridiculousness of an actor's tears during performance--what if that sentiment had an ounce of truth to it, as in Hamlet's own story and circumstance? He is, again, infuriated with himself at this time in the play. He calls himself a coward. He still needs proof that the murder he is about to commit is true revenge and justified. He is obsessed with this process. His "character" is melancholic in Act I and appears energized and maniacal in Act II as he plots the proof of his uncle's murderous deed in the play within a play.

Act III begins with suicidal tendencies, or I suppose thoughts would be a more accurate description as he describes and pontificates over in the famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy. Hamlet's interaction with Ophelia is harsh to say the least, "Get thee to a nunnery." This is informed by his hatred of and disgust at his mother's lusty choices. Perhaps he believes all women to be whores in this moment. He continues to instruct The Players after their performance of *The Aeneid* text (upon arrival) and before their performance of "The Tragedy of Gonzago" (or "The Mousetrap" as Hamlet calls the reenactment), facetiously. He whole-heartedly anticipates catching the king by guilty conscience and comments on the need for the fifteen lines he has composed to go well. And they do. Claudius DOES react accordingly. Hamlet does not kill the king while he is praying, again due to his orthodox religious beliefs. He does not want the king to go to heaven and wants to time the death appropriately. When he is called in to speak with his mother, Hamlet unloads the world on her, all things horrible to push her into a state of remorse and test her knowledge of the murder. In an impulsive and energized moment he kills Polonius who is hiding behind a curtain and shows no remorse because of the contempt he feels for the old meddler. If it had been the king he would have exulted. His mother fears his murderous mania, but he pushes her to listen to him. He convinces her of the flaw in her passions and the mortal flaw of her murderous husband. When the ghost of Old Hamlet appears only to Hamlet in his mother's closet at this moment, Hamlet cowers and obeys while his mother is confused and shocked. Act III displays a truly manic Hamlet who vacillates between thoughts of suicide and energized anger/excitement.

Hamlet is first heard in Act IV talking in a nonsensical way, or so it seems to his friends. He is banished to England after it is found out that he killed the old man Polonius out of madness, as the king and queen believe from his distracted behavior in response to the ghost--even though they must have felt that the act of killing a meddler behind the curtain wasn't itself mad. Then he is gone for a while. It is these moments in the play that deal with family and loss for The Polonius Family: Laertes's rage and Ophelia's irreparable madness. Laertes

returns to Denmark to find his father dead and his sister truly mad. He is led to believe, by the King, that the murder of his father and by and large the decline of his sister's mental state are the fault of Hamlet. Hamlet is supposed to be in England regaining his equilibrium. It is then revealed to Horatio by letter that Hamlet was forced to board a sailor's ship at sea as a sort of prisoner and will be returning to Denmark without Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The King hears of this news as well by letter delivered from one of the sailors. The plot to deal with Hamlet is put into the works. Laertes will avenge HIS father's death. The King will continue to save his own hide. The motivation for executing Hamlet is propelled by Gertrude's entrance in the last scene of Act IV as she tells the story of Ophelia's unfortunate watery death. Act IV shows Hamlet as a shadow that must be illuminated by those who have been affected by his decisions, but Hamlet himself has illuminated his own choices to end the agony of apprehension.

Many say that in Act V he regains an even keel and the extreme mood swings go away. Having returned from England, with Horatio he spends the first scene of Act V in the graveyard with the clowns before realizing that Ophelia has died and been buried there. Up to this point he is commenting on the nature of the clowns and on the nature of death--that one can live a full life and be a lawyer or a court jester and still end up an empty skull and ash and dirt like Yorick. For example, "Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,/ Might stop a hole to keep the wind away." (5.1.215-216) Hamlet comes upon Ophelia's funeral as a surprise. Laertes has already jumped into his sister's grave and Hamlet goes in after him. As they get physical, Hamlet is aware enough to warn Laertes: "Yet have I in me something dangerous/ Which let thy wisdom fear." (5.1.264-265) His mother's reaction to Hamlet's entrance is pity; she believes him to be mad after he has seemed to talk to thin air in her bedroom during Act III. Shakespeare writes a series of "Woo't"s in response--Hamlet calling out in grief at the incredulousness of Ophelia's untimely death. He says he loved her. This may or may not be true but he is convincing and it should be noted that he seems to be in earnest throughout Act V.

In 5.2 Hamlet actively commits to do the deed of revenge that has been discussed since the Ghost of Old Hamlet's testimony in Act I. He does this in a very matter of fact way. He asks of Horatio (who will affirm what he says), "And is't not to be damned to let this/ Canker of our nature come in further evil?" (5.2.67-70) (By the way, Horatio doesn't leave Hamlet's side in this final act of the play.) Hamlet also holds himself accountable for his impulsive actions in a very even keeled way: "But I am very sorry, good Horatio,/ That to Laertes I forgot myself." (5.2.75-76) When the intermediary character of Osric comes to present the king's wager for Hamlet and Laertes to duel (in a sense), Hamlet and Horatio once again take on the persona of intellectually elite schoolmates making fun of an ignoramus, "Dost thou know this waterfly?" (5.2.83) Hamlet asks Horatio if he's seen Osric around the court, perhaps calling him a waterfly for his choice of plumed hat. Hamlet accepts the king's wager and says that he's been practicing even though all bets would be on Laertes winning a fight. His religious beliefs wax poetic in "There is special providence in the fall/ Of a sparrow." (5.2.220-221) From this point on until the play's ending Hamlet continues to make witty comments, pointed apologies, rational wishes, and statements of acceptance. I'd also like to point out that in this act Hamlet does not break the theater's fourth wall to talk to the audience. He is completely engaged in his own world in the play and is "performing" less.

From this full dress analysis, in five acts the character of Hamlet has gone from emotional states of melancholy to mania to suicidal to impulsive anger to nonsensical to even-keeled behavior. I know that my students have experienced many and even all of these emotions. I want them to see that volatility is human. Also, it is important to clarify the difference between profound clinical depression, even manic depression, and irreparable states of madness. This element of social-emotional education is vital to the success of the learning in this unit. Hamlet's changeability shows his reactions to the circumstances that are handed to him in life. He must return home from school where he has been a successful intellectual in order to mourn his

father's death at a young age. He is upset. He then finds out his mother has immediately fallen into the arms of his father's brother who seems like a weak man. He is enraged. He sees his father rise from the grave as a vengeful ghost. He is consumed with disbelief. He is forced by this ghost into a plot of revenge against his uncle. He is consumed by the injustice of it all. And from here on he must act against his nature--proving to his father that he can get the job done "like a real man" when his training is all scholarly. Not to mention he has already struggled psychologically from balancing the religious side of his brain with the intellectual. We see Hamlet change and struggle from act to act, but the changes appear rational, not mad. They are within character, as it were.

Analyzing the "character" of Gertrude is complex. I recently saw a production of Hamlet where Gertrude was a sexy drunk at the age of 65. It really worked for an interpretation of her being a lusty woman who coasts through the emotional moments of life. She also did appear to be quite frail, walking on her high heels, needing the assistance of her son to even be able to stand up in a couple of scenes. The actress wore a mask of expression with brows raised in surprise and wonder at all times. I found the performance to be beautiful but did not entirely agree with the interpretation of her character by the director.

Carolyn Heilbrun writes eloquently about Gertrude in the essay *Character of Hamlet's Mother* (1), "But Gertrude, if she is lustful, is also intelligent, penetrating, and gifted, with a remarkable talent for concise speech." (Heilbrun p. 206) As I now understand and find very useful to the execution of this unit, Shakespeare's choice of what his characters should say is not only deliberate but shows a map of the "character" of his characters. Heilbrun explains "She (Gertrude) is, except for her description of Ophelia's death, pithy in speech, with a talent for seeing the essence of every situation presented before her eyes." (Heilbrun p. 204) Though she may have a substance abuse problem, as do all Danes according to her son, the evidence in her lines does not show unstable surprise as part of her "character". (As a note, I've begun to put the term "character" in quotations when referring to either a person's nature or individual behaviors to tease out the discussion of "character" in the text of Shakespeare as well as a discussion of human behavior in general.)

An unfortunate element that comes up in the closet scene in the play (3.4), is the moment where the Ghost enters the room. "Alas, how is't with you,/That you do bend your eye on vacancy,/And with th' incorporal air do hold discourse?" (3.4.117-119) Up to that point Gertrude had been able to turn a new leaf in believing her son's accusations about her husband. Hamlet and Gertrude could have gone back to the type of closeness they had before this whole mess happened. When the Ghost enters, as Shakespeare writes it, Gertrude is not able to see the apparition. So she has no choice but to believe once again and with a new conviction that her son is mad. In this moment she is forced to be flawed in a way other than her lust, questioning her son's motives. It's not fair and complicates things, eventually leading to her death in "the drink".

I believe Gertrude to be a middle-aged woman who is still quite comfortable with her sexuality (which makes her son very uncomfortable). She is a loving mother who dotes on her only son as she should; worrying about him and wanting him near her. She wants to see her son happy, wishing that his love affair with Ophelia could have turned into something more substantial like marriage--not caring about class differences, only true sentiment. Gertrude has appropriate emotional responses, unlike many characters in this play, especially in response to Ophelia's death. She is not one-sided. She is feminine, sensible and kind.

Is Gertrude a stock character or archetype? Madonna or whore? I believe she is a dynamic character, although it may be said that she is static. She does symbolize a universal pattern of human nature. She is the mother with a flaw, just that one flaw, that she is passionate and in touch with her sexuality. As far as Jungian

archetypes go, we could think of an archetype triad of the mother, the madonna, and the whore. In her son's eyes she could do no wrong as he was growing up, as in the saintly madonna. This must be why he becomes so angered by his mother's openness in sexuality. She is susceptible to wooing by Claudius, as in the whore. She enjoys sexual attention and gives in to lust at times like most human beings. The mother should be a combination of these two, sitting at the top of the triad, connecting the intersecting lines. Being a mother after all is sexual in how one conceives but also in the birth. Birthing is a sexual act, aided by awareness of one's sexuality. I like to think that Gertrude embraces this fact rather than letting go of her sexuality in becoming mother to a son. The exploration of this mother to son relationship should take her sexuality into account. Gertrude loves her son and wants to please him and in return Hamlet loves his mother and wants to please her. Students' relationships with their mothers are central to their confidence and engagement in school. I don't think that this fact is discussed very often in schools with students themselves. I think we could benefit as educators by bringing the complexity of this relationship to light in the classroom.

Another character that wants to please Hamlet is Horatio of course. On the friendship scale Horatio definitely goes way up as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go way down. This is after Hamlet barely remembers Horatio's name in their first scene together. In 1.2, Horatio is asked why he is visiting and responds that it was for the funeral of Old Hamlet, but when Hamlet jokes grimly that it must actually have been for the wedding of his mother to his uncle, Horatio immediately responds with honesty and concern: "Indeed my lord, it followed hard upon." (1.2.179) There is an innate respect that comes from Horatio's lips, continuously. With him it is always "my honored lord" and "Do not, my lord [go with the ghost]". (1.4.63) He expresses worry that the ghost might "draw (Hamlet) into madness". He prays that heaven will protect Hamlet in his interaction with the apparition. It is when he calls upon heaven that the Ghost leaves. In 3.2 I assume that in the staging we're supposed to see Horatio at the play within a play the entire time, a witness to the king's reaction. Hamlet has requested that Horatio play this role and Horatio, again, responds with support and respect for the prince's ideas. He is a validator.

He is also there in the room, without Hamlet for Hamlet is in England, in 4.5 when Ophelia is showing her state of insane reverie. Horatio coaxes the queen to speak with her gently to calm her down. This is yet another act of subtle support. Horatio's responses are in juxtaposition to the bawdiness of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. For one thing, in their entrance, Hamlet asks about the intention of their visit as he did to Horatio. Their response is different: "Is it a free visitation?/ (Hamlet) What should we say, my lord?/ (Guildenstern)/ Why anything--but to th' purpose. (Hamlet)" (2.2.285) Yes, Guildenstern gives the appropriate courtly respect with "my lord", but he is admitting falsehoods and beating around the bush instead of being straight-forward, honest, and to the point.

I believe that Hamlet simply cannot deal with anything he deems false or inauthentic. There is an authenticity to Horatio. Yes, they joke around, but not exactly in the same manner as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for whom life in general seems to be a joke. While Hamlet is a modern man who believes the world is all relative in a sense, a view that would lend itself to the type of humor expressed by these two friends of his from school, he is also deeply religious. Horatio jokes around with Hamlet on an intellectual level, sometimes at the expense of those that might be intellectually inferior to them, or so they think. The difference is that Horatio also has an inveterate seriousness about him. He can be trusted. He has proved himself in moments with the ghost, calling upon heaven to protect Hamlet.

"Give me thy man that is not passion's slave,/ And I will wear him in my heart's core, ay,/ In my heart of heart, as I do thee. (3.2.55)" Hamlet REALLY admires the way that Horatio deals with adversity. With Rosencrantz and Guildenstern something had rung hollow. He admires Horatio's stability. Hamlet craves that stability. His

mother is passion's slave, as is all of Denmark, he believes, in their love of drink. His friends have been giving him the run around and talking to the king as confidants, rather than talking to Hamlet as true friends. One might even say that Horatio is really the only stability that Hamlet has in his entire life at this point, in the time of the play. For whatever reason, Horatio is able to deal with Hamlet's manic tendencies and not see him as crazy. He continues to validate and support. The line used as a topic sentence above is a profession of love, gratitude, and care to Horatio. Hamlet has to cut himself off before he goes on and on as a lover might. This is how we feel about our most trustworthy friends. We put them on a pedestal. We might depend on them to keep us sane in difficult circumstances. Students should question what real friendship looks and feels like. It is often these friends that become chosen family, especially in times of great loss.

The final character focus for students will be the Ghost of Old Hamlet. Many believe that this character was created to be performed by Shakespeare himself. There is record of him performing the role. The Ghost defines the genre of this text, makes the play a revenge tragedy as stated before. The Ghost also sets the tone of the play. This is a world that is magical, where heaven and hell can pop out of the earth. The Ghost is not argument for Hamlet's madness or lack thereof. He is clearly seen by other characters in the play, Barnardo and Marcellus but most notably Horatio, who is the most pragmatic and sensible character in the play. It is the Ghost that makes this play reminiscent of a Senecan tragedy of the Elizabethan era, says Sylvan Barnet, "characterized by sentences (sententious remarks), passionate utterances (especially about the pain of living, and also defiances of fate), deeds of horror, and vengeful ghosts (2)." At first Hamlet thinks the Ghost might be a devil but that theory seems to be eradicated by the Ghost's line, "Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive/Against thy mother ought (1.5.85)". This evidence suggests that the Ghost "is an honest ghost" and, even though he is giving his son an assignment of revenge, he is still protecting his family. This character is very real in the lives of many students. This apparition is the family member or loved one who died before their time and was really relevant to them, if only as a prominent memory. This person has been lost by most of my students and their families. In many cases the concept of revenge becomes very real in students' lives as well.

What of FAMILY? Family is relational, by blood but also by experience and connection. Blood related family is not chosen, but is related to our identity through genetic make up which is powerful and also necessary for one to feel they truly know themselves. But in life we have our chosen family as well, our friends who prove to be there through thick and thin. Chosen family is a place to let one's guard down entirely, to ask for favors, and provide comfort and honesty. In *Hamlet* it is through the loss of his father that the character of Hamlet redefines his blood familial relationship with his mother (and his uncle for that matter), swears to his dead father that he will avenge his death, and grows a chosen familial bond full of trust with (his new friend) Horatio who had just been an acquaintance at school in the recent past. These family relationships--the complications of them and the changes they go through--sustain the character of Hamlet in the time of the play. One might say that the interactions with intermediary characters, floating through one's life, such as Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Osric, The Clown, The Players create distractions and transitions in order for the text to be able to move forward. I believe that Hamlet's character is indeed changeable in relation to his family ties. Furthermore, we see his changes most poignantly not in his soliloquies but in his interactions with his family, assigned by blood or chosen. Isn't this a delicate comment on human behavior on Shakespeare's account? Dealing with familial loss is personal and requires the space of solitude, but isn't it in moments with the people that are dearest to us and most trustworthy that we are able to let our performance guards down?

Students process and articulate abstract ideas easily during focused conversation, but have more challenges when asked to write these ideas down. Below are Big Ideas that I want students to grasp from the text. There are also Essential Questions that are focused on feelings, behavior, and choices. We will keep coming back to

these ideas and questions. Students will provide answers in writing to these questions concerning different moments of the play after meaningful discussion. The Big Ideas that will be daily topics of discussion with my seventh grade students are as follows: In life we all have loss. Human beings deal with loss in a variety of ways. Family is complicated. The words of Shakespeare are challenging. The words of Shakespeare are playful. Shakespeare can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Character can be interpreted in a variety of ways in Shakespeare. Essential questions that will facilitate discussion about those ideas are: Who are you? What are Hamlet's REAL views about family and loss? Why does the Ghost seek revenge? How does Hamlet feel about avenging his father's death? What are Gertrude's feelings about her son? What are Shakespeare's words REALLY saying? What stories are being told in this play? What kinds of people are Hamlet, Gertrude, Horatio, and the Ghost of the late king (Hamlet's father)? What do the lines of the characters listed above show about their character?

Close-reading has become a popular text approach, especially with the coming of the Common Core State Standards which mandate the use of complex texts. This strategy allows students to come in contact with a text over and over and over again in order to achieve depth of understanding. When reading an article or journal, one might number the paragraphs, chunk the text, underline and circle information with a purpose, write what you believe the author is saying in the left margin, and/or write text interpretation in the right margin (ask questions, give a verb example for what characters are doing, illustrate). When reading a play, I'll be chunking the text by monologue or dialogue. The chunks of text we'll address will be quite short due to the complexity of Shakespeare's use of language.

A close-reading activity to begin the unit will be encountering the first five lines of the play together. "*Barnardo. Who's there?/Francisco. Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself. Barnardo. Long live the King!/Francisco. Barnardo?/Barnardo. He. (1.1.1)*" I plan to be explicit about the Essential Question that these lines address: Who are you? We'll read through the text three to four times. The first time I'll read it. The second read will be done by two students playing the characters. The third read will have a focus question: Why do you think Shakespeare is starting a (this) play with the (conceptual) question "Who are you?" Responses to this question can go in the margin of the text. I will then lecture on the nature of Denmark of the time, giving historical context from Horatio's soliloquy in the play (3): The King of Norway, Fortinbras, challenged the King of Denmark, Old Hamlet, to war. King Hamlet (viewed as quite valiant by his country) killed Old Fortinbras in battle. Upon previous agreement the conquered lands then were handed over to King Hamlet. Norway's dead King's son, Young Fortinbras, became incensed by what was stolen from him as he viewed it. He decided to wage war against Denmark once again to regain the land that once belonged to Norway. (1.1.79-106) It is these circumstances that set the scene at the beginning of the play. After giving this context, students will read for a final time silently and answer the focus question again. The idea of questions will be considered throughout the reading of the text. Why are there so many questions in this play?

Another strategy we'll use in the classroom is performance. I'd like to start the unit with improvisation. Through role-playing students will develop interest and empathy. Actor David Tennant speaks on performing the character of Hamlet, "This is a play made of historical sources and religious wars, existential questions, the meaning of life and death, and the idea that ghosts are real and speak. (I also) find that many actors who've played Hamlet share a common experience: deeply and profoundly personal, life changing." Performance supports dissection of a text but also the social-emotional learning that we want to accomplish for healthy culture and community in the classroom. Not only is performance important to introduce for our kinesthetic learners, but the act of performing brings body/mind/voice together. This act introduces educational methods that push learning into the hearts and minds of students for long term memory. Types of performance that I believe apply to our learning of *Hamlet* are improvisation based on themes and topics from

the text, recitation and memorization of chunked text for performance mastery, and mask-work (gestural and expressive).

One activity we'll participate in is an improv game called Dinner Party with Emotions. The purpose of improv in general is to strive for students to be more in touch with their imagination. Improv also causes us to think on our feet. This aids in decision-making. The intent behind this game in particular is to see how emotions may affect a person's ability to interact in the world by making choices. The game is simple. There is a bank full of emotions (in this case emotions that are experienced in the play by our focus characters) that each student will draw from. The hostess/host will be neutral like Horatio. She/he will welcome guests to the party one at a time and give them a place at the dinner table. Each guest has to portray their emotion with a gesture, a facial expression, and a vocal tone. Once the host/hostess guesses the emotion, they may begin to call the person by the name of the character from the play that is most applicable. Variations on this activity are: using only gestures, using only sound, using masks to show emotion (look into creating masks as an interdisciplinary activity with visual art teachers), choosing a table topic from current events to provide discussion points, and playing--after reading the play--as the actual characters.

A culminating event for this unit will also be informed by performance. This type of performance is called open-ended play or scene-work. Students will create long-form improvisational scenes based on scenarios related to family and loss. The scene freezes when the main character in the scene comes to a moment where they need to make a choice in their emotional state. The choice is posed to an audience. The scene continues based on the choice the audience makes. A discussion follows on the complexity of choices made and how we feel about the outcome. The purpose of this activity is for students, staff, and families all to be able to connect the text of Shakespeare to the topics of family and loss in their own lives in a communal setting. Another version of this activity would be using the plot of the play to create an original play. This would include some playwrighting techniques. I would still want to include elements of improvisation in the work. I imagine students writing their own contemporary Hamlet stories and then enacting the stories so that they weave into each other. Rather than scenes with choices to be made, we could create a series of alternate endings. Perhaps these open-ended scenes/plays would include masks so that different students could play multiple roles. I'd also like for students' ideas to reach a greater audience with documentation of the work we do. Technology will be a tool that is useful for this learning objective.

The use of one to one technology in the classroom will allow students to interact with the text as well as have the potential to interact with other students and educators around the world. We can use this strategy in a variety of ways. Yes, interactive note-taking may be helpful for text comprehension. I plan on using the application called Evernote for this strategy. Also, social media makes it possible for us to share ideas with the greater community in an organized way. Activities involving technology are great for engagement, but more importantly this is an opportunity for students to shine. It's a generational thing. When we use tech in the classroom, I'm always learning something new. Technology will be used to share our work but also to converse with the world at large about the important questions and text we are dealing with and learning from.

At my school every Tuesday we participate in a communal activity called Twitter Tuesday. This year I'll have students write responses to the prompt for NTA, but I'll also create a writing prompt every Tuesday that relates to themes in the text we're working on. During this unit the prompts will be our Essential Questions. Students will post and maintain interesting responses weekly. Other technological activities we will use are creative websites that allow us to be playful and inventive while wrestling with tough questions and tough text. One creative application we'll use is Curriculet. Curriculet has interactive text. The site has published a

number of units based on Shakespeare's plays. These units provide context for the text with Youtube videos, images, and comprehensive questioning. Another application we can use is Steam. Steam has a number of interactive games that are created by educators. One of these games is called "To Be or Not To Be" and is based on choices characters make or should have made in *Hamlet*. This game has an accompanying graphic text for use with students.

Alternate texts, such as graphic novels and adventure-based novels, will be used in our classroom to develop leveled understanding of the text. In actuality, all of the strategies I've listed above will be used throughout the teaching of the play to boost comprehension and engagement with the text. The main alternate text will be the Choose Your Own Adventure Novel *To Be Or Not To Be* by Ryan North. North is a teacher who created this text and the accompanying video game for his students via the Kickstarter website. The text uses contemporary language to more readily understand the emotional situations of the characters of Hamlet and Ophelia. I truly believe in using the text with fidelity, even with seventh graders. We will be reading from the actual play, and the use of this alternate text as well as film will be supplemental.

Film will be used during this unit to compare and interpret text and media thematically and structurally. As I stated above, I believe that my seventh graders can and will tackle Shakespeare's complex text. I'm also not afraid to be direct and detailed in the explanation of the plot so that they feel the text is accessible. The use of film analysis will provide a level of comprehension that inspires comparative writing. Students will focus on one of the characters that have been interpreted in my content paragraphs. This character will be their focus for the watching of the full film version of Branagh's *Hamlet*. Their writing will be on comparing the character in the text (or rather their interpretation of that character) with the character as interpreted by the director of the film. Along with Branagh's version, we'll watch and analyze monologues and dialogues involving Laurence Olivier and Ethan Hawke for contrast in film interpretation of text through character. Seventh grade is the only grade that requires analysis of film and media. This provides a convenient opportunity for explanatory writing that will connect students' articulation of ideas with analysis of text to film.

The interpretation of character in Shakespeare leads to deep thought about humanity. I am coaxed into thinking about people's roles in the world and in their own lives. This type of consideration will help the minds of growing adolescent students. Throughout this unit I have tried to connect the text to the meaningfulness of life. The choice of the focus topics of loss and family are my attempt at an easy-in. The characters chosen for interpretation are based on these focus topics. The teaching strategies are a map with activity examples to aid in the connection of text to topic and meaning. They give students the opportunity to grapple with a range of emotions that relate to family and loss in *Hamlet* through performance. Then students experience a deep dive into complex text that reflects the emotions they've enacted and recalled. Film comparisons allow for another layer in the interpretation of character, while the connections of text to topics are shared among themselves but also with many more readers of *Hamlet* through technological channels. These connections are converted to moments of situational and emotional choice for human beings. In addressing the text, this is accomplished with alternate versions of the play. In culmination, this will then be translated to REAL life by interacting with an audience. So concludes an arch of learning that encompasses the academic and the social-emotional lives of our students. My hope is that this unit provides an interpretation of *Hamlet* that inspires confidence in readers.

List of Standards Addressed

The study of Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* is a challenge for middle school minds. The text is not only complex in structure but also in content. CC.7.R.L.10 Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity: By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 6–8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

Our focus of study with Paul Fry has been character, both type and individual in Shakespeare. When we interpret character, we must provide the evidence for our claims. This critical thought is vital to students' learning of the text. CC.7.R.L.1 Key Ideas and Details: Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

In the study of this text for students we will be chunking text, that is, breaking the play up into short sections of soliloquy or short scene. We will continually ask why--why is this text placed at this point of the play? How does it add to the theme or topics of family and loss (our focus)? CC.7.R.L.5 Craft and Structure: Analyze how a drama's or poem's form or structure (e.g., soliloquy, sonnet) contributes to its meaning.

It will be an ongoing exciting challenge to break down the meaning of Shakespeare's text and to convince middle school students that the text matters. CC.7.R.L.4 Craft and Structure: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama.

Text accessibility depends on connection. To aid in this connection we'll use one or two film versions of the play, a graphic novel, and a video game that accompanies the choose your own adventure style graphic novel. CC.7.R.L.7 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Compare and contrast a written story, drama, or poem with its audio, filmed, staged, or multimedia version, analyzing the effects of techniques unique to each medium (e.g., lighting, sound, color, or camera focus and angles in a film).

Before writing and performing comes mulling through ideas with meaningful discussions. The Essential Questions and Big Ideas this unit centers on provide a platform for these discussion in class. SL.7.1. Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly. a. Come to discussions prepared, having read or researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence on the topic, text, or issue to probe and reflect on ideas under discussion. e. Seek to understand other perspectives and cultures and communicate effectively with audiences or individuals from varied backgrounds.

While students will be writing continuously for understanding in an explanatory way, they will mainly be defending their interpretation of character with evidence from the text. W.7.1. Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence. a. Introduce claim(s), acknowledge alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically. b. Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant evidence, using accurate, credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text. c. Use words, phrases, and clauses to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among claim(s), reasons, and evidence. d. Establish and maintain a formal style. e. Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.

Notes

1. Carolyn Heilbrun's extremely eloquent essay on Gertrude from 1957 shed a great deal of light on my feelings about the Queen Mother of Hamlet. Most interpretations of Gertrude that I'd seen in the past both in performance and literary critique posed her as weak and stupid. This essay gave pause to these interpretations based purely on text evidence. This is something I can teach.
2. Sylvan Barnet's critical essay that introduces the play talks about the characterization of the play as a revenge tragedy based on the formula of Senecan tragedies. I thought this was important to note when analyzing the character of the Ghost of Old Hamlet. The ghost is of another time and could almost be considered a character who is out of place. I believe that Shakespeare did this on purpose.
3. Horatio's speech in Act One Scene One sets up the historical context of the play. I have to say that I began to research the history that inspired Shakespeare in the writing of the play, but I stopped short when re-reading these lines (1.1.76-106). The opportunity to use a character's speech to set the historical scene, rather than non-literary sources, provides a better learning opportunity for students' critical thinking in our classroom.

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