



HOUSTON
SHAKESPEARE
FESTIVAL

ONE ROLE, TWO ACTORS: *Hamlet*, Act I, Sc. 2

Reacting to a Heartbreaking Decision

Curriculum Authors: Laura B. Turchi, Abbey Bachmann, and Cori Stevenson

Approximate timeline: 50 minutes – see sequence

TEKS (9th Grade) :

(4) Comprehension skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing using multiple texts. The student uses metacognitive skills to comprehend text with increasing depth and complexity. The student is expected to: (A) establish purpose for reading assigned and self-selected texts; (B) generate questions about text before, during, and after reading to deepen understanding and gain information; (C) make, correct, or confirm predictions using text features, characteristics of genre, and structures; (D) create mental images to deepen understanding; (E) make connections to personal experiences, ideas in other texts, and the larger community; (F) make inferences and use evidence to support understanding; (G) evaluate information read to determine what is most important; (H) synthesize information to create new understanding; and (I) monitor comprehension and make adjustments when understanding breaks down.

(5) Response skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing using multiple texts. The student responds to an increasingly challenging variety of sources that are read, heard, or viewed. The student is expected to: (A) describe the personal and emotional connections to a variety of sources, including self-selected texts; (B) write a response with accurate and relevant text evidence and commentary to compare texts within and across genres; (C) use text evidence to support an appropriate response; (D) paraphrase and summarize texts in ways that maintain meaning and logical order; (E) interact with sources in meaningful ways such as notetaking, annotating, freewriting, or illustrating; (F) respond using acquired content and academic vocabulary as appropriate; (G) discuss and write about the explicit or implicit meanings of text; (H) respond orally or in writing with appropriate register, vocabulary, tone, and voice; (I) reflect on and adjust responses as new evidence is presented; and (J) defend or challenge authors' claims using relevant text evidence.

(6) Multiple genres: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts--literary elements. The student recognizes and analyzes literary elements within and across increasingly complex traditional, contemporary, classical, and diverse literary texts. The student is expected to: (A) analyze how themes are developed through characterization and plot in a variety of literary texts; (B) analyze how authors develop complex yet believable characters in works of fiction through a range of literary devices, including character foils. (C) analyze non-linear plot development such as flashbacks, foreshadowing, subplots, and parallel plot structures and compare it to linear plot development; and (D) analyze how the setting influences the theme.

(7) Multiple genres: listening, speaking, reading, and writing using multiple texts--genres. The student recognizes and analyzes genre-specific characteristics, structures, and purposes within and across increasingly complex traditional, contemporary, classical, and diverse texts. The student is expected to: (A) demonstrate knowledge of American, British, and world literature across literary periods; (B) analyze the effects of metrics; rhyme schemes such as end, internal, slant, and eye; and other conventions in poetry; (C) identify and explain the function of archetypes and motifs; (D) analyze characteristics and structural elements of informational texts such as: (i) clear thesis, relevant supporting evidence, pertinent examples, and conclusion; and (ii) the relationship between organizational design and thesis; and (E) analyze characteristics and structural elements of argumentative texts such as: (i) clear arguable claim, appeals, and convincing conclusion; (ii) counter arguments, types of evidence, concessions, and call to action; and (iii) identifiable audience or reader

(8) Author's craft: listening, speaking, reading, and writing using multiple texts. The student uses critical inquiry to analyze the authors' choices and how they influence and communicate meaning within a variety of texts. The student analyzes and applies author's craft purposefully in order to develop his or her own products and performances. The student is expected to: (A) identify and analyze the use of allusions and motif; (B) identify and analyze how the author's diction and syntax contribute to the mood, voice, and tone of a text; and (C) identify and analyze the use of rhetorical devices, including appeals, understatement, overstatement, parallelism, and shifts.

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Overview (notes for the teacher)

What is this scene about?

This scene occurs just after the beginning of the play, following the strange encounter with the Ghost that the guards have told Horatio about (and that he comes to see for himself). In Act 1 Scene 2, we meet the King of Denmark, Claudius, who has just replaced his brother on the throne as well as married the widowed Queen Gertrude. Hamlet is with them, and many other members of the King's Council. The coronation has just finished, and the King is unhappy that Hamlet is moping around about the whole thing. Both he and Queen Gertrude want Hamlet to cheer up and stay with them, rather than going back to his college studies at Wittenberg. After the crowd moves on, Hamlet gives the first of many soliloquys, speaking his mind to himself and to the audience. Hamlet is desperately unhappy: he says he would commit suicide if it weren't against God's law. He is tired of life at least in part because of his mother, who seems to have forgotten all about his father (King Hamlet) with her remarriage. In the course of the speech, he criticizes her for her decision to marry with such speed: he says it breaks his heart.

If you're teaching the whole play

Students often overlook the other reason Hamlet might be so grumpy: shouldn't he be King? Students may want to consider how the aria in this video could be read as a reaction to thwarted ambition, and wonder: why is Hamlet's anger largely focused on his mother? Has she been frail in not supporting him as the next ruler? Does he think his mother is a strong or powerful queen?

After a discussion of Hamlet and Claudius and Gertrude's feelings about each other, students can create an illustration of how they would stage the opening of Act 1 Scene 2 (text provided below) and the way the three main characters might act toward each other if their feelings were on display. This can be contrasted to how the actors would play the roles if each character is hiding his or her true feelings.

This video sequence can allow the class to open up questions about the role of gender in the play roles and in casting. It would be easy to contrast this video to the other video for Hamlet played by male actors: the performance of Act 3 Scene 4, where Hamlet asks his mother to consider the two pictures – of his father, and his uncle, now her husband.

If you're teaching just this excerpt

Using just this excerpt as an example of Shakespeare's plays, the class could focus on Hamlet's rage against his mother, and how that leads to his declaration that "Frailty, thy name is Woman." Students can think about their expectations about relationships between mothers and sons (and fathers and daughters, etc.) and how these expectations influence how they experience the performances in this video.

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Key Vocabulary:

Oh, that this too too solid* flesh would melt,	
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!	Resolve=dissolve
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed.	Everlasting = God
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! Oh God! God!	Canon=religious law
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable	
Seem to me all the uses of this world!	All the uses = everything
Fie on't! Oh fie fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden	Fie on't = For shame
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature	
Possess it merely. That it should come to this!	Merely=entirely
But two months dead – nay, not so much, not two –	But=only
So excellent a king, that was to this	
Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother	Hyperion = Sun god; satyr = mythological frat boy
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven	beteem = allow or permit
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth!	
Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him	
As if increase of appetite had grown	
By what it fed on. And yet within a month –	
let me not think on't; frailty, thy name is woman! –	
A little month, or ere those shoes were old	ere = before
With which she followed my poor father's body	
Like Niobe, all tears, why she, even she –	Niobe as stone statue still cried for her children
Oh, God! a beast that wants discourse of reason	wants discourse = lacks the capacity
Would have mourned 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	unrighteous=insincere
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,	flushing=reddening galled=irritated
She married. Oh, most wicked speed, to post	post=rush
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!	Dexterity=nimbleness
It is not, nor it cannot come to good.	
But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue.	

*Early printings of Hamlet are inconsistent on this word: some editions use “sullied” and others “solid” (and scholars argue in support of each). This is a good opportunity for students to understand about the folios, quartos, and other versions of Shakespeare plays printed more-or-less contemporaneously to his life. Seeing the contradictions and the editing done to make up for lost or unclear texts can help Shakespeare seem less monolithic or authoritative to students, and uncover the role of an editor.

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Additional information and ideas for teachers

This is a particularly good video to show with the purpose of highlighting the differences in performance between the two settings – the huge stage at Miller in contrast to the intimate NYC stage – that the actors describe. Students can notice the differences between the two performances in this video, even though in the video the two actors are not on the stage each is describing.

If you haven't read *Hamnet* by Maggie O'Farrell ... it's a great book about mothers and sons for sure.

Materials needed for this lesson

Scripts

Access to video

LESSON SEQUENCE

This lesson plan is about an intense scene in an intense play. There is very little rational or even civil debate in *Hamlet*, and Hamlet says a lot of evil things about his mother, and life and the human race in general. If the class needs to start with something more light, consider the "Smash Boom Best" podcast at <https://www.smashboom.org/> (available on Apple Podcasts and Spotify). This podcast allows students to have a different (healthier) perspective on debate, including persuasion and civil argument. Here's how the producers describe it: "Smash Boom Best is a debate show for kids and families from the makers of the award-winning podcast, Brains On! Every episode takes two cool things, smashes them together and lets you decide which is best. Our debaters use facts and passion to make their case -- teaching listeners how to defend their own opinions along the way." One recommendation: February 4, 2021's Sugar vs. Salt (36:21 audio). Back to *Hamlet*.

1. Students can begin by writing and reflecting on their ideas about the differences between genders when people are under psychological pressure. How do men behave when they are frustrated and angry? How do women behave? In this video, we meet two women, Laura Frye and Shannon Hill, who have both played the role of Hamlet on stage. What do students already know about Hamlet's character? Even before reading the scene or watching the aria performed, students should reflect on the differences they expect between a male and female performance of Hamlet. What do the students expect the female actors will need to do (act or speak) in order to be believable as Hamlet?

As an introduction to these actors, play the opening discussion of the settings where each performed. (00:10-3:08).

After viewing the video segments that follow, students can also discuss the ways the actors use the pronouns "he" and "him" (3rd person masculine) as well as "me" and "my" to describe their character.

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Lesson Sequence (continued)

2. In Hamlet's case, he is deeply disappointed and frustrated with his mother (Queen Gertrude) for choosing to marry his uncle (his father's brother). Although in this scene he is not (yet) talking to her about her choice, he is full of anger and dismay as he considers the differences between the father he loved and admired and the uncle whom Hamlet thinks is much less of a person. Playing the video from 3:08-9:21 Can be a good lead off to this discussion.
3. After watching the video from 9:22-12:55, in pairs or small groups, students can read through the text of the aria and 1) note the comparisons made between King Hamlet and (now) King Claudius and 2) look for examples of Hamlet blaming or criticizing his mother. Before they watch and listen to the performances, students should predict (on the basis of this scene/aria) how they expect Hamlet to behave towards his mother and her new husband the next time he sees them.
4. The Arias: 13:01 Shannon Hill uses a sweater as the cloak she described wearing in the performance – angrily, then defiantly. Students should note the big gestures she makes, appropriate to the stage. This is also true when she, as Hamlet, addresses God, and then maybe the audience, as she expresses deep anger and disgust at Gertrude. Note how she spits out the word incestuous.
5. 15:57 Laura Frye wears a black skull cap, evoking the performance she made in the NYC production. Students can see that her gestures and demeanor are much more introspective, and more clearly playing to a small audience (for instance by directly addressing the camera).
6. The "Mutual Admiration Society" (see notes below) offers a good model of peer-to-peer critique and praise. Students might watch the aria performances and make their own notes of what they would say to the actors before they watch the interaction of the two in the video.
7. As a closing writing assignment or discussion, students should imagine themselves casting an actor for the role of Hamlet. What are the qualities or characteristics that an actor must play convincingly in order to make this character understandable? Does gender matter?

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The Aria - Act 1, Scene 2

The script of the aria with some of the surrounding scene from the Folger Digital Collection

HAMLET

I shall in all my best obey you, madam.

KING

Why, 'tis a loving and a fair reply. 125

Be as ourself in Denmark.—Madam, come.

This gentle and unforced accord of Hamlet

Sits smiling to my heart, in grace whereof

No jocund health that Denmark drinks today

But the great cannon to the clouds shall tell, 130

And the King's rouse the heaven shall bruit again,

Respeaking earthly thunder. Come away.

Flourish. All but Hamlet exit.

HAMLET

O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt,

Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,

Or that the Everlasting had not fixed 135

His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God, God,

How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable

Seem to me all the uses of this world!

Fie on 't, ah fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden

That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature 140

Possess it merely. That it should come to this:

But two months dead—nay, not so much, not two.

So excellent a king, that was to this

Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother

That he might not beteem the winds of heaven 145

Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and Earth,

Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him

As if increase of appetite had grown

By what it fed on. And yet, within a month

(Let me not think on 't; frailty, thy name is woman!), 150

A little month, or ere those shoes were old

With which she followed my poor father's body,

Like Niobe, all tears—why she, even she

(O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason

Would have mourned longer!), married with my 155

uncle,

My father's brother, but no more like my father

Than I to Hercules. Within a month,

Ere yet the

Had left the

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She married.

With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!

It is not, nor it cannot come to good

salt of most unrighteous tears
flushing in her gallèd eyes,

160

O, most wicked speed, to post



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The Aria - Act 1, Scene 2 (continued)

The script of the aria with some of the surrounding scene from the Folger Digital Collection

HAMLET

Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her gallèd eyes, 160
She married. O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not, nor it cannot come to good.
But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.

Enter Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo.

HORATIO Hail to your Lordship. 165

HAMLET I am glad to see you well.

Horatio—or I do forget myself!

HORATIO

The same, my lord, and your poor servant ever.

HAMLET

Sir, my good friend. I'll change that name with you.

And what make you from Wittenberg, Horatio?— 170

*** myShakespeare [<https://myshakespeare.com/Hamlet>] provides a great modern translation to this aria:**

Oh, if only I could just melt away and disappear like the morning dew. Or if God had not made suicide a sin! Oh God! Oh God! How boring, stupid and meaningless everything that we do in this world seems to me. Damn it all. The world is like an unweeded garden that has gone to seed. Things rotten and gross have taken over completely. That it should come to this!

He's only been dead two months – no, not even that long. He was such a great king, like a Greek god compared to Claudius – that dirty goat. And so loving to my mother, he wouldn't even let the winds from heaven blow in her face too hard. Heaven and earth! Must I remember? How she clung to him – it seemed that the more her desire was fulfilled, the stronger it grew.

And yet, within one month (I can't stand it – women are so morally weak!), within a month, even before she had broken in the shoes that she wore to the funeral – that funeral where she cried the whole time – why, she (Oh, God, even a dumb animal would have mourned longer) why, she married my uncle, my father's brother, who's no more like my father than I'm like Hercules.

Within a month, while her eyes were still red from the shameful tears she had shed for my father, she married! Oh, with such horrible speed she jumped into that incestuous bed! It's awful and it won't turn out well. It's going to break my heart, but I can't tell anybody.

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Video Timeline:

0:10 TITLE The venues

Laura Frye performed as Hamlet at the Titan Theater Company in Flushing Meadow Park NYC – the Queen’s Theater. The stage is a proscenium, a thrust with lots of flexibility for staging.

For this production it was set up like a baseball diamond – audience between 1st and 2nd, and 2nd and 3rd bases. This made for an intimate production with 80-85 people in the audience. Actors were about five feet away from people at all times and could “hear, see, and smell the audience.”

Shannon Hill performed as Hamlet for the Houston Shakespeare Festival on the Miller Outdoor Theater stage in 2018. It is a gigantic outdoor theater with the hill and the people picnicking behind the audience.

From six to ten thousand people would see the performance. She compares the space she uses to film this video (her 1 bedroom apt) to the stage – the 20 feet she might have to “cover” if moving toward a character on the Miller stage.

3:08 TITLE The Setting The Concept

This section of the video intercuts between the two actors – below is what they each say.

Laura Frye: The NYC stage used technical projection software – there were flat screen TVs on the stage, a whole wall of TVs, and the setting projected (and changed) on that. During the praying scene – there was a cathedral backdrop (projection). When the action happened outdoors – it showed snow falling. It also had difference scenes to indicate something about what was going on in Hamlet’s mind

When she/Hamlet talked to the ghost – Hamlet’s father, it was through these screens. The actor recorded the part in Milwaukee and it was projected into the screens, so that it showed his whole body across all the screens. As a result, when she as Hamlet talked to the Ghost/father – she was facing upstage.

He (father/ghost) would also show up at other points in the production “and be a part of it.”

Rather than having the stage manager control the ghost/actor, the production timed it, so that playing Hamlet had to be done with careful “muscle memory” for pacing, so that the recording didn’t “overstep my lines” (6:00)

As a result it “felt like I was in a musical” (6:20)

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Video Timeline: (continued)

Shannon Hill: The Miller Outdoor Theater/HSF production was loosely based in the 1960s in terms of music. The set itself was dark and sleek, with two giant staircases and for the grave, an open spot in the floor. There were lots of simple, powerful set statements made little furniture.

This set also had to convert for Comedy of Errors (every other night) so that the set design had to work for both productions.

6:25 Title: The Aria: What Launches it, What inspires Hamlet to say this?

Laura Frye, NYC theater. This is the first big aria. Hamlet is expressing his dislike and disgust for his uncle, who is not the man that his father was.

7:13 The whole cast was on stage, and there is a build-up in tone. And then there's a freeze, and the focus goes to Hamlet (for this speech).

7:55 "This is the "ah ha" moment that shows how much animosity and anger and hurt and betrayal that Hamlet feels towards his mother. And how this whole aria speaks to the disgust and distrust that he now has kind of eating away at him, living inside of him, towards his mother." [NOTE PRONOUNS of "he"]

8:57 There's so much to play with in holding on and not releasing that kind of disgust towards this one particular person. This [disgust] is the huge "jumping off point" for me – for the entire rest of the play.

Shannon Hill, Miller Outdoor Theater:

6:47 We had these cloaks, that we wore for Claudius's coronation ceremony

7:03 And when I first came on stage, I was wearing it like this (over her shoulder) "no way am I going to support his coronation" but throughout the scene, he (Claudius) ends up putting it on me

7:35 There was a canon sound, and a trumpet, and everyone else on stage froze. [So the speech] is a look into "my inner thoughts."

8:30

"And for me, this cloak felt like my skin was burning, from the inside out, and I could not believe I had let myself go through this – through his coronation without saying anything, without standing up for my father. And so this cloak felt like a giant betrayal [look at her reaction to this – it's just a sweater, but it's palpable!] for my dad, and I was burning through my skin.

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Video Timeline: (continued)

9:22 TITLE The Big news, the Big discovery.

Shannon Hill: This speech impacts the whole rest of the play, the bedroom scene...

10:30 All of this hatred I keep bottled up until it's revealed that Claudius did kill my father and I knew that I was right, and then it explodes!

10:55 – [If you're familiar with Hamlet] When Hamlet bursts in on his mother and he ends up stabbing Polonius. I take out all that rage, that I have been building up, and all that fear and anxiety

... So much so that I end up killing an innocent man.

Laura Frye: We mapped out the play, looking at where in this play the disgust, etc. that Hamlet feels keeps rearing its ugly head.

What she found in this aria: [insight into] "What does this speech mean [reveal] about "every time that she [his mother] is in the room with him?" What does that do to every person that is "friends with her"? What does that do to his relationship with Ophelia? What does that do to his whole relationship to women in general? And what he thinks of men?

10:36 It was interesting to play with this, because he (Hamlet) does everything right (with his promise to his father – as Ghost) except for one thing, which is that he isn't able to let it go, when it comes to his mother. His father asked him specifically to leave her out of this, and Hamlet isn't able to do this – all the way to the very end of this play, when he curses her and tells her to follow his uncle to Hell.

We are set up to watch this young man go on this journey, of his inability to release his grief, or give him enough time to do this ... his mother pushes that [being done with his grieving] on him again and again –

What a terrifying journey it must be to harbor that much hate towards one person that at one time you loved, very very much.

12:56 The aria

13:01 Shannon Hill

15:57 Laura Frye

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Video Timeline: (continued)

19:09 Mutual Admiration Society

Shannon Hill loved watching Laura Frye’s performance because it gave her such a sense of the difference between the two theater spaces they performed in. The soliloquy was like “whispering to a friend” in the more intimate space. Similarly, the line “Frailty thy name is woman” made it clear that this was a realization for Laura’s Hamlet that “all women are terrible,” which really informs the rest of the play – and Hamlet’s treatment of Ophelia and of Gertrude.

Shannon Hill also loved Laura Frye’s emphasis of the alliteration, such as in the lines, “to post with such dexterity...”

Laura Frye described preparing for the role by watching a lot of archival footage – and mostly men – in the role of Hamlet, although she appreciated that many famous women have taken it on too. She complimented Shannon Hill on the way she portrayed the “urgency to strip yourself of the formality of the moment – Knew immediately what it was being conveying (pulling off the white coat) – the need to show she was disgusted by the situation, wanted to wash it away.” She really liked how Shannon Hill played the aria as a kind of “argument with God,” which fits the world of the play – with spiritual beliefs, and also belief in the supernatural. And acknowledging the rules (like against suicide). Laura Frye loved the choice Shannon Hill made at the end of the aria, when Hamlet has to go back to the formality of the moment [and puts the sweater/cloak back on]. This is one of many things she “wants to steal if she gets a chance to play Hamlet again” “Take a little bit of this, take a little bit of that, because it was so compelling and strong” [note to students – what does that mean “to take a little bit” of a performance?]

23:23 Still from the production - Shannon Hill on stage with sword

23:27 Production still – Laura Frye with the iconic skull of Yorick 2015-2016 production of Hamlet at American Shakespeare Center

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