

## **The Language of *Hamlet***

*Jerell W. Bullis, Jr.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

I teach British literature to eleventh grade students in a gifted and talented program, and three of Shakespeare's plays occupy a central position in the course. The students read the tragedies *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* and, for contrast, either the history *Henry IV* or the romance *The Tempest*. I present three related units of varying time and complexity, but the unit I present here is for *Hamlet* only since it may be the Shakespeare play most relevant to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This unit is designed to enable the teacher to utilize two distinct approaches to teaching the play, thematic and poetic/linguistic. The first focuses on what characters say and do, the second on how Shakespeare uses other linguistic tools (meter, prose, rhyme) as stage directions for the actor and, coincidentally, critic. These approaches receive equal emphasis. The thematic view is supported by scholarly readings ideal for the needs of college-bound students. Assignments include critical reading, research, and essentially academic writing. The second approach to the play has two goals: to study the play as poetry and to emphasize *performance* of the language as one of the most important tools for understanding characters.

The progress of the unit entails reading and discussion of the play, analysis of the language and characters, formal or informal performances of certain scenes, viewing of various film productions of certain scenes, reading critical secondary works, and, of course, projects and writing *assignments*.

### **THAT OLD BLACK MAGIC: THE TRAGIC FLAW**

Contrasting *Hamlet* with *Macbeth* clarifies one major reason why Prince Hamlet's tragedy raises so many questions. *Macbeth*'s "tragic flaw" is clearly excessive ambition. He says that he is ambitious more than once, and Lady Macbeth adds ample support to that interpretation of *Macbeth*'s character. Her domination of her husband in the play exploits that flaw. We English teachers all know that a tragic hero must fall from the effects of a major character flaw (plus outside forces), and Shakespeare knows well how to play this game. But in *Hamlet* he makes his protagonist more intriguing by making it more difficult for the audience to decide what Hamlet's flaw might be. Hamlet introduces the idea in Act 1, Scene 4, when he speaks of the "vicious mole of nature," "the stamp of one defect" that can bring a person "otherwise as pure as grace" to "his own scandal" (24-38). The ghost of the dead King Hamlet appears immediately and informs Prince Hamlet that his father was murdered by the king's brother, Claudius, now king and married to the queen, Hamlet's mother. Of course Hamlet's resentment of the marriage of Claudius to Gertrude is one of the first things we learn about the prince, but

the major thrust of the play focuses more on why Hamlet “fails” to exact the revenge demanded by the ghost. Hamlet asks this question multiple times, giving possible reasons that range from “bestial oblivion” to over-intellectualizing, from cowardice to lack of honor (“O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!”). This element of the play is emphasized by the actions of other characters. Hamlet’s strategy for finding the truth (his pretended madness) causes other characters simultaneously to delve in their own analyses—attempts to explain Hamlet’s behavior. Ophelia, Polonius, Claudius, and Gertrude each offer interpretations that range from love (“mad for thy love?”) to grief for his father’s death and resentment of his uncle’s and mother’s “o’erhasty marriage.”

Part of my approach to the play is certainly traditional. Its primary focus is to attempt to explain Hamlet’s tragic flaw. I find it beneficial to introduce my students to a variety of critical interpretations with the following handout, which includes several inserts in a lighter tone to get them to think about the handout on more than one level:

Is Shakespeare giving us a philosophical or a psychological argument in *Hamlet* and its tragic hero? Does Hamlet fail to act in time because the world is arguably beyond our effective comprehension? because he has a particular psychological problem, such as an Oedipus Complex? or because his character is too weak for the task--he is a coward, a ditherer, or a dullard and dolt? [Editor's note: The observant in the crowd will notice that this lesson contains either two or three sentences at this point. The first starts with the word "is," the second with the word "does." Is the next sentence, which begins with the word "editor" in the possessive form, part of "the lesson" or is it the beginning of a second lesson--perhaps something about sentences and paragraphs, or punctuation, or positioning editor's notes, or how to end a sentence inside brackets!] Is Hamlet a strong character or a weak one? How does the Laurence Olivier production present him and explain his delays? How does the Mel Gibson Hamlet play? How do you explain them? [Editor's note: Why is the above paragraph written in present tense?] [Editor's note: Should any or all of these editor's notes appear as footnotes rather than insertions?] [Editor's note: Does the author of the note appear to believe his audience is capable of learning more than one thing in one day?] [Editor's note: How many lessons are here? How many sentences? How many editors?!]

**HAMLET'S TRAGIC FLAW:** Is Hamlet's distress understandable? Why does he fail to act until too late? Some of the most important interpretations of Hamlet's tragic flaw are:

Goethe: The great German poet argued that Hamlet is not brave enough. He lacks the "right stuff." The dramatic situation is like an acorn (the problem) planted in a cracked vase (Hamlet). As the problem grows, Hamlet becomes less sound.

A.C. Bradley: This famous Shakespeare scholar said that Hamlet suffers from melancholia or is merely mentally deranged.

Ernest Jones: The Freudian interpretation--Oedipus complex. He still has a childish sexual fixation on Gertrude. Thus, his attitude toward Claudius is ambivalent; he is grateful to Claudius for removing his "rival" for his mother's affections (King Hamlet) but must also resent him as his new father-figure.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Hamlet's delay is caused by "the effect of a superfluous activity of thought." He thinks too much because he is too elevated for this world, has too fine a character.

A more general interpretation is that Hamlet does not have a flaw. He is merely waiting for the ghost to be proven honest or not. In this he may be seen as a twentieth century existentialist hero. He is faced with a problem whose answer may lie beyond the limits of human reason--or in fact may not have an answer. It is this limitation, and the uncertainty it produces, that makes Hamlet "unstable."

Helen Gardner: *Hamlet* is a true revenge play: In a typical revenge play the protagonist must kill the slayer of his relative or friend in the most terrible way possible.

- a. The hero faces a predicament not of his own making.
- b. The villain provides the means for the vengeance (Claudius suggests the duel).
- c. The avenger conceives a plot and puts it into action.
- d. Usually the hero descends to the moral level of the man being punished (a mild irony) with a terrible revenge scheme (Hamlet may not do this).
- e. The denouement of *Hamlet* shows a "profound" irony: Claudius plans Hamlet's death, but both he and his queen die. The tragedy here does not lie in the unfitness of the hero for his task. He, according to Gardner, has no flaw. The flaw is in the task itself (is it beyond any man?) or in the nature of the world (is perfect justice impossible in the world?). The task itself is one only a hero would feel called upon to undertake--like charging the machine gun nest to save your buddies, raising children, teaching English.

Productions of the play generally use one or more of the above interpretations to present Hamlet's character. (Both the Laurence Olivier and the Mel Gibson Hamlets are products of Ernest Jones' argument that Hamlet suffers an Oedipus Complex.) Although I have shown both of these films and the Kenneth Branagh version in their entirety—at different times—the Mel Gibson film is the shortest (135 minutes) and perhaps the most accessible for the students. Scenes ranging from the opening scene to the poison-duel resolution could be chosen for contrast, but I prefer Act 3, Scene 4, where Hamlet kills Polonius and the ghost appears. This scene is the play's climax and involves whatever interpretation of the tragic flaw the actor chooses. A scene that could be chosen just to show contrasts in staging is Act 3, Scene 3, where Claudius is attempting to pray.

A study of Hamlet's tragic flaw certainly does not exhaust the attractions of this play. Other characters die—are their deaths justified? King Hamlet has called upon his son for revenge, but the biblical imagery within the play surely reminds us that revenge is the province of the divine and raises the question, is the Ghost's very request somehow wrong? (Hamlet initially questions the prudence of heeding the ghost's demand.) Why do Gertrude and Ophelia so willingly give in to the authority of the males? Should Hamlet's friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die for helping the king and queen? Does Polonius deserve to die when hiding behind the arras?

## SHAKESPEARE'S THEMES

An equally direct approach to the play is possible through a study of Shakespeare's themes. This can be the basis for a closer study of the language Shakespeare chooses for his text. In *Macbeth* Shakespeare makes use of an idea Alexander Pope will later call the Great Chain of Being. Everything that exists has a place in an orderly universe that ranges from the lowest being (Aristotle identified it as "unformed matter") to the highest (God). Man's immoral acts upset that chain and cause disruptions in Nature. (A twentieth century Hollywood movie, *Shane*, may make use of that idea in the fight scene between Shane and his host—both good men—when they clash over who will face the bad gunman in town. The sky outside the cabin grows dark, apparently because good men are fighting each other rather than evil, and clears again when the victorious Shane rides to the gunfight.) In a much more exaggerated fashion Shakespeare has the unnatural acts of *Macbeth* disturb the heavens and cause animals to behave unnaturally (horses are reported to eat each other on the night the king is killed). Hamlet alludes to this concept only once, when talking of Rome, Julius Caesar, and the "sheeted dead" that roamed the streets in the days before Caesar's assassination. In *Hamlet* Shakespeare explores the idea in a more "realistic" manner. The kingdom is disturbed politically and morally. Denmark is preparing for war, a ghost appears early in the play, and the king and queen are united in an incestuous relationship!

Other religious ideas dominate the play. The king's death, related in the play by the ghost, invokes the Garden of Eden of Genesis. The king is asleep in the "orchard" (garden) and is supposedly bitten by a snake when Claudius poisons him. The act of brother killing brother recalls another story from Genesis, Cain killing Abel, which Claudius echoes in the famous prayer scene (3.3). This echoes in Hamlet's declaration that the world is "an unweeded garden" and is part of the background that heightens Hamlet's reasoning when he is debating whether to kill Claudius as he is "praying" and is significant in the drama's distinctions between appearance and reality.

The method Claudius chooses to kill his brother provides a central metaphor for the kingdom being "poisoned"; poison and its effects provide much of the most effective language in the play, from "unweeded garden" (1.2.135) and "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.90) of Act 1 to the poisoned pearl of Act 5. But the dramatic uses of poison are even more striking. From the murder of the king to the "poisoned" plot of

Laertes and Claudius, from the poisoned mind of the mad Ophelia to the poisoning of Hamlet and the death of Claudius by poisoned sword and poisoned pearl, Shakespeare has wonderfully illustrated the consequences of the ambitious murder of King Hamlet by Claudius.

## SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE

Students may profit most of all by learning to read Shakespeare's language as though for performance. Becoming aware of techniques Shakespeare uses to disrupt the flow of speech at one instance or to make it inescapably regular at another can offer insights into Shakespeare's intentions concerning characters and scenes. After all, the stage directions in Shakespeare's plays are minimal, and the actor must turn to the language to discern the author's intentions. "Everything is in the verse," maintains Professor Sidney Berger, director of the University of Houston School of Theater. Shakespeare gives hints about how to interpret a character's state of mind and how to play a scene in the structure of the language. This can lead to reading the play more closely to discern character development and, of course, plot development. (Shakespeare borrowed most, if not all, of his plots; his primary interest is *character*.) This can be done with or without emphasizing themes within the play. Instructors who approach *Hamlet* thematically place great weight on a speech by Hamlet in Act 1, Scene 4:

So, oft it chances in particular men  
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,  
. . . (these men) in the general censure take corruption  
From that particular fault. (23-36)

This "tragic flaw" speech is at the heart of the play for the teacher who wants to focus on Hamlet's failure to act in time, but those now famous lines are *absent* from the most finished version of the play—the 1623 Folio edition! Did Shakespeare remove them from working scripts after the earlier Quarto 2 edition? (Scholars often view both editions as authoritative.) The speech will undoubtedly be in the text classes use today and should not be ignored, but the student may gain if more emphasis is placed first on learning to mine the language closely, looking for other nuggets.

Shakespeare makes use of several poetic devices to give clues to characters and scenes: **short metric lines, rhyming couplets, shared lines, prose, feminine endings, long lines, broken lines, and broken lines.** His plays are often described as being written in iambic pentameter verse, but approximately 28 percent of the plays' language is prose and he often uses lines longer than ten syllables or even with more than five metric feet. One of his most effective uses of variation within the verse can be seen in Hamlet's most famous soliloquy. "To be, or not to be, that is the question" (3.1) must be read first of all as a voice despairing of living. Hamlet has already (1.2) revealed a wish that suicide were not against divine law. A close reading of the line reveals that it contains not the 10 syllables of iambic pentameter but 11, and final syllable is

unaccented. This feminine ending is repeated in the next three lines—four irregular endings in a row. The repetition of the falling endings of the unrhymed lines provides as much of an insight into Hamlet’s state of mind as the subject of his soliloquy does. Incidental lines in the play may have the same type of ending, but they seldom appear in such sequences.

Sometimes a short line will appear in an otherwise iambic pentameter series of lines. Students read these lines as though Shakespeare has suddenly—for one line—reverted to prose, but those lines are more often intended to carry the time and weight of his 10-syllable lines. Usually the line is supposed to be read as though it has the same five beats as the other lines and forces a pause in the actor’s delivery. In Act 3 when Hamlet confronts Gertrude in her closet, he castigates her behavior in angry lines.

Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,  
Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,  
Or but a sickly part of one true sense  
Could not so mope. O shame, where is thy blush?  
Rebellious hell,  
If thou canst mutine in a matron’s bones,  
To flaming youth let virtue be as was  
And melt in her own fire. (4.79-86)

Students will usually read the short line as though Shakespeare merely ran out of words to fill up the measure. But the line is much more dramatic if the actor is understood to fill the space with his acting. The pause after “Rebellious hell” makes the succeeding lines more emphatic and clear. In Act 1, Scene 2, Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo bring Hamlet the news that they have seen the dead king’s ghost. Hamlet declares, “If it assume my noble father’s person / I’ll speak to it though hell itself should gape / And bid me hold my peace” (243-5). Continuing in perfect iambic pentameter, Hamlet cautions the men to remain silent about what they have seen, and as they depart he says, “Your loves, as mine to you, farewell.” That line contains only eight syllables and should be followed by a pause to occupy the same space as the preceding and succeeding lines. The pause, though short, captures the tension of the moment and is followed by “My father’s spirit—in arms! All is not well, / I doubt some foul play. Would the night were come!” He concludes the scene with the next two, rhymed lines: “Till then sit still my soul. Foul deeds will rise / Though all the earth o’erwhelm them, to men’s eyes” (254-7). The rhymed couplet serves as punctuation—it reinforces memory in the audience by emphasis. In the same fashion he closes the act and another famous soliloquy with “the play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscious of the King” (2.2.604-5). Shakespeare has provided stage directions for the actor in the metrics of his lines.

Sometimes short lines are in fact shared lines for two or more speakers. A different effect is achieved. When Hamlet first speaks to his mother in Act 1, they share the line where he says bitterly, “Ay, madam, it is common.” She finishes the metric line,

“If it be, / Why seems it so particular with thee?” Hamlet continues, “Seems, madam? Nay it is. I know not ‘seems’” (2.74-6). Hamlet’s play on the word “seems” is obvious, but Shakespeare has also emphasized the mother-son connection with the shared line that makes Hamlet’s words read into hers. Other times the sharing may play a less significant role in the dialogue. When in Act 1, Scene 1 Marcellus wonders about the military preparations afoot in the kingdom, he asks about their cause, “Who is ‘t that can inform me?” and Horatio completes the line, “That can I” (83). At a later moment in Act 1, Scene 2, after Hamlet says he thinks he sees his father, Horatio asks, “Where, my lord?” Hamlet responds immediately, “In my mind’s eye Horatio” (185). These shared lines do not necessarily play any part than metrical continuity, but when, only moments later, shared lines indicate the scene’s intensity. Horatio swears that the ghost did appear to be Hamlet’s father, “These hands are not more like,” and Hamlet responds immediately (literally, on the same line), “But where was this?” (213). Hamlet naturally asks, “Did you not speak to it?” and Horatio finishes the line, “My lord, I did” (215). The actors do not need stage directions in the margins to understand how the shared lines carry the tension of the moment, just as they do in the final scene of the act when the ghost-Hamlet-ghost line races, “Mark me.” “I will.” “My hour is almost come” (2). Other shared lines signal the dramatic height of the scene, which Shakespeare emphasizes with a short line the ghost’s speech, “I am thy father’s spirit” (pause) / “Doomed for a certain term to walk the night” (10-11). Short and shared lines intensify the language throughout the scene. To properly appreciate the poet-dramatist’s technique, students need some familiarity with metric forms and terminology.

Shakespeare uses rhyme often in his earlier plays (*Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, for example), but he may more often write in prose. The plays’ prose is not the normal spoken language, especially when it rises to the height it does when Hamlet is addressing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Students often ask why certain scenes appear in prose rather than verse. (This does not occur to them when reading the opening scene of *Hamlet*. The short and abrupt lines at the changing of the guard seem appropriate; it is only after growing accustomed to the iambic pentameter that the question arises.) A clue is found in the fact that most of the prose in Act 2, Scene 2 is in the mouth of Polonius or of Hamlet when he is speaking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet always speaks in prose when addressing these three characters, as though Shakespeare is implying that the three men are not worthy of verse. In Act 5 the clowns (characters too low be worth naming) speak prose in the grave-digging scene. Polonius and the clowns are obviously being shown disrespect, but what about Hamlet’s two old friends? When Hamlet encounters them, he already knows that they are present at the command of the king and queen. They do not willingly admit this, and so are obviously present to spy upon him. They are beneath Hamlet’s—or our—respect, and this later is reflected in Hamlet’s decision to alter the letters the two men carry and send them to their deaths. When Hamlet’s prose becomes almost a prose poem; as he is describing the world and man, that quintessence of dust, he is not speaking down to his companions; he is speaking *above* them. (Act 3 of *Romeo and Juliet* contains five scenes, and only one of them uses bulks of prose, the first, when Romeo foolishly steps

between Mercutio and Tybalt and causes his friend's death. Shakespeare uses prose because the action does not merit poetry. Neither do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.)

Feminine endings can be a poetic tool to illustrate a character's state of mind. The normal iambic pentameter line contains ten syllables, but certain lines end with an extra unaccented syllable. I used to dismiss these instances as instances of "Homer sometimes nods," but Dr. Sidney Berger pointed out that Hamlet's most famous soliloquy opens with four lines with feminine endings:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep—  
No more, and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wished. (3.2.55-63)

Hamlet's contemplation of suicide is evident enough from the words alone, but Shakespeare has keyed this with the opening feminine endings. Lacking the prototypical upbeat rhythm of the 10-syllable line, the feminine endings in the first four lines here signify Hamlet's uncertainty. Should he struggle, or should he escape? When Horatio first appears in Act 1, come to visit a friend, whose father has just been buried, Hamlet speaks lines with feminine endings. Horatio says, "My lord, I came to see your father's funeral." Hamlet replies, "I prithee do not mock me, fellow [student], / I think it was to see my mother's wedding" (2.176-178). Hamlet's lines contain both his grief and his anger, as do two of his lines (both with feminine endings, here in italics) describing the wedding:

Thrift, thrift, Horatio, the funeral bak'd meats  
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage *tables*.  
Would I had met my dearest foe in *heaven*  
Or ever I had seen that day, Horatio! (2.180-183).

Sometimes Shakespeare employs long lines—12-syllable iambic lines or Alexandrines. Once again, this is not Shakespeare nodding. The longer line usually is broken in the middle by a caesura. The rhythmical break provides a balance to the line, three metrical feet in each half-line. The symmetry can show, perhaps unexpectedly, great emotional stress. Three of these lines appear in the first act's second scene, one in a soliloquy, two in the Hamlet-Horatio dialogue. Hamlet, after expressing regret that suicide is against religious law, speaks bitterly of his mother's newest marriage and says (famously)—"Let me not think on't! Frailty, thy name is woman!" (146). A few moments later, he encounters Horatio and greets his friend a promise to teach him how to

drink. Horatio responds with a long line that shows his awareness of the seriousness of the moment: “My lord, I came to see your father’s funeral” (176). When Horatio a few lines later admits that the wedding followed the funeral very closely, Hamlet angrily says, “Thrift, thrift, Horatio, the funeral bak’d meats” went quickly to the wedding tables (180). The tension here is supplied by the situation, the identities of the characters, and the language Shakespeare uses.

A second scene where Shakespeare strategically places long lines is the fifth scene of the first act. When the ghost exits on the line “Adieu, adieu, adieu! Remember me,” Hamlet explodes into language: “O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?” His next line is an ideal example of an Alexandrine: “And shall I couple hell? O fie, hold, hold, my heart” (91-93). A scene that is dramatically as charged is Act 3, Scene 3, where Hamlet encounters Claudius praying and debates whether to kill him. Hamlet’s first line in the scene is “Now might I do it [pat], now ’a is a praying” (73). The 12-syllable line reveals Hamlet’s emotions and psychological state. He is supercharged with exultation—this is the moment to get revenge! Without awareness of Shakespeare’s prosody, it would be easy to play this line as showing some diffidence—gee, I *could* kill him now, but if I did. . . . That conclusion comes to Hamlet in the scene, but it is not present at the beginning of his speech. The first excitement gives way to his reasoning about possible actions and consequences.

The same scene shows Shakespeare using another metric tool—broken lines. Feminine endings can show uncertainty, ambiguity, internal conflict, but broken lines symbolize even greater stress. When Claudius attempts to pray in Act 3, Scene 3, the irregularity in line length suggests his state of mind:

O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven,  
It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t,  
A brother’s murder. Pray can I not,  
Though inclination be as sharp as will. (36-39)

Claudius’s first two lines have feminine endings, the fourth the traditional 10 syllables, but the third only *nine*. Ten lines later he speaks another nine-syllable line: “To be forestalled ere we come to fall” (49). The soliloquy is filled with feminine endings, too, and ends with Claudius falling to his knees and closing with a short line, “All may be well” (72). This mix of feminine endings, broken lines, and the final short line metrically capture the confusion of the play’s Cain figure. The player whose attends to the rhythm of the lines alone should sense how to play Claudius in the scene.

More than one way to teach—or not teach—Shakespeare will appear to any teacher. (“Here, Johnny. Take Shakespeare’s play home and read it. There will be a test Monday.”) The plays can be intimidating for students and teachers alike. (I did not expand on my comfortable trio of Hamlet, Macbeth, and Henry until a drama teacher proposed that we coordinate our classes by teaching *The Tempest*.) Nevertheless, several

important Tunnels into *Hamlet* can be found. I have tried to touch on two or three here (“tragic flaw” *can* be categorized as just another *theme*, but I think it requires special attention), of which I think the most useful is the approach where the play is read with a *performer’s* interest in the language of each line. Why is line shorter/longer than the norm? It is almost always, I am willing to bet, *not* because Shakespeare is nodding.

## **SAMPLE LESSON PLANS**

### **Lesson 1: Scanning Poetry**

This study of *Hamlet* requires the students to learn the intricacies of prosody. They scan lines and mark the stresses in their paperback texts. They must illustrate how to read passages of the play with and without paying attention to the metrics. Terms that the students need to know are defined in the glossary. The glossary and definitions must be entered into their notebooks and are fodder for vocabulary tests.

### **Glossary**

*alexandrine*—iambic hexameter, a line of six metrical feet, often rhythmically broken in the middle. (Examples: 1.2.146, 176, 180; 1.5.93; 3.3.73)

*anapest*—a metrical foot of three syllables, the first two unaccented.

*broken line*—a line with fewer than expected syllables, affecting the rhythm of the passage. Not the same as a “short line.” The implication of great stress. (Examples: 3.3. 38, 49)

*caesura*—a break in the line of poetry for rhythmical effect.

*dactyl*—a metrical foot of three syllables, only the first accented.

*feminine ending*—an extra, unaccented syllable at the end of a line, which gives the rhythm of the line a “falling” feeling and may suggest uncertainty or ambiguity in the character.

*hexameter*—a line of six metrical feet.

*iamb*--a metrical foot of two syllables, the first unaccented. This is said to be the basic rhythm of the English language.

*long line*—see *alexandrine*. Usually marked for its symmetry; indicates character is emotionally overloaded.

*meter*—the measurement of the rhythm of a line of traditional poetry by metrical feet, units marked by the relationship of accented and unaccented syllables. The basic metrical feet of English poetry are the iamb, the trochee, the anapest, the dactyl, and the spondee. Free verse attends to rhythm of phrases more than of metrical feet.

*pentameter*—a line of verse of five metrical feet.

*prose*—writing without metrical structure. Shakespeare’s prose is not, however, the prose of everyday speech, often approaching or reaching the level of a prose-poem. (Examples: 1.2.190-2; 2.2.171-379; 3.1.104-152)

*rhyme*—the repetition of identical or very close sounds of accented syllables. (Examples of *rhyming couplets*: 1.2.262-3; 1.3.43-4; 1.5.197-8; 2.2.605-6; 3.2.397-8; 3.4.97-8; 4.3.71-2; 4.4.66-7; 5.1.301-2)

*shared line*—characters divide a five-foot line between them. (Examples: 1.1.74; 1.2.185; 1.2.213, 215; 1.5.2, 4)

*short line*—a line of fewer metrical feet than normal in the passage in which occurs. It is not really a pause, since the actor is expected to fill the space of the line by *acting*. Used for special emphasis. (Examples: 1.5.9; 25, 27, 41, 53, 58, 159; 3.1.103; 3.4.83)

*spondee*—a metrical foot in which both syllables are accented.

*trochee*—a foot of two syllables with only the first accented.

## **Lesson Two: Analyzing Characters**

Students choose either a major character or pair of characters to analyze in a five hundred word formal essay. They must utilize the character’s actions and statements, other characters’ statements about the character, and the nature of the character’s language. Most students write about Hamlet, of course, but other interests have been Claudius, Polonius, Ophelia, Gertrude, Hamlet and Ophelia, and Ophelia and Gertrude. Sometimes I require essays about *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, but at other times only one essay about both plays. In the second case they must compare or contrast characters from each of the two plays—Hamlet and Macbeth, either Ophelia or Gertrude and Lady Macbeth, or some other pairing.

## **Lesson Three: Class Discussion-Test**

I use a format learned from the Great Books of the Western World program developed under the auspices of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Under the guidelines of the program, students should be seated a circle or around a seminar table; I am fortunate because my students sit at small tables that I arrange in a large oval. In these discussions the teacher

is not a lecturer, but only a moderator presenting open-ended for discussion. The class starts with the students writing about a question I present from a prepared list of questions and topics. The questions may be about themes, characters, motives, possible alternatives to what happens in the play, but must not be questions with one answer (or a *discussion* will not develop).

I have found this format very useful and have altered slightly in order to grade the discussion. I prepare a seating chart while the class is writing about the first question and during the discussion give students credit (merely a mark on the seating chart) for each pertinent contribution to the discussion (either good ideas or good questions). When I do this, I count the grade as a major test, and for a student to get any credit, the written answer to the opening question must convince me that the writer has read the assignment. (Obviously this format can be used for any form of literature studied.)

#### **Lesson Four: Films**

For *Hamlet* I use three films. Laurence Olivier's black and white 1948 *Hamlet* earned four Academy Awards, including best picture and best actor, but is weaker in the classroom because the older acting styles and some unintended comic effects (especially the killing of Claudius). While it does not use the entire play, the opening scene captures the spirit of the play, so I show the first few minutes of this film and portions of other scenes, including the important Act 3, Scene 4 confrontation between Hamlet and Gertrude. The 155-minute film makes explicit the Ernest Jones interpretation that Hamlet suffers from an Oedipus complex.

For contrast the 1996 Kenneth Branagh *Hamlet*, the only film to record the complete play, shows how the story can easily be set in a different century (the film contains a steam locomotive) without losing any of its power. This is a very good film, but a long one, running 242 minutes. I have shown the entire film, but usually I just show certain portions of it. Charlton Heston's performance as the Player in Act 2, Scene 2 brings to life a portion of the play seldom performed or concentrated on in class.

The *Hamlet* film most accessible for students, I think, is the 1990 Mel Gibson version. It runs only 135 minutes, and the film alters the order of the beginning of the play, but Gibson does a creditable job. Consequently, I show portions of the Olivier and Branagh films and all of this one.

A shorter (50 minutes) film can provide background at the very beginning of the Shakespeare unit, if desired. *Shakespeare in London, The Life and Times of the Real William Shakespeare* captures the spirit of the period well, reconstructing scenes from the era and showing scenes from the plays themselves.

### **Lesson Five: Acting the Play**

After they have studied *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* and seen portions of several films of *Hamlet*, the students deserve an opportunity to have fun working on a production of their own. In groups the students rehearse, perform, and film scenes from either of the plays to show the effects of short lines and shared lines. In the era of video cameras, this is an assignment easily produced on the weekend, and the students generally enjoy making the films. I give a grade for the finished product, but the class is not a course in filmmaking. I weigh most heavily not the skills of the actors, but the effort that has gone into the production: costumes, attention to the language of the play, efforts to memorize lines or to use cue cards.

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### Books for teachers

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