

**“What a piece of work is a man!”**  
**Double Consciousness of a Sports Hero and a Tragic Hero**

*Allison P. McCowan*

**BACKGROUND**

At first glance, my students at James Madison High School appear to be happy children. When they pass to and from classes, their cheerful but penetratingly loud sounds reverberate in the hallway as their effervescent smiles often turn to riotous laughter. Every day, my colleagues and I jokingly remark that their vocal chords will not atrophy any time soon.

However, my young charges have an underlying problem that some of the laughter may be masking: absentee fathers. Only a few of them have a positive male role model in the home. As a result, they often seek celebrated sports figures to emulate, and, sadly, some of their choices are not always examples of positive lifestyles.

That my students seek larger-than-life sports heroes as a form of escapism and source of identity serves as a backdrop for the development of this curriculum unit.

**BENEFITS TO MY STUDENTS**

After reading about and taking a penetrating look into the lives of legendary professional athletes in the seminar entitled “Sports Autobiographies,” I have chosen the theme of double consciousness as the topic of my curriculum unit. I have researched the effects of duality on the sports hero and the tragic hero by exploring five areas:

- the autobiography as a literary genre;
- double consciousness and the black man;
- double consciousness and the sports hero;
- double consciousness as seen in *Giant Steps*, the autobiography of sports hero Kareem Abdul-Jabbar; and
- double consciousness and Shakespeare’s tragic hero Hamlet

The two lesson plans herein will be consistent with Project CLEAR, a Houston Independent School District (HISD) compilation of reading goals and correlations for twelfth grade English. Questions are designed for general classroom discussion and adhere to the cognitive learning processes set forth in Bloom’s six-tier taxonomy.

Studying double consciousness and showing how it affects some men of prominence will benefit my students in six ways. First, I want my students to see that a man should be more than a media-created image, more than a skill or talent he possesses, more than the

money he makes, and more than fancy clothes or expensive cars. Under the veneer of success and glory are usually problems, inconsistencies, and signs of the pressures of life. Each man must, therefore, develop coping mechanisms which allow him to deal with life's imperfections and disappointments.

Second, I want my students to see how literature imitates life. No literary genre attests to this concept more than autobiography, which is largely the reflection of a life whose events in some way make the reader take a penetrating look at his own existence and ponder his own problems and possibilities. As a result, this medium of literary and artistic expression will be quite valuable to my twelfth grade English literature students.

Third, as my young charges prepare to travel down various intertwining roads of adulthood, they need to study real life portraits. More in-depth study of some of the sports figures they have superficially heard of or read about should make for more interesting class discussions and assignments. Their impressionable minds are in need of positive role models, and many youngsters have chosen these cultural icons to emulate; conversely, the reality of the world demands that they also learn that their "heroes" are not perfect and that their lives, in many instances, reveal the human condition and foibles of man.

Fourth, integrating sports autobiography with the literary genres we study will enhance the already rich tapestry of English literature by providing another springboard for more interesting as well as creative class assignments.

Several examples of such integration follow. In a comparison-contrast essay, students could show similar and different traits of a literary hero and sports figure. In a reflective essay, students could examine a life-changing personal incident that parallels an event that was experienced by Hamlet and/or Jabbar. In a problem-solution essay, students could consider the roles of Hamlet and Jabbar in society and determine whether they were a problem, a solution to a problem, or a little bit of both. In a persuasive essay, students could ponder the effect of environment and genetics on the successes and failures of each man and argue for or against their position.

Fifth, students will have a chance to tap into their creative juices. For example, they could write a sonnet or a soliloquy that embodies the concept of the tragic hero or a sports figure. They could also draw pictures, create collages, devise puzzles and word games, make up songs, dances, plays, and short stories; in other words, they could use other medians of artistic expression to reflect their textual knowledge of Hamlet and Jabbar.

Finally, by studying the autobiography and reviewing the tragedy, students will see the thread of human connectiveness that exists in the fabric of society. Seventeenth century metaphysical poet John Donne discussed this kinship in "Meditation 17" when he said, "No man is an island, entire of itself. Each man is part of the continent." Years later,

Romantic poet William Wordsworth expressed this same sentiment when he wrote, “We have, all of us, one human heart.”

## **OVERVIEW**

Man is awesome. When he puts his mind, hands, and heart to any endeavor, he can transform visions into amazing reality. But, unfortunately, when Hamlet utters the now famous words “what a piece of work is a man,” he has begun to lament man’s predicament when trapped in a society whose expectations conflict with personal values. Similarly, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, in his autobiography *Giant Steps* also agonizes over the conflict between community expectations and individual fulfillment.

These two culturally diverse protagonists are confronted with the issue of double consciousness, which suggests a timeliness in human nature that transcends a physical place. The traditions, mores, manners, and customs of both men are but the outer trappings of human likeness. Pierce the exterior symbols of difference and a constant and unchanging humanity is revealed.

Each man is torn by a desire to act according to the expectations of society and a need to act according to the dictates of his conscience. This divided self causes both intellectual heroes to endure periods of self-imposed isolation. Each is a brooding introvert who eventually comes of age after a series of life-altering epiphanies defines him as a man who is ultimately “true to thine ownself.”

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A LITERARY GENRE**

Since I will introduce this unit after my class has studied *Hamlet*, I will merely review the characteristics of the Shakespearean tragedy. My review notes are in the appendix. I will, however, define and discuss the autobiography in detail. The key points of this discussion follow.

Unlike the formulaic structure of the tragedy, the organization of the autobiography depends, to a great extent, on the writer’s purpose. If he merely wants to tell his version of his newsworthy life, he arranges details to fit the confessional mode; if he wants to make amends for past imperfections (whether real or perceived), he writes an apologia. Thus, consideration of motives is an essential pre-writing strategy.

Once the design has been determined, the writer should determine the appropriateness of the genre he has chosen by reviewing the varied definitions and characteristics of an autobiography.

St. Augustine, the reputed father of the autobiography, says that autobiography is a “large and boundless chamber of memory from which a handful of experiences are charted and graphed as a man progresses through error to truth” (*Design and Truth* 9).

What Augustine calls error, J.C. Powys refers to as “painful as well as advantageous experiences that stimulate a transformation” (11).

While Augustine refers broadly to this “recollection as re-collection,” Roy Pascal refers to it as “reflection” (10). Pascal also says that autobiography is “an interplay, a collusion between the past and the present; its significance is indeed more the revelation of the present situation than the uncovering of the past. If this present position is not brought home (or only feebly brought home), there is failure” (11).

Similarly, Pascal, a contributing essayist to editor James Olney’s *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, states further that autobiography is “a discourse in discovery, for man is not a state of being but a process of development. Wandering through childhood, he recalls events and persons that affected him” (113). Related to the concept of self-discovery is Susanne Langer’s view that autobiography is “intuitive knowledge of selective unique experiences.” Like Pascal and other scholars, Langer feels that these “experiences are chosen and arranged by evaluating memory” (Olney, 186).

These autobiographers seem to agree that this genre is largely factual and non-fictional. However, Gaston Bachelard sort of straddles the fence when he says that the autobiography is “an endless prelude, purely fragmentary, an incomplete literary project that is neither pure fiction nor pure non-fiction” (Olney, 295).

Unlike the previous autobiographers, William L. Howarth in “Some Principles of Autobiography” looks at this genre from a literary perspective:

An autobiography is equally a work of art and life, for no one writes such a book from his original model, resembling life but actually composed and framed as an artful invention. He has lived out the requisite years. During his life, he remains uncertain of cause and effect, rarely sensing the full shape or continuity of experiences. But in writing his story, he artfully defines, restricts, or shapes that life into a self-portrait—one far different. (Olney, 112)

Howarth concludes by saying:

Therefore, autobiography is hardly factual, unimaginative, or even non-fictional, for it welcomes all the devices of skilled narration and observes few of the restrictions such as accuracy, impartiality, or inclusiveness: restrictions imposed upon other forms of historical literature (Olney, 112).

The view that autobiography can be categorized as a narrative is shared by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Quoted in Howarth’s essay, “Elements of Autobiography,” Frye says three elements of the narrative are also present in autobiography: theme, technique or style, and character. The latter element presents an interesting parallel. Frye says the image or self-portrait is presented from “double

persona.” Two figures share the story: “a narrator who tells the story and a protagonist who enacts it. They share the same name but not the same time and space.” Frye explains further:

A narrator is also more than his protagonist, yet he remains faithful to the latter’s ignorance for the sake of credible suspense. Eventually, the reverse images should merge: as past approaches present, the protagonist’s deed should begin to match his narrator’s thoughts. (Olney, 113)

Although these definitions deal primarily with the autobiography from the writer’s perspective, Olney looks at this genre from the reader’s vantage point. He says that as the reader probes these “personal illusions, which are often reinforced and perhaps reality prompted, the reader satisfies a legitimate curiosity about the ways of man” (1). In essence, the reader is “fascinated when he enters the private life of someone else and learns motives, intentions, and personal stories behind selected real life events” (7). The reader becomes what I would call a *literary voyeur*.

To be sure, autobiography is a literary hybrid, a piece of prose whose truths are sprinkled with dashes of fiction. To what extent fiction is added and for what reasons, only the autobiographer knows for sure. The taking (or abusing) of this dramatic license to embellish a work is a key aspect of this genre.

## **DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE BLACK MAN**

Once I am sure that students understand the focus and intent of the autobiography, I will introduce the theme of double consciousness and the black man.

In his landmark work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois explores the concept of double consciousness. A civil rights activist during the Harlem Renaissance and one of the founders of the NAACP, DuBois delves into the psyche of the Negro and makes the following observation:

The Negro is born in a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. This double consciousness is the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. This twoness—an American and a Negro—two worlds, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (3)

The duality that DuBois describes is on-going; “this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge the double self into a better and true self” is an uphill battle. Why? Because the once enslaved man wants respect from and recognition in both worlds: “he wants to be a Negro as well as an American”; he wants equal parts of the same paired

identity “without being used and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face” (3).

In the Introduction to *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, James Weldon Johnson affirms DuBois’ concept of double consciousness. Johnson writes:

... the colored people of this country are, in reality, a mystery to the whites. It is a difficult thing for a white man to learn what a colored man really thinks; because, generally, with the latter an additional and different light must be brought to bear on what he thinks... This gives every colored man... a dual personality... I have often watched with interest and sometimes with amazement even ignorant colored men under cover of broad grins and minstrel antics maintain this duality in the presence of white men. (xvii-xviii)

The dominant culture’s overt contempt, therefore, produces a “divided sense of self” with “loyalties to family and tradition as well as a need to belong to and be accepted by the dominant culture.” The uniqueness that black Americans face with double consciousness is grounded in American history, for blacks were once considered “property and viewed as animals.” So the black man, “created somewhere between men and cattle,” has to “walk within the Veil” in order to exist in America, the land of the free (63).

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. believes blacks long to “unfold layers of veils that mask their culture,” and, although the process is difficult, it is possible. Gates, whose tone is more optimistic than DuBois’, thinks that the “commonality of the human condition, however alienated, is shared at the most fundamental level by every human being, and not just by Blacks” (Johnson, xxii).

Both Gates and DuBois think that only demands for freedom and liberation will help to remove the veil; some form of fight for equality will reap results. DuBois says until this freedom comes, this dichotomy will only be a “vain search for true identity.” The Negro will continue to be an “outcast and a stranger in his own house, the shades of his prison-house will close around him and cause bitterness, mistrust, and discouragement” (DuBois).

This depression and sense of hopelessness explored by DuBois and Gates is also reflected in other writings by blacks. For example, in “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King, Jr., with his eloquent use of alliterative parallelism and graphic imagery, gives examples of the degrading effect of dealing with double consciousness. A few of King’s examples follow:

When you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” and “colored”; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to

expect next and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness . . .” (Peterson, 982).

What King refers to as “nobodiness,” Paul Lawrence Dunbar calls a “mask,” and Ralph Ellison calls invisibility. For Ellison the black man is an “invisible man,” even though he is one of America’s native sons. This rejected progeny, though angry in Ellison’s works, is praised for perseverance in “The Negro National Anthem.” When James Weldon Johnson and his brother, R. Rosamond, wrote this patriotic hymn, they acknowledged the downtrodden, second-class citizenship of the black man who continually “lifts every voice and sings until the harmonies of liberty” are realized. After musically recounting a “bitter, dark, and gloomy” cultural history, the black man still remains true to his “native land.”

Similarly, two different forms of entertainment, the autobiography and film, look poignantly at double consciousness. Maya Angelou in her autobiography likens double consciousness to a “caged bird singing.” *Finding Forrester*, a movie which speaks of the divided self, profiles a contemporary student athlete who refuses to yield to the low expectations of the academic elite. The protagonist proves that a black basketball player can be equally skilled in sports, literature, and composition.

The young black student in *Finding Forrester*, though a fictional character, finds himself initially in a real-life battle fought by many contemporary black athletes and their forbearers: the ever-raging struggle against being categorized as intellectually inferior to their white counterparts.

Gary Sailes in *African Americans in Sports* writes that in an attempt to explain the success of the black men in sports and their subsequent “attack on the white status quo, the physical prowess of the African American was elevated but their intellectual capabilities were attacked.” Simply put, the African American was a spectacular physical phenomenon, but he was still a “dumb jock” (186).

Although there is a low college graduation rate for black athletes, I think that factors other than intellect play a significant role in this dismal completion record—home and community environments which are lacking in academic motivation, inferior public schools, unrealistic expectations that sports is the panacea to everything worth having, low expectations of the academic and athletic echelon, and the unmotivated athletes themselves. Regardless of the reasons, which many people see as excuses, a fertile “anti-intellectual climate” based on stereotyping and prejudice exists in sports.

## **DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE SPORTS HERO**

However, black men, in general, and black professional athletes, in particular, do not have exclusivity on duality. According to Peter Williams in *The Sports Immortals: Deifying the American Athlete*, most professional athletes (regardless of race) live in two

different worlds; many of them also wear masks. These worlds and veils are not the result of race; Williams says they are the logical consequence of being a sports hero.

In *The Sports Immortals*, Williams says, “all jocks are aware of their double lives, for they exist in two worlds: the mythic world of sports and the earthly world before and after the sports career” (44). He explains the mythical journey that the sports hero takes in great detail:

The hero takes a mythic journey from Arcadia (the pre-heroic waiting area where he waits and prepares for his trip to fame). He finally arrives at Utopia, the place of celebrity, paradise and happiness; in this place, the hero tries to reach the earthly Utopia, a place associated with success in a sport. For example, that success in football is the Super Bowl; that success in tennis is Wimbledon. (44)

But how long does the hero stay in Utopia? Williams continues:

There he remains for a short period of time. Utopia, therefore, ultimately becomes symbolic of the earthly end of every hero’s journey. Much too soon, he is forced out of Utopia into the Underworld, an earthly place which is his punishment for being banished from the game, an earthly place that represents his removal of any chance he has for achieving Utopia again. Perhaps, if he is lucky while in the Underworld, he will reach Valhalla, the celestial paradise or shrine that gives him a formal legacy of an indestructible image. But, for the most part, the majority of the sports heroes do not achieve such a revered status. For all practical purposes, they are mythically dead but biologically alive. (45)

Existing in two worlds necessitates two deaths. According to Williams, “every athlete dies twice: once at the end of this mythic/heroic (sports) career and once as a real person.” Every athlete must leave his playing field before middle age has fully set in. Williams says, “the trauma of finding yourself mythically dead in your thirties takes its toll on all athletes” (44).

Two literary figures voice a sentiment similar to that of Williams. A.E. Housman writes in his much anthologized poem “To an Athlete Dying Young”

Smart lad to slip betimes away  
From Fields where glory does not stay  
And early through the laurels grows  
It withers quicker than the rose...  
...Runners whom renown outran  
And the name died before the man. (Emra, 248)

Housman states, in essence, that “an athlete would be a smart lad if he dies young, thus sparing himself the pain of observing, as a real individual, his own mythic death” (Williams, 44).



Another writer, John Updike, expresses concern over this dilemma in his poem “Ex-Basketball Player.” He laments a recently graduated basketball star who, after a phenomenal high school career, has no place to go and no skills to cope with his new existence without sports (Emra, 230). Brian Emra, in his editorial notes, interprets Updike’s narrator as having “sympathy and regret at the lack of fulfillment that the athlete experiences when he reaches life’s high point so early in life” (231). Although this poem is set in 1946 and the protagonist is a high school graduate, the same observation can be made of a contemporary sports hero after college graduation if he is ill-equipped for his new life sans the glory.

I agree, in part, with these sports critics and poets. To be sure, the sports heroes as well as their fans often identify their heroes by what they do, not by who they are; therefore, when heroes are no longer able to do with incomparable skill and talent, they no longer have the applause and cannot find external validation nor self validation. Herein lies the tragedy. Francis Keenan, as quoted by Williams in *The Sports Immortals* goes even further than I do when he compares the sports event to Aristotle’s definition of tragedy in *Ars Poetica* (see Appendix):

There is an Aristotelian paradigm to the sports event, which resembles tragedy in that it also symbolizes man’s struggle with the inequities and paradoxes of life, a symbolism made more cathartic because although the sport remains only a game, the action of sport, unlike that of drama, is real. (41)

In essence, Peter Williams also believes that role changing or mask wearing is not restricted by race. He believes “athletes wear masks for their entire mythic lives. The most common mask is the one worn by an athlete who pretends to be holier than thou. Sometimes, athletes change roles, mostly the saintly change to sinful and sacrifice their mythic lives and even their biological ones in moving from order to chaotic energy” (55). Williams asserts, “There are fewer examples of individuals who have abandoned their sinful ways to become more saintly than vice versa.”

But chaos and discord in a person’s life may be relative terms; depending on the culture and the political, social, and philosophical climate, conduct deemed as unacceptable can be praised and admired years later. After all, Garry Smith, as quoted by Williams in *The Sports Immortals* reminds us that “the sports hero is an accurate barometer of the times.” The 1960s supports Smith’s observation because “in that decade, athletes instead of conforming wanted to express their individuality” (Williams, 59).

Richard Lipsky agrees.

The turmoil of the 1960’s saw the breakdown of consensus in American society. The rise of sports heroes with divergent appeals reflected this breakdown. Who one rooted for began to be determined by the athlete’s political views and lifestyle. The politicization of athletes added to the possibilities of hero worship and villainy. (Williams, 59)

## **DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS AND KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR**

Events in Jabbar's life parallel great changes in American society; but even before Jabbar experiences these tumultuous events, he, like many other athletes, is faced with "doubleness." According to David Wiggins in *Glory Bound*, the racist world of collegiate and professional athletics perpetuates the issue of double consciousness. Such discrimination poses a dichotomy for and a great burden on black athletes. Wiggins explains that blacks are "proud of their race for its forbearance and ability to survive and fight against negative images of black inferiority," but they also have "aspirations of success in American sports which necessitates that they adhere to the values upheld in the dominant society" (200). Thus, the dilemma of "having to submit to the dictates of coaches, other support personnel, and the deep pockets of employers and thereby exhibit a high degree of conformity while at the same time trying to maintain the respect of their race" proves equally frustrating (201).

So the struggle to realize a sense of identity amid the constraints of organized sports is, at best, a difficult balancing act. Wiggins says, "Black athletes move in and out of their three respective roles as blacks, athletes, and Americans with a high degree of regularity in an attempt to foster a positive self-image and realize success in one of this country's most prominent institutions" (201).

A case in point is Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. In *Giant Steps*, Jabbar is confounded by such constraints. He wants to be more active in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, but he also longs to live the American dream. Because he is also a phenom on the basketball court, collegiate and professional athletic protocol demands that he have little or no involvement in volatile political and social issues. After all, no conduct or cause is acceptable if it has even the slightest likelihood of reducing advertising revenue, decreasing ticket sales, or losing television sponsors. So, how does Jabbar maintain his personal identity amidst his conflicting black man/black athlete persona?

One way that he gets in touch with his inner self is by escaping into the world of jazz. Although his parents are also jazz enthusiasts, Jabbar prefers the genius of trailblazing jazz improvisationalists: John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Roland Kirk, and Thelonius Monk. The freedom and release of musical improvisation provides a sense of freedom and release for Jabbar. While listening to jazz, he is free to be himself without worrying about political correctness (Jabbar, 30).

Another way that he finds freedom from the dilemma of double consciousness is by cultivating solitude. Perhaps part of the appeal of being alone stems from his being an only child. Since childhood, he continues to be intolerant of intrusions upon his privacy. He retreats from the "impenetrable world" of racism by staying in his room. This solitary individual seeks quiet time in the cloistered confines of his personal sanctuary. Once there, "he insulates himself against criticism of coaches, reporters, and fans who resent his quiet nature and call him a brooding introvert who is aloof, distant, and taciturn" (Jabbar; 183, 256-257).

Gustav Jung's research on introversion and extroversion sheds light on why Jabbar's introverted posture may have been unfavorably received by society. Jung says that "our culture values the extrovert much more than the introvert." One reason for this preference is that the extrovert is more interested in people and society. According to Jung, the extrovert "focuses on the external world of things, people, and activities" while the introvert "focuses on thoughts, feelings, fantasies, and dreams." The extrovert is the affable socializer; the introvert is a loner who prefers private moments of "introspection and reflection." Because more people have this gregarious quality, Jung concludes that the extrovert is the "norm of society" (Boeree, 9-10).

I believe people identify with the extrovert because he is the ultimate *Everyman*. People see in him a magnetism that they either proudly possess or desperately want to possess. Thus, their perception of self is heightened as they try to develop or maintain a friendly glow as well as an outgoing personality.

From Jung's studies, it is apparent that Jabbar is an introvert and that he represents the minority personality type. He is not popular on a personal level with the general public, for he does not fit the "norm." He is not the personification of *Everyman*. When people encounter Jabbar, they may be a bit intimidated by this person who says far less than he thinks. Because his thoughts are not readily apparent and he prefers to be approached on a more intellectual level, people shun him.

In recent years, however, sports figures no longer bear the burden of double consciousness. They no longer retreat to their rooms or lose themselves in music in order to escape their dual and sometimes three-part identity. One of the main reasons is these sports figures no longer feel tied exclusively to the apron strings of employers, coaches, and the image-building media. They are no longer fearful of losing their jobs as they once were. Because of the positive results of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and strides in economics, education, and politics by blacks, athletes feel more in control of their destiny. They are no longer puppets on short strings dangled by white puppeteers.

For example Jabbar changes as America changes. In 1968, at the height of the civil rights struggle, Jabbar refuses to play in the Olympics in Mexico because of racism in America and South Africa. He refuses to leave his studies at UCLA and postpone graduation in order to represent a country that treats his people so poorly. The press criticizes this unpatriotic posture (Orr, 108). Unlike John Carlos and Tommie Smith, world-class sprinters who are blacklisted from the NFL for raising black-gloved fists on the winner's platform at the Olympics during the playing of the national anthem, Jabbar does not suffer financially because he chooses to stay at home (Orr, 108-110). After graduating from UCLA in 1969, he is a first-round draft choice in the NBA.

As his people engage in boycotts, sit-ins, and other forms of civil disobedience, Jabbar also becomes civilly disobedient. He also begins to retreat openly from strangers and reporters when he feels that their questions are mundane and inconsequential. The towering basketball center is an avid reader and intellectual. But people see his body as

his identity, not his mind. As a result, they ask too many questions about his height and size. So he remains silent when they dwell on these types of trivial questions. In addition, when they tell jokes about his height and size, he does not laugh; when they need an approving smile, he is unaccommodating (Jabbar, 75).

Surprisingly, his giant body gives *other* players an unfair advantage, for he is constantly under siege. Referees let him get pounded and never call fouls. (They feel they are “evening the playing field.”) Reporters say he is lazy, uninvolved, not aggressive enough because he does not hustle with the vengeance of the shorter players (204).

But perhaps the singular, most important coming-of-age event in Jabbar’s life is the self-identity he gains when he studies Arabic and comparative religions at Harvard. An avid reader and a critical thinker, he gains knowledge that makes him embrace his black heritage and personal convictions without fear of reprisal. The more he learns, the more double consciousness becomes a moot issue.

For example, because of his knowledge of Arabic and comparative religions, he abandons his Catholic upbringing for the Muslim faith. His devotion to Islam leads to the adoption of a lifestyle consistent with his new religion. Eventually, he changes his birth name, Lou Alcindor, to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, which means “generous, powerful servant of Allah” (169-170). These life-altering changes put an even greater strain on his relationship with the public.

Even Peter Knobler, co-author of *Giant Steps*, respects Jabbar for making decisions as a man and not as an athlete. In the preface, Knobler writes, “a happier image has begun to re-emerge. He has grown and developed, free from once distracting pressures of stardom, money, religion, and race. No longer is Jabbar haunted by issues and expectations which, heretofore, had caused him to push inside himself.

No longer “humble, accommodating, or docile: Black athletes have forged a new-found independence. They “refuse to sacrifice cultural distinctiveness, the merits of a black lifestyle, and the value of negritude to satisfy the White majority” (Wiggins, 215).

## **DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS AND HAMLET**

Hamlet also suffers from the problem of double consciousness. But unlike Jabbar, who becomes liberated and independent, Hamlet falls victim to paralysis and melancholy.

According to A.C. Bradley, Hamlet is torn between his duty as a son and his duty as a man (Harris and Scott, 121). As a son, he should avenge the murder of his father by Claudius, who is guilty of fratricide. However, as a man, he is morally repulsed by murder; as a result, he is restrained by his conscience and cannot respond in-kind to murder. Although he feels that revenge is futile, he still chastises himself for his inability to act as the ghost of his father expects. After all, two other sons in the tragedy, Laertes

and Fortinbras, seek to revenge their fathers' deaths while the more intellectual Hamlet merely procrastinates.

Theodore Spencer says Hamlet is torn by an additional inner conflict: the disparity between the ideal and the real (Harris and Scott, 169). In other words, he is torn by the way things should be (thou shall not kill) and the way things are (blood should have blood). So even though Hamlet clings to the ideal, he berates himself for not being more forthcoming with actions more characteristic of a twelfth century Danish prince.

Similarly, Spencer argues, the complexity of consciousness is also revealed when Hamlet is torn between two other extremes: contemplation and action (Harris and Scott, 169). In this dilemma, Hamlet battles reason and emotion. Reason requires the tragic hero to be contemplative, whereas emotion precipitates action often rash and ill-thought out. Thus, when Hamlet, a university scholar, weighs the relative merits of contemplation versus impulsive decision-making, the pendulum swings in favor of careful examination of the issue and its consequences. His cultivated mind is prone to microscopic examination and analysis rather than rashness and impetuosity.

This inability to act quickly is not in itself unique to Hamlet. Harden Craig says Hamlet is "an Everyman figure, prone to two human weaknesses: a propensity to hesitation and a difficulty in mustering enough courage to act. Hamlet thus becomes a hero in whom we recognize our common humanity" (Harris and Scott, 277).

Nevertheless, as A.C. Bradley points out, the paralytic inaction caused by his father's murder pales in comparison to the "profound melancholy" he experiences as the result of his mother's hasty marriage to Claudius, his father's brother and murderer (Harris and Scott, 120). Hamlet cannot fathom his mother's attraction to Claudius, who is the exact opposite of his father. For example, Hamlet Sr. is like Hyperion (the Greek god of manly perfection) and Claudius is like a satyr (half goat and half man); Hamlet Sr. is a fair mountain and Claudius is a moor; in other words, Claudius is no more like his father than Hamlet is like Hercules (1.2.140-53). Hamlet is baffled by the union that has made his mother so very happy.

This melancholia, as defined by Lawrence Babb, in "Pathological Grief and Other Forms of Grief in the Drama," is purely an intellectual phenomenon which is caused by grief and frustration" (276). Hamlet experiences unrelenting grief over his mother's marriage. Frustration arises because he is powerless to do anything about this union, which is sanctioned by both the council and his mother.

Hamlet's problem is further exacerbated because he is torn by the meaningless of life and the fear of death. While engaging in his most private thoughts, his despondency about these two extremes becomes evident. In his first soliloquy, he wishes that his "too, too solid flesh would melt" (Act I, scene ii). In another soliloquy, he ponders yet again the issues of life and death: His pre-occupation with death is evident in the first line of his most famous soliloquy: "To be or not to be, that is the question" (Act 3). Again he stops

short of “self-slaughter.” Though the main reason he gives is that Christianity frowns on suicide, he is also afraid of the unknown, afraid of the “uncharted country from which no traveller has ever returned” (124). After all, as Hamlet says, dead people may have nightmares and endure an existence far more devastating than an unhappy life (123).

In conclusion, sports hero Jabbar and tragic hero Hamlet suffer from double-consciousness. A definite parallel can be drawn between the two heroes. First, both men are intellectuals: Jabbar is a graduate of UCLA and a post graduate student at Harvard University; Hamlet, although in his thirties, is still a student at Wittenberg University.

Second, both intellects brood about their predicament and isolate themselves from society by turning inward and losing a degree of communication with and connectiveness to society. These introverts are torn by the need to satisfy self and the desire to live up to societal expectations. For example, Jabbar eventually breaks free of critical coaches, overbearing reporters and insensitive fans and finds much satisfaction in living a non-traditional lifestyle based on the Muslim religion and Middle Eastern traditions. He rises above his dilemma, for such duality ultimately leads to liberation and self-identity; today, he is respected by his former critics. On the other hand, Hamlet is overcome by his inner struggle and disappointment; therefore, he retreats in feigned madness as well as in self-reproaching soliloquies. He exerts negative energy in a vain attempt to cope with his predicament of having a mother stained.

Third, Jabbar and Hamlet remain true to themselves and make decisions based on their sense of right and wrong. Jabbar is a professional sports hero who refuses to make his personal life the subject of interviews. He will not comment on nor justify his lifestyle and his religion. Similarly, Hamlet opposes pre-meditated murder. Even in the face of indisputable evidence of fratricide, Hamlet does not avenge his father’s death. He does, however, avenge his mother’s death because pre-meditation is not involved. He witnesses the death of his mother and, in an emotional state, kills his uncle/stepfather out of rage and the passion of the moment. His impetuous nature is to act immediately when he sees wrongdoing.

Jabbar and Hamlet, a sports hero and a tragic hero, react and respond to life based on their personal integrity. They stand on the “common ground” of human experience, thus validating King Solomon’s statement, which was later uttered by Hamlet, “there is nothing new under the sun.”

## LESSON PLANS

### Lesson Plan 1: Defining moments and life connections

#### *Project CLEAR Goal 2: Genre Study*

The student reads a variety of genres and texts for a variety of purposes.

#### *Bloom's Taxonomy*

Level 1: Thinking Process

1. What is tragedy? What is an autobiography?
2. What are the characteristics of tragedy? Autobiography?

Level 4: Analysis

1. What literary techniques or structures do Shakespeare and Jabbar employ?
2. From the discussion thus far, which genre do you think is more interesting reading? Support your response.

Level 5: Synthesis

1. Can you compose a song or a poem that reflects your understanding of these two genres (i.e. autobiography and tragedy)?
2. How effective are you in recalling significant events of your past? Give a few examples.

#### *Learning Activity: Communication and Autobiography*

Student objectives are:

- To compare and contrast perceptions of the past;
- To determine which definition of autobiography most closely reflects your understanding this genre; and
- To demonstrate the essence of autobiography in creative, non-traditional, and artistic media of expression.

#### *Walking Down Memory Lane*

Even though you are just a teenager, the editor of the *Madison Marlins Gazette* has asked you to write your autobiography and you have agreed. After engaging in the pre-writing strategy of brainstorming, you refine your ideas by using a more focused pre-writing strategy, outlining.

1. On the left side of a sheet of paper, write the five most important events or experiences that you would like to include in this publication.

2. On the left side of a second sheet of paper, elaborate on the most significant event. Be as graphic and as specific as you can.
3. When you go home today, ask your parent or guardian to tell you the five most important events or experiences that he or she remembers about *your* life. Write down the responses on the right side of the first sheet of paper.
4. On the right side of the second sheet of paper, write down your parent's or guardian's recollection of the most important event in your life.
5. Study the two sheets of paper.
6. Be prepared to discuss the following questions during the next class meeting:
7. Did your responses overlap with your parents' responses? If so, which items did you both agree on?
8. Which items were on your list but not on your parent's list?
9. Can you explain the difference in recollection?
10. Classify each item as being positive or negative. Were there more positive items on one list than on the other? If so, how do you account for this difference?
11. What role did the point of view or the narrator's perceptions have on the selection of details?
12. Discuss varying degrees of objectivity and impartiality of the two narrators.
13. Which definition of autobiography does your outline most closely resemble? Support your answer.
14. Are there any other observations you would like to share with the class?

### ***Singing Down Memory Lane***

Many singers have theme songs; often the lyrics of these songs reflect the lives of the vocalists. Several cases in point are Frank Sinatra's "I Did It My Way" and "That's Life," Bob Hope's "Thanks for the Memories," Billy Holiday's "God Bless the Child That's Got His Own," and R. Kelly's "I Believe I Can Fly."

Perhaps you, too, have a song that represents your present life or a song that represents what you envision your life will be in years to come. If you have such a CD, bring it to class. If you play an instrument and can sing, share your musical talent with the class. Make ten copies of the song for class distribution. (If you do not have access to a printer or you are low on funds, see me.)

### ***Reciting a Poem Down Memory Lane***

Throughout the semester, we have memorized inspirational poems that, I hope, will strengthen you when you are in the dumps like the narrator was in Shakespeare's "Sonnet XXIX." Poems such as "Invictus," "If," "Be the Best of Whatever You Are," and "Myself," are just a few of my favorites.



Identify your favorite poem or write a poem about your life so far, your dreams, the value of self-esteem, or rewards of a positive attitude. Then in a five-to-seven sentence paragraph, tell why this selection speaks to your heart. If possible, relate some incident that, upon reflection, reveals the theme of the poem.

## **Lesson Plan 2: Defining moments and literary connections**

### ***Project CLEAR Goal 2: Genre Study***

The student reads a variety of genres and texts for a variety of purposes.

### ***Bloom's Taxonomy***

#### Level 2: Comprehension

1. What differences exist between the effects of double consciousness on Hamlet and on Jabbar?
2. How did the tragic hero and the sports hero handle their respective dilemmas?
3. Do you believe that inconsistency exists in society and that persons should modify their behavior to accommodate different audiences?

#### Level 6: Evaluation

1. How would you have handled Jabbar's dilemma? Hamlet's dilemma?
2. How effective were Jabbar and Shakespeare in developing realistic portrayals of the protagonists in the respective works?

### ***Learning Activity: Communication and Double Consciousness***

Student objectives are:

- To recognize inconsistencies in delivery methods and
- To apply these inconsistencies to literary selections.

Usually, when we buy our clothes, we try to envision the place or places we will wear them. After all, some clothes are more appropriate for certain settings than others. For example, would you wear the same kind of outfit to a Madison basketball game that you would wear to a ballet at the Wortham Theatre? Would you wear the same kind of outfit to church that you would wear to Adair Park? (I hope your answers were "no." If they were not, there is more of a generation gap between us than I realize. ☺)

The same consideration of appropriateness should be attached to our words and actions. Have you ever modified your words or actions depending on the person with whom you were communicating? Depending on who the listener is, do you use formal, informal, or slang words and actions in order to get your point across successfully?

*Part A:* Reflect on the Anglo-Saxon folk epic, *Beowulf*. Imagine you are the monster Grendel; after you retreat with your mortal wound to your mother's underwater lair, you are asked to tell your autobiography with emphasis on your fight with Beowulf. Tell your story to two of the following characters: your monster mother, Beowulf's children, the fire dragon whom Beowulf will meet years later, the narrator in the "The Seafarer," or the narrator in "The Wife's Lament." Consider the appropriateness of your language and the expectations of the listener.

*Part B:* Imagine you are the squire in the *The Canterbury Tales*, and you have engaged in a great battle. Although you receive a "red badge of courage," your "badge" was the result of cowardice, not courage. Like Stephen Crane's Civil War protagonist Henry Fielding, you were devastated by and fearful of the raging battle.

As the squire, explain the circumstances of the wound to two of the following pilgrims: the knight, who is your father; the parson; the wife of Bath, or the Oxford scholar. Consider the appropriateness of your language and the expectations of the listener. You may need to review the prologue to reconstruct the personality of the pilgrims as well as re-read their stories, which give further insight into their character and nature.

## APPENDIX

### Shakespeare's use of the Greek's dramatic structure in his tragedies

This material on tragedy is merely a review since my students have already studied Greek and English Renaissance tragedy. Major points of discussion follow.

Tragedy originated with the ancient Greeks and was defined by the famous ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle in *Ars Poetica*. He defines tragedy as a play that “arouses pity and fear in the audience—pity for the tragic hero (protagonist) and fear for all men who are subject to character flaws and a destiny that is unknown.” In addition, seeing tragedy unfold “produces a catharsis,” or a cleansing of pity and fear; by the end of the play, the “audience is in awe as the hero faces defeat.” (*The Language of Literature: British Literature*, 321)

The tragic hero has several characteristics:

- He is a person of royal blood or high position;
- He has a tragic flaw (hamartia), which is usually excessive pride (hubris); and
- He is basically a good man who makes a mistake in judgment or falls victim to hubris excessive pride

I paraphrase Aristotle's five-part dramatic structure as given in Thrall and Hibbard's *Dictionary of Literary Terms*.

Act I: Exposition (Background information is given, the main characters are introduced, and the exciting force or conflict is introduced.)

Act II: Rising Action (The conflict intensifies.)

Act III: Climax (The hero's fortune is reversed.)

Act IV: Falling Action (The hero is placed in a position that appears to be hopeless, one from which he cannot extricate himself.)

Act V: Denouement/Catastrophe (The defeat, downfall, and death of the hero and the main characters.)

English Renaissance drama imitates the conventions of the ancient Greeks and adheres to Aristotle's standards. However, the tragedy enjoyed popularity in England due, in part, to the success of morality and miracle plays performed during the Medieval Period. These pre-Renaissance plays dwelt on biblical or moral themes and served to whet the literary appetite of theatergoers who were ready for the highly charged, action-filled dramas from the bard of Stratford-on-Avon.

## WORKS CITED

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957.

*The Language of Literature: Britain*. McDougal Littell & Co., 1998. pp. 321.

Peterson, Linda H., John C. Brereton, and Joan E. Hartman, eds. *The Norton Reader*. 9th ed. New York: Norton, 1996. pp. 982.

Olney, James, ed. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980.

Thrall, William and Addison Hibbard. *A Handbook to Literature*. New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Teacher Resources

Babb, Lawrence. "Pathological Grief and Other Forms of Grief in the Drama." In *The Elizabethan Malady: A Study of Melancholia in English Literature*. East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press, 1951.

<http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/jung.html>

Boeree, Dr. C. George. "Personality Theories: Carl Jung."

Loy, John W. Jr., Gerald Kenyon, and Barry McPherson. *Sport, Culture and Society*, 2nd ed. Philadelphia, Penn.: Lea and Febiger, 1981.

This text examines the sociology of sports with its macro and macro social systems.

Olney, James, ed. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980.

This collection of essays explores various aspects of autobiography as a literary form as well as offers studies of some specific autobiographies.

Pascal, Roy. *Design and Truth in Autobiography*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960.

This text examines the historical perspective of the autobiography as a genre and the various approaches to this kind of writing.

Pipkin, James. "One and Yet Many." In *On Common Ground*. Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute 7 (1996): 15-16.

This essay delves into the commonality and distinctiveness of American literature and

re-examines the applicability of current debates about the traditional motto, “E Pluribus Unum.”

Williams, Peter. *Sports Immortals: Deifying the American Athlete*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling State University Popular Press, 1994.

This text explains the psychology of hero worship in sports and presents an interesting relationship between sports heroes and Greek archetypal deities.

### **Teacher and Student Resources**

Abdul-Jabbar, Kareem, and Peter Knobler. *Giant Steps: An Autobiography of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar*. New York: Bantam Books, 1983.

Ashe, Arthur. *A Hard Road to Glory: A History of the African-American Athlete*. New York: Warner Books, 1988.

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu>

Dubois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*.

This text delves into the essence of black consciousness and its effect on the black man.

Edwards, Harry. *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*. New York: Free Press, 1969.

This text focuses on the revolt of the black athlete during the 1960s.

Emra, Bruce, ed. *Sports in Literature*. Chicago, Ill.: National Textbook, 1991.

Harris, Laurie and Mark Scott, eds. *Shakespearean Criticism*, Vol. I. Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research Company, Book Tower, 1984.

This volume excerpts criticism from the important scholarly books on Hamlet by A. C. Bradley, Harden Craig, and Theodore Spencer.

Johnson, James Weldon. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. New York: Vintage Books of Random House, 1989.

This text reveals a man who lives in both the black and white worlds.

Orr, Jack. *The Black Athlete: His Story in American History*. New York: Lions Books, 1969.

This text focuses more on black athletes and their ability to impact professional sports in the last forty years.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet and Related Readings*. Dallas, Tex.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997.