

Three American Families in the Plays of William Gibson, Lorraine Hansberry, and Thornton Wilder

Jacquelyn Stowers
Austin High School

INTRODUCTION TO THE CURRICULUM UNIT

Students at Houston's Austin High School have had increasingly few opportunities to see staged productions in recent years. In my first years at Austin, beginning in 1993, the drama department performed two to three productions a year, in addition to variety-type programs for Black History Month and Cinco de Mayo. Students from the University of Houston's drama department occasionally performed for enthusiastic student audiences also. In the last few years, however, because of the pressure to prepare for standardized tests, teachers have been reluctant to give up any class time. Even if teachers have wanted their classes to attend, few performances were possible because budgets were reduced for elective classes such as drama. Consequently, few students have enjoyed the magic of a theatrical production.

For an even longer period, drama has been neglected in most classrooms, too. Shakespeare's plays are, of course, the exception, with *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Macbeth* routinely included in the literature books and the curricula of the different grade levels. But while the ninth grade literature book contains an additional three plays, these are rarely taught: there are too many tests to be prepared for and too many other objectives to be covered.

I believe that students need to see stage productions, read plays in class, and also practice creative dramatics. Going to the theater is a cultural experience which brings communities, be they in a school or city, closer together. Reading plays aloud in class is a proven reading improvement strategy, and students are usually quite enthusiastic about the opportunity to "take parts." For a relatively small investment of time, students can encounter memorable characters, discuss important themes, and hear distinctive speech. Reading plays aloud, perhaps standing up and acting a little in front of the class, has two benefits: students overcome their shyness and enhance their self-esteem, and the 90-minute block passes by a little more quickly with some adolescent energy used constructively. Creative dramatics activities done prior to reading aloud help prepare students for a little acting and for reading louder and more expressively.

My own interest in drama stems from a few happy classroom drama memories and from a long history as a delighted spectator. In Mr. O'Malley's tenth grade English class, I was both terrified and thrilled to be cast as a nun in a play whose name I have forgotten. To prepare for the classroom presentation, the players had to meet at someone's house—a social opportunity! Again, I was terrified and thrilled. My dramatic debut with pillowcase wimple was unremarkable, except that for a shy tenth grader it was a

monumental achievement! My second role in a classroom drama was that of a French-speaking bear in a play version of a La Fontaine fable. My French teacher somehow matched each of us with our animal alter-ego (and managed to avoid offending us at the same time). He emphasized characterization as well as pronunciation, and the whole production, even without costumes or sets, was a big success. Thirty-five or more years later, these two experiences remain vivid and remind me that learning can be fun for both teachers and students. Certainly Mr. O'Malley and Monsieur Dunn, the French teacher, were having fun with our classroom theater performances.

Although my performances were few, attending plays has been a constant in my life: as a child, going to Little Theater productions in Phoenix with my mother and her friends; watching talented high school friends perform Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke* only a few feet from the audience in Central High School's drama room; living next door to the arts building at Southern Methodist University and taking advantage of student-priced tickets for dates (and later seeing former students Powers Boothe and Steven Tobolowski on screen as well as Beth Henley's plays); congratulating myself on living within walking distance of Dallas' Greenville Avenue Theater and enjoying the luxury of season tickets; proudly watching South Oak Cliff High's musical programs in an auditorium packed with teachers, parents, and students; moving to Houston and discovering the Alley and other theaters here. As Katharine Anne Ommanney says under the frontispiece of her book, *The Stage and the School*, "The theatre is the gateway to thrilling adventures in an imaginary world." Seeing a play on stage is not just "seeing," either; it's an interactive experience in which the audience affects the actors just as the playwright and players affect the audience.

To provide my students with these adventures is a little beyond my capabilities as a classroom language arts teacher, especially since time to plan field trips and money to fund them are both in short supply. But in my classroom, I hope that students can begin sharpening their appetites for live theater.

Fortunately, Austin High School's theater curtain has risen again this spring, with the promise of more productions next year under the leadership of a new drama teacher. Recently there have been new opportunities for field trips: Austin students were able to enjoy a production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Rice University campus this spring, and preview nights at the University of Houston's theater are a possibility for next season.

Seeing staged productions on campus or away from school, or participating in a production, can inspire students with the subject matter and can motivate them to read other plays on their own. Some may even become bitten with the "show biz" bug! There are equally important reasons for using drama (either creative dramatics or reading plays) in class on a regular basis. The most compelling argument is based on Howard Gardner's research on multiple intelligences: the brain needs early exposure to a variety of experiences (Cornett 11). According to the authors of *Creative Dramatics for the Classroom Teacher*, creative dramatics (which is not for entertainment of an audience but

for the “growth and development of the players”) can aid in “. . . developing language arts skills; improving socialization skills; stimulating creative imagination; developing an understanding of human behaviors; and participating in group work and group problem solving” (5).

Creative dramatics is especially beneficial for students who are in the process of polishing their English skills. Many of my students do not speak English as their first language, and their lack of ease in the language makes them reluctant to participate in class. But, “improvisational drama is effective because of the repeated pressure it puts on participants to respond. It is not enough for students to hear the target language spoken; they need to talk themselves” (Bauer 4).

DISCUSSION OF UNIT

While proponents of creative dramatics, theater games, and even Readers Theatre generally do not make use of published plays, I believe a merging of the traditional classroom reading of plays (with everyone taking a part and perhaps practicing with a goal of acting out some scenes) and the activities of creative drama can be beneficial. The unit I am proposing for my ninth grade regular, pre-advanced placement, and magnet classes would allow extra time for some improvisational and Readers Theatre activities prior to reading a group of thematically related plays. In the plays *The Miracle Worker* by William Gibson, *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, and *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder, the common theme is **family**. I am planning approximately a week of creative dramatics activities interspersed with teaching other literature with the same overall theme: a short story and at least three poems. Then I will spend a little more than two weeks for each of the three plays, for a total of seven weeks. By teaching reading skills, vocabulary, and literary terms, and practicing writing (especially open-ended responses) as well as reading and speaking, the unit should be able to demonstrate many of HISD’s TAKS objectives.

The first week of the unit is crucial to the success of the entire unit. I want the students to become comfortable with performing and reading aloud, and I want to begin the work on the themes the literary works have in common, as well as the literary terms. To encourage them to think about the themes, I will require a journal entry in answer to a quotation or statement relating to the family. Some sample journal topics are: “Why do many parents have high expectations for their children?”; “Can such high expectations have a negative effect on the children?”; “Do the high expectations ever have a positive effect?”; “What aspirations (hopes and goals) do your parents or family members have for you?”; “Do you agree or disagree with these aspirations?”; “Give an example of a conflict you had with a parent or older family member and how you resolved it.”; “Were you happy with the way the conflict was resolved at the time?”; and “How do you feel about the conflict and its resolution now?” All of these topics will encourage the students to think about the issues in our first literary work, the short story “Two Kinds” by Amy Tan.

The first day of the unit we can begin to read Tan's story in our literature book, *The Language of Literature*. The story is primarily about a mother and daughter in conflict over the mother's aspirations for her daughter. The story is part of Tan's popular novel *The Joy Luck Club*, published in 1989 and made into a movie in 1993. Like the daughter in "Two Kinds," Tan, born in 1952, is the child of Chinese immigrants. The mother-daughter conflict in "Two Kinds" is sometimes violent and sometimes humorous, but it is not resolved until the daughter has grown up and the mother has died. This conflict is set inside another conflict: that of modern American culture and traditional Chinese culture. The story provides many starting points for discussing conflicts in families, cultural issues among immigrant or minority families, and the students' own aspirations in contrast with their parents' aspirations for them. In addition, the story is enjoyable to read aloud with lots of conversation and considerable humor.

But, before beginning the reading, I want to ease the students into the drama unit by teaching them some voice warm-up activities as described in Maria C. Novelly's book, *Theatre Games for Young Performers*. First, we'll simply breathe in and out slowly a few times. Then we'll count aloud by fives to 100, first starting softly and getting loud; then starting loudly and becoming quieter and quieter. Next we'll loosen up our mouths by stretching them in different directions, out like a fish's and in like an old person's. Saying the vowel sounds "ah, oh, ooh, eeh" is next, followed by saying the vowel sounds plus various beginning or ending consonants (e.g., "fah, foh, fooh, feeh"). Finally we'll try a few tongue twisters: "specific Pacific," "fresh fried fish," "pre-shrunk shirts," and so on (64-65).

These voice warm-up activities and the many variations will be routine after the first week, and some of the more adventurous or outgoing students can lead the others. The idea I want to impress upon the class is that we're not preparing merely to read aloud from the book as usual: we're preparing as actors prepare for their work on stage.

The next group of activities, to begin on the third day of the unit, allows students to practice putting expression into their reading as well as varying the volume of the voices. For "Color Your Nursery Rhymes," I'll write a short nursery rhyme (e.g., "Little Miss Muffet") on the board and then read it in various ways—nervously or angrily, for example. The students repeat the rhyme after me and imitate the way in which I read it. Then a student can be the leader and continue reading the same rhyme in other ways—like a newscaster or like a shy person. Again the rest of the class imitates the reading (67). This activity, like the warm-ups, allows the shyer students to respond in a group instead of individually, which I hope will increase everyone's confidence.

The following activity, "Greeting By Number," involves getting up and moving—a break most ninth graders can appreciate! Two groups (probably no more than four students in each group at one time due to space limitations) line up opposite each other, with pairs facing each other. One group is instructed to come forward and always greet the others with the numbers "1, 2, 3, 4," spoken as if to say, "Hi, how are you?" The

other group is to meet their counterparts with “5, 6, 7, 8,” spoken as if to say, “Fine, thanks very much.” (All of the class can practice this new “language of numbers” together to give the groups moral support!) After practicing walking towards each other, greeting with the numbers, and then walking past each other, the group members are ready for the variations: greet each other like long-lost friends, like rude people in a hurry, or like robots, still using the same numbers for the same words (67-68). After a few of these variations of the game, two new groups can try additional variations. In this exercise students are encouraged to be a little silly (or extremely silly!) to communicate the different types of people or situations or emotions. The extra benefit is that they’re up and moving, using their bodies as well as their voices to express themselves. Since this activity requires some space, only a few people at a time can participate. If the students become restless while waiting their turn to act, it would probably be better to go on to another activity and give the students who hadn’t participated time to do so the following day.

Another creative dramatics activity, “Directed Poetry Reading,” involves the whole class at first; later, students separate into groups. First I’ll read, as expressively as I can, Langston Hughes’ poem, “Dream Deferred,” which asks a series of questions in the form of similes about what happens when a dream (goal) is postponed or deferred. At the end, the speaker of the poem asks, “Or does it explode?” implying that violence can be the outcome of a postponed dream. Students will only listen as I read; they will not have their own copies yet. After I’ve read it two or three times, I’ll distribute copies, and we’ll discuss the poem and why I read it the way I did (68). This poem provides a good opportunity to teach or reteach the literary term *simile*. The vocabulary is not difficult although we need to discuss the different meanings of *dream*. To completely understand the poem it’s helpful to know that Langston Hughes, an African American, lived from 1902 until 1967. In the years prior to his death, the Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum. Most importantly, I’ll ask if anyone has noticed the relationship between the poem and one of the titles of the plays we’re going to read. *A Raisin in the Sun* takes its title from the poem’s line, “Does it dry up/like a raisin in the sun?” This connection, of course, provides the perfect moment to teach the literary term *allusion*.

After this discussion of the Hughes poem, students can work individually for a while. I’ll hand out copies of Sandra Cisneros’ moving poem “Abuelito Who,” a description of her grandfather written in a series of clauses beginning with “who,” and ending with the question, “who loves him who?” In choosing this poem and “Dream Deferred,” I have disregarded Novelly’s instructions to avoid lyric poems for reading aloud (69). Not only does Cisneros’ poem directly connect with the unit’s theme of family, but I also think this poem will be very appealing to my students, many of whom have close relationships with their grandparents and most of whom, like Cisneros, are Mexican American. Before we read this poem aloud, I will ask the students to read it silently and to mark their copies with words that can be “colored” by their expressive reading, words such as “who used to laugh.” Also, they should note what emotions the speaker feels towards her grandfather and when or if these emotions change (69). Then we’ll discuss their findings and a

volunteer or two can read the poem aloud, trying for appropriate expression. Before the students move into their assigned groups for the next activity, I'll explain that the understanding of the poem's *tone*, the author's or speaker's attitude towards the subject of the poem, is crucial to reading aloud with the appropriate expression.

For the group activity portion of "Directed Poetry Reading," I'll divide the class into several groups of varying sizes: smaller groups of two or three for the shorter poems by Shel Silverstein: "Clarence," "The Pirate," and "Never," all selected from *A Light in the Attic*, published in 1982. Silverstein, whose book *Where the Sidewalk Ends* is recommended by Novelly, seems to be universally popular with this age group (69). His humorous, irreverent poems offer students a chance to practice "deadpan" delivery and to learn satire, understatement, and irony. For example, in "The Pirate," the speaker describes all the terrible things the pirate has done, but then begs to sit next to him at the dinner table!

Larger groups of four, five, or six can work on the longer, story-type poems, all of which are found in the ninth grade literature book. (If the classes are larger than 30, additional poems can be used.) "Annabel Lee" by Edgar Allan Poe is a soulful, songlike poem expressing the love between the speaker and his bride, whose untimely death is the subject of the poem. "O What Is That Sound" by W. H. Auden is a ballad telling of betrayal between family members or lovers in the time of the Revolutionary War. "The Wreck of the Hesperus" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow tells the tragic story of an actual shipwreck in the 1800s.

Once the groups are organized and have read their poems, they should discuss the meaning and tone of their poems. Then they should practice reading aloud, with different people taking different lines or stanzas (not reading as a chorus). To help the groups complete their tasks, I will appoint group leaders and give them worksheets with questions to make sure they've inspected the poems thoroughly.

After a reasonable amount of time, perhaps 30 minutes, the groups will present their poems to the class. The students should stand up as a group in front of the class. They do not need to memorize their lines. Although these six poems do not relate to our family theme directly, the activity is designed to prepare them for longer reading assignments and "on stage" experiences.

By the end of the week, we can begin some improvisation activities, such as "Add-on Story," "Telling a Story and Acting It Out," and "Group Improvs with a Given Situation" (91-96). The "Add-on Story" is a fairly simple game in which five students sit in the front of the classroom; someone not in the group acts as the leader. One person begins telling a story (one of his/her own creation or a well known story). After 30-60 seconds, the leader stops the first person and chooses another person to take over the storytelling, then a third person, and so on. The last person picked by the leader must finish the story

(91). Rather than repeating this activity immediately, I'll explain the next improvisational game.

Students who didn't participate earlier may volunteer for "Telling a Story and Acting It Out." A narrator is chosen to stand to the side and tell a story; five or six students act out the story in the front of the room. The narrator can pause briefly from time to time to allow for spontaneous dialogue (92). (If the narrator doesn't have a story that he/she is confident about telling, I can have a short folk tale or familiar story ready for him/her to read.) Again, before giving other students opportunities to take part in this activity, and before trying a variation of it, I'll give the directions for "Group Improvs with a Given Situation." Time permitting, possibly the last day of the first week, more students can participate in "Add-on Story" and "Telling a Story and Acting It Out."

Depending on the situations (which are written down ahead of time on index cards), two to five students may volunteer to improvise. They are given about one minute to confer with each other before they act out the situation. Some sample situations that relate to the theme of family are: teenagers sneaking into the house after their curfew; family members in a car having an argument, when suddenly the car runs out of gas in the middle of nowhere; a teenager tries to explain his/her way out of a situation (such as a bad report card, or taking the car without permission), without upsetting the parents (94-96).

Our concluding activity of the week will be a rehearsed (but still casual) performance in the classroom of "One Situation—Three Ways Scene" (101-102). All students will participate, working in groups of three. Each group will be given a situation and a worksheet on which to write down their ideas and plans. The groups will have no more than 40 minutes to plan their presentations. The first "way" they'll present their situation will be in pantomime, the second way will include dialogue, and the third way will be completely unexpected: for example, the characters might become animals or the situation might be portrayed through singing (100-101). The idea is to be as creative as possible and to practice improvisation. As Ruth Heinig and Lyda Stillwell note in *Creative Dramatics for the Classroom Teacher*, ". . . the action and dialogue are improvised rather than memorized from written scripts" (5).

The Plays

The following week we'll begin the study of the plays. The students will continue to keep their journals at the beginning of class, and we'll add new literary terms to a "word wall" made of brightly colored bulletin board paper each day as a concluding activity. By now, reading aloud, standing up to read, and coming up to the front of the class should be fairly non-threatening. Ideally we will read all of the plays aloud, but if necessary, the students can read some of the plays at home as homework. In addition, students will have been assigned some research topics on the plays on the first day of the unit: archaeology (*Our Town*), Chicago's neighborhoods in the 1950s (*Raisin*), and the lives of

Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan (*Miracle Worker*), as well as information about the authors and the settings. The students' research findings will be presented on the third or fourth day of the study of each play.

The Miracle Worker

The first play we'll read is *The Miracle Worker*, the story of Helen Keller, the blind and deaf child who learned to read and speak through the tireless work of her teacher, Anne Sullivan. William Gibson, born in 1914, wrote the play originally for television in 1957 and later revised it for Broadway. He based the play on letters written by Sullivan. It opened on Broadway in 1959 with Anne Bancroft as Anne Sullivan and 12-year-old Patty Duke as Helen; it won six Tony Awards, including best play. Bancroft and Duke repeated their roles in the movie version and both won Academy Awards. As an adult, Duke played the role of Anne Sullivan in a made-for-television movie and won an Emmy. Most recently, in 2000, the play was again produced for television with Alison Elliott as Sullivan and Hallie Kate Eisenberg (of Pepsi commercial fame) as Helen. The play definitely has staying power! (Ridge)

What is the appeal of this play, set in the 1880s, for today's young people? I think one reason my students have responded positively to this play is that it is realistic about familial relationships. Having a handicapped child in a family may or may not be a tragedy, but it's nearly always stressful for the other members of the household. Helen's mother, Kate (or Katie) Keller is young. Helen is her first child and became blind and deaf as a result of an illness. Kate's love for her child and desire to protect and take care of her actually prevent her from helping Helen: Helen is completely undisciplined.

To complicate matters, Kate is the second wife of Helen's father. In addition to Helen, Kate must contend with a new baby and an unhappy stepson, James, who is on the brink of adulthood and who resents Kate for taking the place of his dead mother. James and Kate are at least polite with one another, but James and his father, Captain Keller, do not get along at all. Keller treats James as a child and doesn't listen to him; James doesn't stand up for himself and sulks.

One thing the Keller men have in common is their lack of tolerance for Helen and the inevitable commotion she causes. Everyone in the household tries to pacify six-year-old Helen, who is frustrated much of the time because she cannot communicate her needs to anyone. Instead of training Helen in everyday skills such as how to eat at the table, the family and the servants ignore her as much as possible and try to keep her happy with favorite tidbits of food. At the beginning of the play, the family's frustration is extreme: James, Captain Keller, and their aunt are considering sending Helen to an institution.

Into this troubled situation comes a young Irish American woman with her own set of problems: Anne (or Annie) Sullivan. She is a complete contrast to the Kellers. Captain Keller, a veteran of the Confederacy, considers her a Yankee, an outsider, an uppity

woman who doesn't recognize his authority in his household. Their life of ease is foreign to her, brought up in the asylums of the Eastern cities. She herself is nearly blind and she's also poor and without family. Her determination to make Helen learn language in spite of all obstacles wins over most readers or audiences. She tirelessly works, both physically and emotionally, to teach Helen the sign language that will open the world to the girl. In the last scene of the play she succeeds!

Many scenes in *The Miracle Worker* are full of action and fun to act out. One of my favorites takes place soon after Annie's arrival at the Keller home. Helen becomes angry at Annie, hits her with the new doll Annie has brought her, locks her in the bedroom, and throws the key in the well. Annie, nursing her injuries, realizes that Helen is bright as well as mischievous. James' remarks add to Annie's embarrassment at the situation. Three students can volunteer to plan and present this scene; a few props make it work better. As the play progresses, other groups may present additional scenes. The players do not need to memorize their lines; they can carry their small paperbacks easily. Helen, of course, has no lines, but must be very physical and expressive.

A Raisin in the Sun

The next play of our unit is *A Raisin in the Sun*, written in 1959 by a young African American woman, Lorraine Hansberry. *Raisin* was important "back in the day" since it was the first Broadway play written by a black woman and directed by a black director (Lloyd Richards). Winner of the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, it starred Sidney Poitier, Claudia McNeil, and Ruby Dee. It brought the reality of the black experience to white theater patrons and gave black audiences a look at themselves (Corley). The story is rich with characters, conflict, suspense, and language. It concerns the Younger family in their tenement apartment on Chicago's south side: the widowed mother Lena; her daughter, Beneatha; her son, Walter, and his wife, Ruth, and their son, young Travis. Both Ruth and her mother-in-law work in white women's homes; Walter is a chauffeur for a wealthy white man; Beneatha is a college student. They are struggling, but they have dreams, all of them, and the focus of the play is on the money needed to make the dreams happen: the \$10,000 insurance money left by Walter, Sr. Mama and Ruth want the family to move to a house away from the city with light and space for a garden; Walter wants a fresh start in life with a business of his own, a liquor store; Beneatha wants money for college, including medical school.

A Raisin in the Sun is still relevant. After two successful movie versions, the play has been revived on Broadway with Sean (P. Diddy) Combs as Walter and Phylicia Rashad (formerly of *Cosby*) as Mama. Both Rashad and Audra McDonald, who plays Ruth, won Tony Awards in 2004 (*Raisin On Broadway*). The issues of the play are still in the news: discrimination in housing and jobs; abortion; the roles of men and women in the family; assimilation of immigrant and minority cultures. I think the play will engage my students because of these topics and because my students will identify with the characters. Many Austin students have known poverty and discrimination as Hispanic

Americans; many of them, like Beneatha, have the goal of being the first persons in their families to go to college.

Probably the first activity for this play, after getting into the first act, should be to relate it to Langston Hughes' poem that we read during the first week of the unit. The students will examine the images in the poem and decide why Lorraine Hansberry chose the one she did for the title of the play. A journal topic for this part of the unit will ask students to discuss dreams of their own families.

For the second activity, students will have an opportunity to try writing a scene. Working in groups of no more than three, students will select a short scene from *Raisin* and rewrite it by updating it, setting it in Houston, and making the Younger family Hispanic! Then the groups can trade and read each other's scripts and perhaps read them expressively in front of the class.

Our Town

The last play of our unit is also the oldest. Thornton Wilder, born in 1897, won his first Pulitzer Prize in 1927 for his second novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. After a less successful novel in 1934, Wilder began writing for the theater, and in 1938 won his second Pulitzer for *Our Town*, which was a critical and popular success on Broadway. He is the only writer to have won a Pulitzer in both drama and fiction. In 1942 he won a third Pulitzer for his play, *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

Our Town is one of the most widely produced and best-loved American plays, yet it is also unconventional and often misunderstood. The stage for *Our Town* has no curtain, no scenery, and minimal furniture. It has a stage manager who constantly reminds the audience that this is a play. The stage manager gives history lessons about the town of Grover's Corners, explains the events on stage, and speaks directly to the audience as well as the characters. It is a bit unnatural and unnerving at first, even to modern audiences. Because the play is set at the turn of the last century (1901) in a small New Hampshire town, and because the characters' lives seem simple and decent, some audiences have felt the play was a nostalgic look at the "good old days." It does seem like a simple story: the main characters of the play, two families, the Gibbsses and the Webbs, live side by side. The son of the Gibbsses, George, and the daughter of the Webbs, Emily, grow up and marry. Emily dies with the birth of their second child. The only misfit in the town seems to be the choir director, a drinker, who is treated with pity but left alone.

However, *Our Town* is not such a simple tale, after all. The stage manager keeps reminding the audience of Grover's Corners and its place in the universe and in history. The characters' lives are played out with rituals (a wedding, a funeral), reminding us that the people of Grover's Corners are not unique; they are part of history. When Emily dies, she joins the dead in the cemetery, but they, too, have an existence, and it is after

death that Emily learns what it is to be alive. Revisiting a day of her life, she is overwhelmed with its beauty, but realizes that the living don't appreciate it. Back in the cemetery, Simon Stimson, the choir director, tells her bitterly, "That's what it is to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feelings of those . . . of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you had a million years . . ." (Wilder 101).

Like other audiences, students respond to the play, at first finding it old-fashioned and quaint, but recognizing its power at the end. Although there's no divorce or blended families in Grover's Corners, families are families. By examining the relationship between Emily and her mother or George and his father, students can see the adolescents seeking their parents' approval and striving for independence (yet fearing it, too, as when George and Emily both have doubts about getting married), as all adolescents do. Updating a scene from the play is one way to see its timelessness. Students can pair up to rewrite the scene in which Emily tells George he's too involved with baseball. Today's George might be too involved with his car or with video games! After rewriting this short scene from Act I, students can trade their work with other pairs and let the other pairs read the scenes in front of the class.

To conclude the unit on the American family in these three plays, students must write a personal narrative explaining what they have learned about their own families by reading this literature, including with which character, if any, they have identified. Their journal writings could provide some material for this essay, which will be written outside of class. Students will have time to present their writings and to discuss their discoveries in class during the last week of the unit.

Of course, to show what they have learned about drama, students will also, I hope, want to prepare a scene to present before an audience. The scene could be from one of the plays such as Act III of *Our Town* with quite a few parts, of both living and dead characters, or from scenes the students have already written, such as the updated scene between George and Emily in *Our Town*, or one of the updated scenes from *Raisin*. The students in each class could decide if they wanted to travel to another room (or even the drama room or the auditorium) or if they wanted to invite a few guests (other teachers, counselors, or students) to our room for their performances. Students who didn't wish to perform could take care of posters, invitations, programs, props, and simple costumes. This culminating activity will probably take the unit into the eighth week, but preparing for it and discussing the performances can serve as a satisfying conclusion to a long unit.

EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENTS

By participating in this unit my students will not only improve their reading skills and self-confidence, they will also prepare themselves for the more challenging Shakespearean tragedies that lie ahead and for the Advanced Placement literature exams, which sometimes ask questions about plays or give students the option of using their own

literary choices for the essay questions. In addition to literary and theater terms, students will have an appreciation for the writing-to-performance process. Because of the group work, they should know each other better and have learned how to work together. Another benefit of this unit is that all three plays provide indirect lessons in U.S. history. Finally, I think my students, who are almost all of Hispanic heritage, will have an appreciation for African Americans, a culture they are less familiar with. By examining the struggles of this other marginalized group, and the struggle of the blind and deaf child and her teacher, I hope my students will gain a perspective on issues related to their own status as minorities.

I think this unit featuring some creative dramatics as well as the three plays will be successful with ninth graders, but I think older students could learn a great deal from it also (and have fun, too). If my students increase their understanding of drama on and off the stage, perhaps they also will gain skills with which to deal with the drama of their own lives. As Betty Jane Wagner writes in her Introduction to *Building Moral Communities Through Educational Drama*, “Drama is powerful because its unique balance of thought and feeling makes learning enjoyable, exciting, challenging, and relevant to real-life concerns”(5).

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan 1: Day One of the Unit

Objectives

- ELAL 9.1.b. The students will interact effectively for a variety of purposes such as response and feedback.
- ELAL 9.3.b. The students will demonstrate effective verbal and non-verbal communication skills for a variety of purposes.
- ELAR 9.5.a-h. The students will select and use a variety of strategies and criteria to comprehend and analyze texts.

Materials

- Photographs of the three playwrights and productions of the plays, and photographs of Amy Tan and Langston Hughes.
- Copies of the three plays.
- Example of a journal entry (on a transparency).
- Unlined (typing or copier) paper.
- Transparencies and an overhead projector.
- Slips of paper with the name of one of the plays and a topic for research on each one; a jar from which to draw the slips.
- Large sheets of butcher-type or bulletin board paper on which to record the research topics and the partners working on each topic.
- Textbook: *The Language of Literature*

Procedure

On the first day of this unit I have three major objectives (apart from the Project Clear objectives): to give students an overview of the unit without overwhelming them, to generate enthusiasm for the unit, and to set up a few structures that will make the unit run smoothly.

For the introduction and overview, I will show the books we'll be reading and the photographs of the authors and the productions of the plays. I will provide a list of what students will be reading and doing, how they'll be graded, and my expectations of them. I will mention the theme of the unit, the family. I will explain how to keep the journal, how much to write, and when to write. The journal will be part of their classwork grade and will help them to write their personal narratives at the end of the unit. The students will use their usual folder for the class and will respond to the topic on the overhead at the beginning of class each day, as a warm-up or introductory activity. They should write at least a paragraph. Sometimes a chart (family tree, as discussed below) or illustration will be called for. Most of the other grade will be on participation in the drama activities or reading aloud. The short research report, completed with a partner, and the personal narrative, will round out the information on grading.

Finally, I will assign research partners: from a jar, each student will pick a slip of paper with the name of one of the three plays and a topic written on it. He or she will then find someone else with the same play and same topic – *voila!* – research partners. Then they'll record their names and topics on the designated chart made of bulletin board paper, which will serve as a reminder in the classroom of everyone's research responsibilities. I will give each pair the information they need to begin their work for the class. Since we'll be reading three plays, about one-third of the class will present topics on each one. The due dates for the research reports will vary according to when we're reading each play.

Next, I will give students a chance to work quietly for a few minutes. I will assign the first journal topic: describe your family and draw a family tree or diagram of your family on a separate sheet of unlined paper.

After spending no more than 20 minutes on the journal and family tree, we'll be ready for something lively: voice warm-ups. The sequence and details can be outlined on the overhead for easy reference. The directions for these activities are found in Novelly's book (64-65). The first one is simply breathing in and out slowly. Then count aloud to 100 by fives, starting softly and becoming louder; then starting loudly and becoming softer. Next we'll do mouth stretches: around like a rubber band, in like an old person's mouth, out like a fish's.

The really fun activity is saying the vowels: ah, oh, ooh, eeh, and then adding consonants to the beginning of the vowels (e.g., fah, foh, fooh, feeh) and then adding

consonants to the ends: e.g., ahnt, ohnt, oohnt, eehnt. There are lots of variations for the rest of the unit!

Finally, if we didn't feel silly enough yet, we can practice some tongue-twisters such as "selfish shellfish," "red leather, yellow leather," "unique New York," and "good blood, bad blood." Plenty more of those for another day, too!

These activities all will be done in unison so no one will feel embarrassed, or at least not extremely embarrassed. I will allow less than 100 percent participation on this first day; afterwards everyone should begin getting used to them. By the time these mouth stretches and tongue twisters are over, simply reading aloud and having a discussion should be no problem! And that's what we'll do next: read Amy Tan's story, "Two Kinds," in our literature book aloud, first warming up to the mother-daughter conflict in the story by responding to such questions as: "Have you ever had a conflict with a parent over something you didn't want to do?" and "How was this conflict resolved?" As we read the story, students can ponder whether the narrator should have cooperated more with her mother—or should her mother have accepted her daughter's wishes. We probably won't finish reading and discussing by the end of the first class. We can continue on the second day of the unit.

To conclude the class, I'll ask students to recount the main points of the story (as much as we've read so far) and to review what we expect to accomplish in the unit.

Lesson Plan Two: Day 6 of the Unit

Objectives

- ELAW 9.02.b. The students will organize ideas for writing to ensure coherence, logical progression, and support for ideas.
- ELAR 9.02.e. The students will analyze literary elements for their contribution and meanings to texts.
- ELAR 9.05.a. The students will use a variety of strategies prior to reading to enhance comprehension.
- ELAL 9.02.b. The students will interpret and evaluate written and oral texts.
- ELAL 9.02.d. The students whose first language is other than English will speak with increasing command of English.
- ELAL 9.03.a. The students will prepare, organize, and deliver a variety of oral presentations.
- ELAL 9.03.b. The students will demonstrate effective verbal and nonverbal communication skills for a variety of purposes.
- ELAL 9.04.b. The students will justify the choice of verbal and nonverbal performance technique by analyzing and interpreting texts.

Materials

- Overhead projector with transparency with journal topic written on it.
- My notes on William Gibson and *The Miracle Worker*.
- Transparency with list of voice warm-ups.
- Paperback copies of *The Miracle Worker*.
- Transparency with open-ended and discussion questions assignment.
- Brightly colored bulletin board paper (several feet wide) and markers.
- Copy of *The Language of Literature*.

Procedure

Day Six of the Unit should be exciting: It's the day we start reading plays! Our first play, *The Miracle Worker*, is student-friendly to start with because it's easy to read, and after our introductory activities, it will be especially quick to become acquainted with. This week we will continue journal writing and the voice warm-up activities that we learned last week.

By the sixth day, the students will look to the transparency on the overhead when they first come into the class to find their daily journal topic. Today's topic is: Discuss family conflicts that develop when the family is too focused on one of its members—for example a parent going through a difficult time at work, a sick child, or a teenager who is having boyfriend/girlfriend problems. How do the other family members cope with this situation? What if the problem the person has is permanent—something that isn't going away?

After the students have had a few minutes to think about and complete their journals (no more than 10-15 minutes), I will introduce the first play and the author, William Gibson. I will write the characters' names on a transparency and explain the various relationships. We'll discuss how the characters might relate to one another, and especially to the family member with the problem (as in the journal topic): Helen, the blind, deaf, and dumb child. (Regarding her last handicap, I will explain the denotations/connotations of the word *dumb*, and how most deaf people have to be taught to speak.)

Then, before we begin reading, I'll ask a volunteer to lead us in the voice warm-ups we learned last week: breathing, stretching the mouth, saying the vowels, and enunciating the tongue twisters. I'll ask for volunteers to read at first, noting names and characters on the board; if there are not enough volunteers, I'll refer to a list I'll have prepared with some possible cast members. Students will stand at the front of the class to read. We'll read for 30-40 minutes, stopping to discuss the play (were our predictions correct about the way everyone relates to Helen?) and to decide what expressions and gestures would be appropriate for the readers. This is a good time for students to take note of the author's stage directions, which include adverbs or other descriptions

concerning the way a character says something. At the end of the reading, I'll make a note of where we stopped and who the readers were.

Our concluding activity for most days of this unit is to add literary terms (and other vocabulary words we've discussed) to the word wall, a wide strip of several feet of brightly colored bulletin board paper attached to an accessible part of the wall. Today's words include *act*, *conflict* (*internal* and *external*), *dialogue*, *setting*, *metaphor*, and *drama*. If students are not confident of the definitions, we can use the Glossary in *The Language of Literature*. A volunteer can add these terms and their definitions to the word wall.

The final activity of the day will be to write down two questions to complete in class or as homework if more time is necessary. The students will already be familiar with the TAKS open-ended response format, with the directions to "Support your answer with evidence from the play," and they will have already read these scenes in the play. The questions are as follows:

- (1) When Annie begins teaching Helen the alphabet for the deaf, Helen is able to imitate it right away. Annie calls her "bright," but James calls her a "monkey." How are they both correct?
- (2) During breakfast, Captain Keller and James have a discussion (or argument) about Ulysses S. Grant, the Northern general, and his victories in the Civil War. How is their conversation about war a *metaphor* for Annie's job with Helen?

Lesson Plan Three: Day 22 of the Unit

Objectives

- ELAW 9.02.b. The students will organize ideas in writing to ensure coherence, logical progression, and support for ideas.
- ELAW 9.02.c. The students will use voice and style appropriate to audience and purpose.
- ELAW 9.02.f. The students will write creative texts.
- ELAL 9.02.b. The students will interpret and evaluate written and oral texts.
- ELAL 9.02.d. The students whose first language is other than English will speak with increasing command of English.
- ELAL 9.03.a. The students will prepare, organize, and deliver a variety of oral presentations.
- ELAL 9.03.b. The students will demonstrate effective verbal and nonverbal communication skills for a variety of purposes.
- ELAL 9.04.b. The students will justify the choice of verbal and nonverbal performance techniques by analyzing and interpreting texts.

Materials

- Overhead projector and transparency with journal topic.
- Transparency for making notes of discussion.
- Paperback copies of *A Raisin in the Sun*.
- Brightly colored bulletin board paper and markers.
- *The Language of Literature*.

Procedure

Day 22 is about two-thirds of the way into the Unit. We will have finished the second of our plays, *A Raisin in the Sun*, and the students will be comfortable with warming up their voices, reading aloud, standing up in front of the class, and actually acting out as they read. Routines are well established by now: the journals at the beginning of the class help everyone to focus on the reading and discussion for the day. The conclusion of each class is a review of literary terms, new and familiar, on the word wall.

Today the students will start class by writing in their journals as usual. The topic on the transparency will be to compare and contrast the Younger family in *A Raisin in the Sun* with a fictional Hispanic family in Houston's East End in the 2000s. What would a Hispanic family in Houston today have in common with the Youngers? What issues would both families face? How would things be different today in Houston? Would race make any difference? The students may make lists comparing/contrasting the two families and the situations.

After the students spend 15 minutes on the journal, I will ask the students to share their findings with a partner for a few minutes and then report back to the whole class. As the class members share what they've listed, I will write their ideas on a transparency. Some issues should emerge and some things that the Houston family and the Younger family have in common. We'll also discuss the way the characters talk. The Youngers, of course, are African Americans from the South (although living in Chicago); they use some expressions popular in the 1950s that are no longer popular. For example, they use "colored" to describe themselves and "crackers" to indicate white people (in a somewhat derogatory manner). A family that might speak Spanish some of the time is going to sound differently, and their slang expressions in English or Spanish, are different today from slang in the 1950s. After this discussion, the students are ready for the next step: writing a scene themselves.

To save time, I will have divided the students into groups of three already. Also, I will have written down a scene with page and line numbers from *Raisin* for each group: for example, the scene in Act I with Lena, Ruth, and Beneatha, in which the two older women berate Beneatha for not liking George Murchison, "that pretty rich thing," as Ruth says.

Before breaking up into groups, I will make sure everyone knows the assignment: to rewrite the provided scene from *Raisin* using a fictional Hispanic family who live in the

East End in 2004. I will also provide an information sheet to help them get started with spaces to fill in the characters' names, jobs, etc. Then they can take 45-50 minutes to write their own versions of the scenes.

When finished, students will trade their scenes with other groups, and time permitting, a few groups can read these new versions of *Raisin* to the class. We can discuss the successes and the difficulties of the assignment also.

Our typical concluding activity is to add words to the word wall using markers. The reference is the Glossary of *The Language of Literature*. Most of the literary terms relating to *Raisin* are already on the wall, but review is appropriate, especially for such words as *dialect*, *climax*, *turning point*, and *symbol*. A few good questions with which to review and conclude the class are: "When do you think the turning point of the play is?"; "How does the use of dialect contribute to characterization in the play?"; and "What does Mama's plant symbolize?"

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited

Bauer, Gerd, ed. *Body and Language: Intercultural Learning Through Drama*. Westport, CT: Ablex Publishing, 2002.

This book, which is part of a series intended to bring drama into foreign and second language classrooms, contains essays by various authors. Some of the information is applicable since many of my students are in the process of learning English.

Cisneros, Sandra. "Abuelito Who." *Cool Salsa: Bilingual Poems on Growing Up Latino in the United States*. Ed. Lori M. Carlson. New York: Fawcett Juniper, 1994.

Each of the poems in this paperback collection is presented in both English and Spanish. It has a colorful cover and is very popular with my students, especially girls. Cisneros' poem, a memory of her grandfather, fits into the thematic unit about the family.

Corley, Cheryl. *A Raisin in the Sun*. National Public Radio. 11 Mar. 2002. <<http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/raisin>>.

This article provides biographical information on Hansberry and the first production of the play.

Cornett, Claudia. *The Arts as Meaning Makers*. Columbus, OH: Prentice-Hall, Merrill, 1999.

I would like to have my own copy of this book—that's how much I like it (plus, the first eight pages are missing from this one). The author very plainly details how to integrate each of the arts into the curriculum. At the beginning, she sets forth the research on why it's important to include the arts.

Gibson, William. *The Miracle Worker*. New York: Bantam Books, 1960.

This small paperback is a reading teacher's dream come true: reading level designated at fifth grade; interest level at twelfth grade and up. I have taught this play very informally over the past four or five years. The action-packed scenes with the violent Helen and the determined Annie are very engaging.

Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun*. New York: Penguin Books USA, Inc., 1958.

Hansberry's work is both dated and fresh for my students. Once they have become accustomed to the language, and with a little explanation about the time period, they are hooked on the story of the Younger family.

Heinig, Ruth and Lyda Stillwell. *Creative Dramatics for the Classroom Teacher*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974.

A very useful book with lots of how-tos for teachers.

Hughes, Langston. "Dream Deferred." *Adventures in Reading*. Dallas: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989.

This famous Hughes poem is in the old ninth grade literature book. The new book has another of his poems, but I miss this one. Fortunately I have kept a set of the old books.

Novelly, Maria C. *Theatre Games for Young Performers*. Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing Ltd., 1985.

This book includes activities for children up to 18, extensive stage vocabulary, voice activities, and more. Very helpful.

Ommanney, Katharine Anne. *The Stage and the School, Second Revised Edition*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950.

An old book but very thorough for teaching drama: the play and its structure (useful for writing and literary terms), history, acting, staging, makeup, lighting, writing original plays. Black and white illustrations with great cut-lines such as, "The theatre is the gateway to thrilling adventures in an imaginary world."

Raisin on Broadway. 28 June 2004. <<http://www.raisinonbroadway.com/cast.html>>.

This site gives information about the current Broadway production of *Raisin*.

Ridge, Richard. *The Miracle Worker: Still a Miracle at 40*. 25 June 2004.

<<http://www.broadwaybest.com/ridge/rrmiracle.htm>>.

A good history of the play and the actors who have played in it.

Silverstein, Shel. *A Light in the Attic*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1981.

Students of all ages (including adults) seem to respond well to Shel Silverstein's poems with their amusing illustrations. This collection is one among several that could be used for reading aloud.

Tan, Amy. "Two Kinds." *The Language of Literature*. Dallas: McDougal Littell, 2000.

Tan's mother-daughter conflict story has many issues to explore: the daughter's disobedience, the mother's lack of sympathy for the daughter's interests, the mother's perceptions of the daughter's abilities, the cultural conflict—American opportunity vs. Chinese family values—and the bittersweet ending. There's even some humor. A lot of good material in one short story.

Wilder, Thornton. *Our Town: A Play in Three Acts*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Perennial Classics Edition, 1998.

This thin, elegant paperback with a glossy pastoral photograph in soft focus on its cover is deceptively simple to read. At first students think it's not about much at all. Of course, that is Wilder's gift to us: a mind-boggling play in plain

packaging. Most students are startled and impressed, if not moved, by the end of the play.

Supplemental Resources

Adler, Thomas P. "Lorraine Hansberry: Exploring Dreams, Explosive Drama." In *American Drama, 1940-1960*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994. 181-200. This book provides biographical detail around Hansberry's playwriting career and includes in-depth analyses of *A Raisin in the Sun* as well as her later plays, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* and *Les Blancs*. Two of the many interesting points the author makes about *Raisin*: the significance of the name Younger in the play, and the objects associated with Lena—her hat, her plant, her garden (at the new home).

Bolton, Gavin. *Acting in Classroom Drama: A Critical Analysis*. Stoke on Trent, England: Trentham Books, Ltd., 1998.

A very scholarly, historical account of drama teaching in English schools.

_____. *Drama as Education: An Argument for Placing Drama at the Center of the Curriculum*. Burnt Hill, England: Longman Group, Ltd., 1984. Earlier than *Acting in Classroom Drama*, Bolton's historical look at drama in the U.K. curriculum is a bit over my head, especially the chapter on "the 'game' of drama."

Braverman, Danny. *Playing a Part: Drama and Citizenship*. Sterling, VA: Trentham Books, Ltd., 2002.

This is a fascinating book on using drama to teach citizenship (probably this would fall under "character ed" or "values" in Houston ISD) in the U.K., including some great mini-dramas (complete with British slang) and how to set them up.

Duke, Charles R. *Creative Dramatics and English Teaching*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1974.

In addition to the history of children's drama and introductory material, the author discusses using improvisation, mime, and pantomime in various subjects.

Heathcote, Dorothy and Gavin Bolton. *Drama for Learning: Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert Approach to Education*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995.

The definition of the "mantle" approach, a method of creating dramas with students. The learning situations sound interesting, but probably are too complicated for my teaching situation.

Journals in the Classroom. The College of Wooster. 23 Feb. 2004.

<<http://www.wooster.edu/writercenter>>.

I found a form for students to use for keeping journals, as well as discussions on journal formats and evaluating journals. The site has other information for the composition teacher, too.

Kennedy, Peter, and Peter Falvey. *Learning Language Through Literature in Primary Schools*. Aberdeen, Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 1998.

Although the focus is on younger ESL students, I thought this book had some good ideas including storytelling with numbered pictures and “playlets.”

Male, David A. *Approaches to Drama*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1973.

The chapter “Drama and the Scripted Play” was the most useful. The author discusses staging a play.

McCaslin, Nellie. *Creative Drama in the Classroom*. New York: Longman, Inc., 1984.

Good information on how to do improvisations and dramatic structure and terms.

Production Notes. Chicago Public Library. 01 May 2004.

<<http://www.chipublib.org/003cpl/oboc/raisin/chron.html>>.

This useful timeline on Lorraine Hansberry and her works includes events of the Civil Rights Movement.

Plimpton, George, ed. *The Paris Review: Playwrights at Work*. Intro. John Lahr. New York: The Modern Library, 2000.

This book nearly derailed my *Prospectus*! The introduction and the chapter on Thornton Wilder were very interesting, but I couldn’t resist the articles (with photographs and reproduced manuscript pages) on Tennessee Williams, Eugene Ionesco, David Mamet, and other “playwrights at work.” A great read.

Sloyer, Shirlee. *Readers Theatre: Story Dramatization in the Classrooms*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982.

The material is for younger students (grades K-6), but the warm-up exercises, voice projection and diction tips, and characterization activities would still be useful if adapted for high school students.

Spolin, Viola. *Theater Games for the Classroom: A Teacher’s Handbook*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1986.

The theater games are intended to improve students’ communication skills. The games seem simple enough, but the instructions and the explanations for the teacher did not encourage me to want to try them.

Stewig, John Warren, and Carol Buege. *Dramatizing Literature in Whole Language Classrooms*. New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia Univ., 1994.

In this book, the emphasis is on “spontaneous drama.” Even though the activities are intended for younger children, the concepts are interesting.

William Gibson. McDougal-Littell. 25 April 2004. <<http://www.classzone.com/novelguides/authors/gibson.cfm>>.

This one-page biography of Gibson was interesting and included such endearing details as the author’s lack of interest in math and science and his dislike of piano lessons!

William Gibson. Playbill. 25 April 2004. <<http://www.playbill.com/celebritybuzz/whoswho/biography/14223.html>>.

This site provides a brief biography of Gibson including the titles of some of his many plays.