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ENGL 112B, Sec 01

4 December 2023

Preserving Our Memory, Hope, and Courage in the Face of Death

1. **Rationale:**

The notion of death is often a difficult and sensitive topic to approach, especially to the impressionable minds of a young adult audience. Yet, this subject remains highly relevant to the many adolescents who are forced to navigate through trauma and grief. Oftentimes, death is associated with immense sorrow, dread, and misery that can ultimately lead to self-loath and isolation. However, my unit of study will focus on a more optimistic approach where, in the absence of life, there will come a time when hope and courage prevail. My purpose and goal is to not only teach a canonical work that may be difficult to digest, but I also want to highlight the significance of preserving our memories of one another.

In this unit of study, my canonical piece will center around William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, a tragic play in the early 1600s. This canonical work exemplifies the loss of a parent and the complex emotions that come with grief. One of the most essential scenes I want to focus on is when the ghost of Hamlet’s father appears in front of Hamlet. Hamlet’s father reveals a significant line in the play: “Remember me” (Shakespeare 1.5.91). This line parallels one of Hamlet's last lines as he begs Horatio, “To tell my story” (Shakespeare 5.2.327). In echoing his father’s language, the play reinforces the significance of how remembrance and memory can affect hope and courage. *Hamlet* addresses the devastating effects of self-loath, suicide, and madness, but the play also embodies the importance of life and purpose.

Furthermore, Martha Brockenbrough’s excerpt in *The ALAN Review* perfectly captures some of the essential themes of *Hamlet* and other young adult novels I want to mention in my unit of study resources. In the article “Meanings of Life and Realities of Loss: A Collaborative Conversation,” Brockenbrough encapsulates the significance of how life and death coincide with one another: “How beautiful we want our lives to be is directly related to how much hope we summon, and it tends to come from the deepest parts of ourselves after we’ve been crushed by loss” (Brockenbrough 102). Her quote inspires me to have a similar mindset: hope and resilience will eventually emerge from experiencing death.

The study of *Hamlet* is often rigorous and challenging, especially when interpreting the complex and multi-layered themes of the play. To combat these issues, I will pair young adult resources to extend students’ knowledge and understanding of the canonical piece. In addition, I will present some strategies that will allow students to engage with the literary work while reinforcing the idea of memory, hope, and courage in relation to death and loss.

1. **“Into” the Text**

To get students “into” the text, I will introduce a song that will launch the unit on *Hamlet* and the themes of memory and death. Songs are a great way to set the tone of the unit and engage students in the literary work, especially because music is a universal language.

The song “Remember Me” from the Disney film *Coco* conveys a similar significance to the ghost of Hamlet’s father; both deceased father figures repeat the line “remember me” to their children. To provide enough context of the scene in *Coco*, I will show both the lyrics and the YouTube video alongside one another. The visual representation of the lyrics reveals how this scene is a direct homage to a father-and-child relationship. The scene also references the Day of the Dead where people honor the memories and stories of past family generations. After students familiarize themselves with the video and lyrics, I will ask how this song resonates with their own experiences or what emotions this song invokes.

**YouTube Video:** [**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KP\_XkN2v7OM**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KP_XkN2v7OM)

**Transcribed Lyrics:** [**https://www.disneyclips.com/lyrics/coco-remember-me-lullaby.html**](https://www.disneyclips.com/lyrics/coco-remember-me-lullaby.html)

**Remember me**

**Though I have to say goodbye**

**Remember me**

**Don't let it make you cry**

**For even if I'm far away I hold you in my heart**

**I sing a secret song to you each night we are apart**

**Remember me**

**Though I have to travel far**

**Remember me**

**Each time you hear a sad guitar**

**Know that I'm with you the only way that I can be**

**Until you're in my arms again**

**Remember me**

This song, like many other musical pieces, can resonate and connect to the minds and hearts of a young audience, especially when recent YA media is familiar and digestible. Oftentimes, the topic of death is dreadful and intense. However, using this song to initiate the unit will allow students to ease into the canonical piece while preparing for the overarching themes of death and loss.

1. **“Through” the Text**

In working “through” the canonical text, I have several YA strategies in mind from my experience in ENGL 112B. A reader’s theater is a brilliant way for students to read and engage with the canonical text. To put my own spin on a reader’s theater, I want to apply an incentive to a young adult audience: the use of props and costumes. For example, I have two similar options for the class to choose from (I will have to make a financial investment):

* 1. **Finger puppets on a mini-stage**
     1. This is inspired by Dr. Adrienne Eastwood’s online lectures in ENGL 145: Shakespeare + Performance.
     2. Even with my very short attention span in an online classroom setting, Dr. Eastwood’s finger puppets instantly entertain and motivate me to pay close attention to the canonical text.
     3. Who wouldn’t want to recite Shakespeare’s lines with a finger puppet?
        + For example, here is a great listing of *Hamlet-*themed finger puppetson eBay*:* <https://www.ebay.com/itm/285076112693>
  2. **Performing in Costume** 
     1. This interactive reader’s theater will have students stand and “act out” the scenes. This will encourage students to move around the classroom and directly engage with the text.
     2. Performing in costume can also help students visualize the scene, especially the stage directions and verbal cues in the play.
        + Here is another example of a costume I will use in a classroom setting: [www.amazon.com/California-Costumes-Mens-Dark-Monarch/dp/B07PYQWVMN](https://www.amazon.com/California-Costumes-Mens-Dark-Monarch/dp/B07PYQWVMN)

The use of props and costumes creates an amusing take on *Hamlet* as not only just reading a play but rather a visual reenactment of the complex and intense emotions and scenes of the canonical piece. By performing as a class, the student will not be as taunted in reading the difficult literature alone. As some students perform the play “on stage,” the rest of the classroom will also have writing activities on different scenes. Here are some writing prompts I will provide for students:

1. **What are some key representative objects, quotes, or symbols that you can put in a Brown Bag? Explain its context and significance. (e.g. a skull, “remember me,” etc.)**
   1. In ENGL 112B, Brown Bag items are essential to my understanding of the text as they help me recall plot details and important scenes.
   2. Brown Bag items of each scene may also help students notice a reoccurring image throughout the play (and thus, fueling their evidence/argument for a future literary analysis essay).
2. **What is your favorite line/quote from the scene? Why did you choose this quote? Explain its context.**
   1. Although similar to the Brown Bag writing prompt, a student’s favorite quote does not necessarily mean it has a deep significance to the text. Students have the option to choose a quote that shocks, amuses, or entertains them and explain why. As we work through the text, they may expand on their answer in the future.
   2. A favorite quote also levitates some of the pressure of “needing” to analyze every single detail/object of the scene, making this a little less stressful for students to approach the canonical text.
3. **How would you direct this scene (e.g. emotions, body movements, stage cues, etc.)? Why did you make those decisions? Use details from the text.**
   1. This allows students to further visualize the scene. One of the reasons why *Hamlet* is difficult to digest is because of its ambiguous plot details.
   2. In imagining the scene using contextual cues, students can get a better sense of what is occurring in the play. This also allows students to apply some creativity and critical thinking.

Although contextual questions are essential to checking students’ understanding of the text, the more freedom students have, the more motivation students have in writing and participating in their assignments (I learn this from ENGL 112B, my field experience, and Laurie Anderson’s *Speak* where Ms. Hairwoman’s appealing writing prompts motivate her English class to write).

In using the knowledge and experience I have in ENGL 112B, I want to create a safe and inviting environment for students to participate and learn from YA strategies. Teaching a canonical work does not always have to be rigorous or intense when applying YA resources.

1. **“Beyond” the Text**

Many YA novels can help students move “beyond” the canonical work and extend their understanding of the literary piece. By pairing contemporary work with a canonical, students can better connect to the relevant issues. In the following, I will name five of the YA novels I have read in ENGL 112B. In an extension of *Hamlet*, these novels essentially present similar themes of memory, hope, and courage in the face of death.

* 1. ***We Were Here* by Matt de la Peña**
     1. This YA novel follows Miguel’s journey of self-redemption and forgiveness. In coping with the grief, trauma, and guilt of his brother’s death, Miguel finds hope and courage through the remembrance of his friends, Rondell and Mong.
     2. One of the most significant scenes of the text is when Miguel and Rondell find “Mong was here” on a rock.
     3. This heart-wrenching moment amplifies the significance of Mong’s suicide; in seeing this rock, Rondell and Miguel decide to solidify their existence alongside Mong. This memorable detail is similar to *Hamlet* where both works of literature emphasize the delicate importance of life and the significance of preserving our memories of one another.
  2. ***The Giver* by Lois Lowry** 
     1. Although this novel is often taught in middle school, *The Giver* encapsulates much deeper themes of death and loss in a society that completely oppresses all human qualities of life.
     2. Jonas is forced to navigate through complex emotions of grief and sorrow. Similar to *Hamlet*, Jonas finds great significance in how memories shape human experience.
     3. In the face of life or death, Jonas finds the courage and hope to change his corrupted and dehumanizing environment.
  3. ***Life in a Fishbowl* by Len Vlahos**
     1. In this YA novel, Jackie Stone’s grief and her father’s terminal illness are exploited through reality television (this also parallels Hamlet’s own feelings of being “watched”).
     2. By exploiting and rendering her family’s memories, the novel delivers a deep contrast in morals. Through Jackie’s resilience, courage, and hope, she exposes the reality of her dehumanizing situation.
     3. After her father’s death, Jackie ultimately redeems her and her family’s stories.
  4. ***Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher** 
     1. Crutcher’s novel explicitly reminds me of *Hamlet* primarily because of John Paul’s last few words to T.J. where John urges him to not take revenge on Rich, the man who unjustly kills him by the end of the novel.
     2. This YA novel explores the complex structure of how T.J. navigates through racism and violence. Despite his difficult circumstances, T.J. finds it in himself not to act on impulse and revenge, a great contrast to Hamlet.
     3. Furthermore, T.J. solidifies his existence through the significant memories of his swim team. With hope and courage, he overcomes death and loss.
  5. ***After the First Death* by Robert Cormier** 
     1. This YA novel juxtaposes the morality of Kate versus Miro and Artkin. Miro and Artkin’s perception of death deeply contrasts with Kate who values life.
     2. Aligning with Hamlet’s inability to make decisions, Kate also struggles to act on her bravery. However, hope is what drives her optimism during a dire situation.
     3. With hope and resilience, she makes her final act of courage in the face of life or death.

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