

Choral Reading and Cutting a Text: Pairing Clint Smith’s “My Hopes, Dreams, Fears for My Future Son” with *Hamlet*

WHAT’S ON AND WHY

Monologues are full of possibilities. Getting students inside a monologue can lead to all kinds of deep reading and surprising discoveries about the words, characters, and big questions of a play. You can teach this lesson as its own close-reading exercise or bridge into Shakespeare by leveraging student confidence with familiar text. This lesson asks teachers to pair a Polonius monologue from *Hamlet* and a letter from Clint Smith. What if we placed these two voices in dialogue, what interesting ideas do we unearth what occurs when you have characters speak across gender, race, time and region? By the end of this exercise, ALL students will have spoken and read Shakespeare’s original language multiple times; discovered that soliloquies are internal arguments; discussed various student interpretations of this soliloquy; and, in a lively and authentic way, explored all those cool things going on with complex texts: tone, structure, characterization, and big ideas.

This lesson uses 1 of the 9 essential practices of the Folger Method: choral reading, which enables students to build understanding of a new scene simply by rereading it together out loud.

TEXTS

Clint Smith’s “My Hopes, Dreams, Fears for My Future Son”

Hamlet 1.2 and 1.3, taken from the free online [Folger Shakespeare \(shakespeare.folger.edu\)](https://shakespeare.folger.edu)

WHAT TO DO

1. Tell your class they are going to read a speech many times, many different ways. Tell them not to worry about pronunciation or knowing the meaning of every word. Just encourage them to let the language work on them and see what they can glean from the process of reading and re-reading chorally. After each reading, you, the teacher, will ask students to show their comprehension of the speech by holding up 1-5 fingers. After each round, do this self-assessment; 5 fingers means they’ve totally got this!
2. Have students get on their feet and chorally—all together—read Polonius’ monologue Do the quick self-assessment.

3. Get in a circle. The group next reads sequentially—singly, one speaker after another, switching readers when they meet end punctuation (. / ; / ? / !). Breeze through commas. After this reading, do the quick self-assessment.
 4. The group reads sequentially, starting on the opposite side of the circle so that everyone experiences a different part of the monologue. Do the quick self-assessment again. Be sure to keep the activity moving, though.
 5. Ask students about what they learned about the character's situation from this activity:
 - a. What do you observe about the language of the text?
 - b. What are some juicy words that jump out at you? (Juicy words are words that feel good to say, have high connotative value.)
 - c. What seems to be the message Polonius is sharing? What forces seem to be contributing to suggestions? What language tells us this?
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Pairing with Clint Smith

6. Tell your class they are going to read a letter. Try to avoid giving them context on Clint Smith's letter. See if they can use the language of the text to explore his character and internal conflict.
7. Get in a circle. The group will reads sequentially—singly, one speaker after another, switching readers when they meet end punctuation (. / ; / ? / !). Do a quick self-assessment.
8. For a second read, the group reads sequentially again, starting on the opposite side of the circle so that everyone experiences a different part of the letter. Do the quick self-assessment again. Be sure to keep the activity moving, though.
9. Ask students about what they learned about the character's situation from this activity:
 - a. What do you observe about the language of the text?
 - b. What are some juicy words that jump out at you? (Juicy words are words that feel good to say, have high connotative value.)
 - c. What seems to be the conflict that Smith is experiencing? What forces seem to be contributing to his conflict? What language tells us this?
10. After reading both Polonius' monologue and Smith's letter, ask students to get in pairs and sit together to cut the texts. Ask students to re-read Polonius' letter and cut his speech to 10 lines (they can do this with pen/paper or digitally in a shared document or they could highlight what they wish to keep). Ask them to find 10 precepts and put them in 10 lines.

11. Next have students revisit the Clint Smith letter and cut it to 10 lines. Ask them to turn his letter of prose into poetry.
12. Encourage students to share their new versions of poetry. After or before sharing, ask students to come together to discuss what they've discovered. You may wish to have them discuss prior to sharing and give them some time after sharing to revise their original drafts. Some possible questions:
 - a. What are all of these fathers and sons to each other?
 - b. How do their words share their values and societal structures?
 - c. How is our world in 2020 different from that of 1602? What concerns are still present from 1602?
 - d. How are Polonius and Clint Smith similar in their roles as fathers? How are they different?
 - e. Which precept of Polonius' connects to Clint Smith's letter?

Bonus Ideas:

- Have students put these Polonius and Clint Smith in conversation and create a text thread between these two characters.
- Add in a third text--Hamlet's "sullied flesh" soliloquy (1.2)-- to the father discussion. Or use it as an extension to continue the discussion.

HOW DID IT GO?

- Did you, the teacher, get out of the way and let students own the process of discovering Clint Smith and Shakespeare's language?
- Did student comprehension of the speeches increase over time?
- Was every student's voice heard (literally and figuratively)?
- Do students realize that they can understand Shakespeare without teacher explanation?
- Do students understand what a monologue is?

If yes, then huzzah!

HANDOUT

Clint Smith's "My Hopes, Dreams, Fears for My Future Son"

Son,

I want to tell you how difficult it is to tell someone they are both beautiful and endangered. So worthy of life, yet so despised for living. I do not intend to scare you. My father, your grandfather, taught me to follow a certain set of rules before I even knew their purpose. He told me that these rules would not apply to everyone, that they would not even apply to all of my friends. But they were rules to abide by nonetheless. Too many black boys are killed for doing what others give no second thought. Playing our music too loud, wearing a sweatshirt with the hood up, playing with a toy in the park. My father knew these things. He knew that there was no room for error. He knew it was not fair. But he loved me too much not to teach me, to protect me.

I have told you this story before, but it is worth revisiting. Many a Saturday morning, my friends and I would ride bikes throughout the neighborhood together. The wind chiseled our faces into euphoric naiveté. The scent of breakfast being prepared seeped out from beneath the cracked windows of the shotgun homes that lined our streets. All that we deemed worthy of our attention were the endless possibilities that lay atop our handlebars. Which is to say, we were children. We were a motley crew, an interracial assemblage of young boys that would have made the Disney Channel proud. We dreamed of building tree houses with secret passwords; of fighting dragons effortlessly side-stepping their perilous, fiery breath; of hitting the game-winning shot in stadiums of thousands of people chanting our names. Our ambitions were as far-reaching as the galaxy we had been born into. We were small planets simply attempting to find our orbit.

I pray that you live in a radically different world from the one that my father and I have inherited.

On one afternoon, we went to the field where we so often played football — tackle, of course — as we were set on replicating the brawn and bravado that we watched each Sunday on our televisions. This time, however, the field was closed. The fence bolted by a lock that could not be snapped. One friend, whose long, blond hair dangled gently over his eyes, tossed the football to me, and immediately began to climb the fence. I watched him: the ease with which he lifted one foot over another, the indifference of his disposition to the fact that this was an area we were quite clearly not supposed to enter. I remember hearing the soft, distant echo of a police siren. Perhaps a few blocks away. Perhaps headed in a different direction. I couldn't be sure, but I knew better than to ignore it. He reached the other side, and looked back, beckoning the rest of us to join him. I held the football in my hand, looking at him through the chain link fence between us. It was at this moment I realized how different he and I were, before I had the words to explain them to either him or myself. How he could break a rule without a second thought, whereas for me any mistake might have the most dire of consequences.

I hope to teach you so much of what my father taught me, but I pray that you live in a radically different world from the one that he and I have inherited. I do not envy his task, one that might become my own. I tell you these things because I know how strong and resilient you will be. How you will take their fear and make a fort of this skin, and turn it into a bastion of love against unwarranted inhumanity.

You are not a mistake. You are not a deficit. You are not something to be eradicated or rendered obsolete.

I want you to realize that sometimes it will not be the things the world tells you, but the things it does not tell you. It will be the omissions, rather than the direct affronts that do the most damage. Your textbooks will likely not tell you how Thomas Jefferson thought that blacks were “inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind”; how Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal left a hole just wide enough for black families to fall through while lifting the rest of the country into the middle class; it will not tell you how the federal government actively prevented black families from purchasing homes in cities across this country; it will not tell you how police departments across this nation are incentivized to see you as a problem, something to be taken care of. They will not tell you these things, and because of that they will expect you to believe that the contemporary reality of our community is of our own doing, that we simply did not work hard enough, that things would be different if we would simply change our attitudes, the way we speak, the way we dress.

With that said, do not for one moment think you cannot change what exists. This world is a social construction; it can be reconstructed. This world was built; it can be rebuilt. Use everything that you accrue to reimagine the world.

You are not a mistake. You are not a deficit. You are not something to be eradicated or rendered obsolete. You exist beyond pathology. You come from a lineage of those who built this country. You come from my grandfathers, one who toiled tobacco fields amid the ever-expanding pastures of Mississippi throughout his adolescence, the other who fought a war for a country that would spit at his feet as soon as he put down his gun. You come from grandmothers who dedicated their lives to teaching in communities where the quality of one’s education was subject to the whims of the state. You come from my parents, who both protected me from violence and made me feel whole. You are the manifestation of their unyielding commitment to overcome.

I hope the world you inherit is one in which you may love whomever you choose. I hope you read and write and laugh and sing and dance and build and cry and do all of the things a child should do.

I pray that you never have to stand on the other side of a fence and know that it is a world you cannot enter simply because of your skin.

Polonius' Precepts in *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 3

POLONIUS

Yet here, Laertes? Aboard, aboard, for shame! 60
The wind sits in the shoulder of your sail,
And you are stayed for. There, my blessing with thee.
And these few precepts in thy memory
Look thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue, 65
Nor any unproportioned thought his act.
Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.
Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel,
But do not dull thy palm with entertainment 70
Of each new-hatched, unfledged courage. Beware
Of entrance to a quarrel, but, being in,
Bear 't that th' opposèd may beware of thee.
Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice.
Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment. 75
Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,
But not expressed in fancy (rich, not gaudy),
For the apparel oft proclaims the man,
And they in France of the best rank and station
Are of a most select and generous chief in that. 80
Neither a borrower nor a lender be,
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.
This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day, 85
Thou canst not then be false to any man.
Farewell. My blessing season this in thee.

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 2

HAMLET

O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed 135
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God, God,
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on 't, ah fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature 140
Possess it merely. That it should come to this:
But two months dead—nay, not so much, not two.
So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother
That he might not betwixt the winds of heaven 145
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and Earth,
Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on. And yet, within a month
(Let me not think on 't; frailty, thy name is woman!), 150
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's body,
Like Niobe, all tears—why she, even she
(O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer!), married with my 155
uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules. Within a month,
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her gallèd eyes, 160
She married. O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not, nor it cannot come to good.
But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.