LESSON TITLE: Suits of Woe: Grief and Loss in *Hamlet*

GRADE LEVEL: Grades 9-12

TIME ALLOTMENT: One to two 45-minute class periods

OVERVIEW
In this lesson, students will explore the themes of grief and loss in *Hamlet*. The lesson will begin with an exploration of the students' understanding of how grief and loss may be experienced in life. Students will then draw a connection between these everyday examples and the presentation of grief in *Hamlet* by viewing a video segment from the PBS series *Shakespeare Uncovered*. Next, students will turn to the text of *Hamlet* and examine the responses to grief that appear in Act I, Scene ii of the play. They will break into groups to examine the ways Hamlet, Gertrude, and Claudius characterize grief and mourning and draw upon their understanding of the play to speculate about the significance of these reactions. Students will then select one of three characters - Hamlet, Ophelia, or Laertes - and in a short paper explore how grief and loss is presented in the chosen character and how that grief drives the character's actions for the rest of the play.

This lesson is best used during a reading of *Hamlet*.

SUBJECT MATTER
English/Language Arts

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- Describe how Shakespeare explores the themes of grief and loss in *Hamlet*.
- Draw connections between the students' experiences with grief (personal or otherwise) with the grief experienced by characters in *Hamlet*.
- Interpret a literary text by identifying the techniques used by the author and how they contribute to its meaning.
- Analyze themes, plot, and character in *Hamlet*.

STANDARDS

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)
http://www.ncte.org/standards/ncte-ira

Standard 1
Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
Standard 2
Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

Standard 3
Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

Common Core Literature Standards for Grades 11-12
http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/11-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2 Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

MEDIA COMPONENTS

Video

Shakespeare Uncovered: Hamlet with David Tennant, selected segment.

Access the video segment for this lesson at the Video Segments Page.

“Grief-Stricken Hamlet”
An overview of Hamlet and a discussion of the theme of loss within the play.

MATERIALS

For the class:
- Computer, projection screen, and speakers (for class viewing of online video segments).
- One copy of the Hamlet Act I, Scene ii Student Organizer Answer Key

For each student:
- One copy of the Hamlet Act I, Scene ii Text Excerpt
- One copy of the Hamlet Act I, Scene ii Student Organizer
- One copy of the Grief in Hamlet Assignment
**PREP FOR TEACHERS**
Prior to teaching this lesson you will need to:

Preview all of the video segments used in the lesson. Prepare to watch them using your classroom’s Internet connection.

For each student print out and make copies of the *Hamlet* Act I, Scene ii Text Excerpt; the *Hamlet* Act I, Scene ii Student Organizer; and the Grief in *Hamlet* Assignment.

Print out one copy of the *Hamlet* Act I, Scene ii Student Organizer Answer Key for the class.

**INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY**

1. Tell your students that as part of your study of *Hamlet*, you’ll be exploring the different ways the theme of grief appears in the play. Explain that you want them to think about what we learn from Shakespeare about how grief and loss shape us as human beings.

2. Next, tell your students to think about the ways people are affected by loss. Ask: What different kinds of loss do people experience? *Accept all answers, but invite them to consider the many different ways people experience loss, i.e. death of a loved one; loss of money or property; divorce or loss of friendships; loss of a job or opportunity; loss of power or status; loss of hope of something that is wished for; loss of youth through aging; loss of health through illness.* You may wish to write the suggestions on the board so students can refer to the list throughout the Introductory Activity.

3. Ask your students to each pick one of the types of loss the class has identified and write a journal entry about how people are affected by that kind of loss. To help them think about this topic, ask students to address the following questions in their journal entries:
   - How would this loss affect a person’s mood, behavior, or thoughts? How might you see this change?
   - How might the loss impact the person’s relationships with other people?
   - How might the person express their feelings over the loss? Are there any kinds of rituals people perform to help overcome their sense of loss?
   - How might the loss affect what the person decides to do next?

4. When your students have finished writing, ask a few of them to read what they have written. As an alternative option, you may want to ask if any of your students have experienced loss themselves, or if they know anyone who has, and if they’d like to share their observations about that particular experience of loss.

5. When students have finished sharing their writings, explain that in the remainder of the lesson you’re going to explore how Shakespeare represents grief in *Hamlet*. Throughout the discussion, students should think about how Hamlet and some of the other characters in the play are confronted by loss and how they respond to their grief, and whether what we see in the play reminds them of some of the examples of grief about which they’ve written.
LEARNING ACTIVITY

1. Introduce the video segment by asking your students to consider the following questions as they view the segment: How is the theme of grief and loss introduced in *Hamlet*? How has Hamlet's story touched others, such as the actors who have played him, or even the playwright who created the character?

2. Play the segment “Grief-Stricken Hamlet.” (Access the video segments for this lesson at the Video Segments Page.)

3. After viewing the segment, pose the questions you asked students to think about: How is the theme of grief and loss introduced in the story of *Hamlet*? How has Hamlet's story touched others, such as the actors who have played him, or even the playwright who created the character? *(Hamlet grieves his father, who has died just before the play starts. The actors suggest the play resonates when you have lost a loved one; that it seems to reflect the way people experience grief. It's suggested that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* while he was grieving the death of his son Hamnet. Some students may note the play itself is a way that Shakespeare expressed his own grief and found a way to use it in his work.)*

4. When you are done discussing the segment, tell your students you'd like to take a closer look at how Hamlet experiences and expresses his grief in the play. Explain that as a class they will be reading aloud from Act I, Scene ii of *Hamlet*.

5. Remind students of the context of this scene: This is the second scene in the play and it’s the first time we see Hamlet. The scene takes place in the royal court of Denmark. Hamlet’s father, the previous king, has recently died. Hamlet’s uncle Claudius has taken the throne and has also married the dead king’s widow, Hamlet's mother Gertrude. A number of other courtiers are also present, and the king has been reviewing court business.

6. Distribute the Act I, Scene ii Text Excerpt. Ask for three volunteers to read the scene aloud. Remind your students there are three characters in this scene and ask for brief descriptions of each character. *Answers should include:*
   - **Hamlet:** Son of the previous king of Denmark; he is currently the Prince of Denmark. He is grieving his father's death. He is highly intelligent and tends to ask lots of questions. He doesn't always obey authority.
   - **Claudius:** He is Hamlet's uncle and the new king of Denmark. He is very authoritative, but perhaps, under it all, feels guilty about his brother's death.
   - **Gertrude:** She is Hamlet's mother. She loves her son and is worried about him, but she is also worried about whether he will displease the new king, her husband Claudius. She is trying to make peace between her son and her new husband.

7. Assign your volunteers to these three roles and ask students to follow along as they read. Direct them to pay attention to the way Hamlet shows his grief. Ask them to consider the following questions as they read: What signs of grief does Hamlet show? What do Hamlet and the other characters say about these signs of grief? Tell them that during the reading they should circle any key lines or words that describe how grief would be shown or how Hamlet is expressing his grief.

8. After the reading, ask students to write a one- to two-sentence synopsis of what happens during the scene.
9. When everyone is done writing, ask a few students to read their synopses aloud. Check comprehension and make sure students understand the relationships among the three characters. *(Hamlet is in the court of Denmark. His mother and then his stepfather/uncle Claudius question why he is still grieving his father’s death. Claudius tells Hamlet he wants him to stay in Denmark rather than going to Wittenberg. Gertrude agrees and Hamlet says he will obey and stay in Denmark.)*

10. Next, ask your students to consider the questions you posed before they read the scene: What signs of grief does Hamlet show? What sorts of signs are expected? What do Hamlet and the other characters say about these signs of grief? Ask them to start by identifying the signs of grief that are mentioned in the scene.

**Answers should include:**
- **Wearing black** (*"nighted colour" - line 68; "inky cloak" - line 77; "suits of solemn black" - line 78)
- **Downcast eyes** (*"vailed lids" - line 70)
- **Sighs** (*"windy suspiration" - line 79)
- **Tears** (*"fruitful river in the eye" - line 80)
- **Sad facial expressions** (*"dejected 'havior of the visage" - 81*)

11. Summarize these findings and point out that today we still interpret these kinds of expressions as communicating grief and sadness about loss.

12. Next, tell your students to take a closer look at what Hamlet has to say about his grief, and how Claudius and Gertrude respond to it. Distribute the *Hamlet* Act I, Scene ii Student Organizer. Break the class into groups and ask each group to review the speeches and summarize what each character has to say about grief. Explain that on the Student Organizer, each student should summarize what the speech says and consider why the character is taking this stance about grief.

13. When the groups have finished their discussion, ask for volunteers to share what they discovered about the different attitudes about grief in this scene. *(Refer to the Hamlet Act I, Scene ii Student Organizer Answer Key for suggested answers.)*

14. Ask students: How do you think Hamlet feels in this scene? How do you think he responds to the range of attitudes about his grief you find in this scene? *(Accept all answers. Students may note that Hamlet might feel betrayed by his mother, who no longer grieves his father and questions his feelings. Later, we learn that Hamlet is already suspicious about his uncle’s involvement in his father’s death, so he might be wary of his uncle’s insistence that he stop mourning. Guide students to also explore how Hamlet would feel in relation to those around him: His grief makes him feel isolated since no one else seems to share it.)*

15. Optional activity: Ask students to consider how they would stage this scene to portray Hamlet’s grief and its impact on those around him. Break the class into groups and ask them to talk about how they would present this scene. Where would they put the king and queen? Where would Hamlet appear in relation to them and to other characters that are in this scene? How should the characters respond to Hamlet’s actions and facial expressions? How would Claudius interact with Hamlet? If time permits, ask one of the groups to try out a staging of this
scene to see what they can learn about how grief impacts how Hamlet behaves at court and how others respond to him.

16. Conclude your discussion of this scene by pointing out these lines from Gertrude: "Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die,/ Passing through nature to eternity" (lines 72-73). Claudius says something similar in his speech. Ask them what they think of this statement. To what extent is it true? Is it helpful for someone who is grieving to be told this? What does it say about grief and the human condition? (Allow students to come to their own conclusions. They will likely note that this is a true statement, and that it suggests one thing that human beings share is that we all at some point experience grief. They may also note, though, that being told that "everyone experiences loss" may not be helpful to someone who is grieving, and that may keep someone from working through his/her own grief.)

CULMINATING ACTIVITY

1. When you are finished discussing Act I, Scene ii, explain to your students the grief we see in this early scene helps to drive the action in the rest of the play. Point out that other characters in the play also experience grief and mourning. Guide them to realize that both Ophelia and Laertes also experience losses. If students have trouble identifying these characters, prompt them with the following questions:
   • During the play, which characters die? (Students should note that many characters die in this play, but the death that is a pivotal event is the murder of Polonius.)
   • Which characters experience the loss of a family member or a disappointment? (Hamlet, of course, experiences the death of his father and is disappointed by his mother's response. Ophelia is disappointed because she has lost Hamlet's love, and then she loses her father Polonius. Laertes also loses his father.)

2. Either as an in-class writing assignment or as homework, have students pick one of these characters (Hamlet, Ophelia, or Laertes) and explore how this character experiences grief. In their essays, students should consider the following questions:
   • What signs of grief do you see in the character?
   • Is this character permitted to mourn?
   • Does this character appear to heal from the grief?
   • What actions result from their experience of loss?
   If students are to complete the essay as homework, distribute the Grief in Hamlet Assignment which lists the questions above. Students should cite specific textual examples from Hamlet to support each of their assertions.

3. Collect the students’ papers for an assessment of the lesson.