LESSON TITLE: Talking to Myself: Hamlet's Soliloquies

GRADE LEVEL: Grades 9-12

TIME ALLOTMENT: Two 45-minute class periods

OVERVIEW
In this lesson, students will examine Shakespeare's use of soliloquies in *Hamlet*, focusing on the famous "To be or not to be" speech. As the lesson begins, students will view a video segment from the PBS series *Shakespeare Uncovered* to learn about the soliloquy form. Next, they will be invited to consider everyday situations in which people may need to talk to themselves to work through a decision or problem. Students will then view another segment from the series as an introduction to the soliloquy in Act III, Scene i ("To be or not to be..."). They will read the speech aloud several times and then break into groups to produce a modern-day paraphrase of the soliloquy. Viewing another segment from *Shakespeare Uncovered*, students will explore what the soliloquy reveals about the character of Hamlet and produce their own interpretations of the character in this scene. They will then work independently to read and interpret one of Hamlet's other soliloquies in the play.

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

SUBJECT MATTER
English/Language Arts

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

- Explain the function of a soliloquy in a play.
- Decipher and interpret Hamlet’s soliloquy in Act III, Scene i.
- Analyze character in *Hamlet*.
- Recognize the presence of internal monologues like soliloquies in their own lives.

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.RL.11-12.3 Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

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 segments

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

Segment 1: “What is a Soliloquy?”
A brief overview of the general characteristics of soliloquies.

Segment 2: “The Big Question: 'To Be or Not to Be?'”
An introduction to Hamlet's soliloquy from Act III, Scene i and an exploration of some of the big questions the character poses in this speech.

Segment 3: “Many Different Hamlets”
Actors David Tennant and Jude Law discuss approaching the soliloquy from Act III, Scene i.
MATERIALS

For the class:
- Computer, projection screen, and speakers (for class viewing of online video segments).
- “What is a Soliloquy?” Student Organizer Answer Key
- Hamlet’s Soliloquy, Act III, Scene i - Teacher's Edition

For each student:
- “What is a Soliloquy?” Student Organizer
- Hamlet’s Soliloquy, Act III, Scene i
- Hamlet’s Soliloquy, Act I, Scene ii
- Hamlet’s Soliloquy, Act II, Scene ii
- Assignment: Reading Hamlet’s Soliloquies

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 the class, print out one copy of the “What is a Soliloquy” Student Organizer Answer Key and one copy of Hamlet’s Soliloquy, Act III, Scene i – Teacher’s Edition.

For each student, print out one copy of the “What is a Soliloquy?” Student Organizer; one copy of Hamlet’s Soliloquy, Act III, Scene i; one copy of Hamlet’s Soliloquy, Act I, Scene ii; one copy of Hamlet’s Soliloquy, Act II, Scene ii; and one copy of Assignment: Reading Hamlet’s Soliloquies.

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY

1. Ask your students: If someone were to ask you to recite a line from Hamlet, what line would you recite? (A student will likely suggest, "To be or not to be." If not, prompt them by asking, "What about 'To be or not to be'?") Tell your students this is one of the most famous lines in Shakespeare - possibly in all of literature - and that it’s also the opening line of one of Hamlet’s soliloquies.

2. Introduce the first video segment by telling your students that today they’re going to learn more about Shakespeare’s soliloquies by looking at this famous speech from Hamlet. As they are watching the video, ask your students to consider the following questions: What is a soliloquy? How does it differ from other kinds of long speeches? Distribute the "What Is a Soliloquy?" Student Organizer so they can record their findings.

3. Play the segment “What Is a Soliloquy?” (Access the video segments for this lesson at the Video Segments Page.)

4. After viewing the segment, pose the questions you asked students to consider: What is a soliloquy? How does it differ from other kinds of long speeches? Encourage them to review the notes they’ve taken in the organizer as they formulate their responses. (Students may recall different elements of the description. Guide them to list the
various attributes of soliloquies: The character delivers the speech alone on stage. The character addresses only him/herself or the audience. The character speaks his or her inner thoughts aloud. The character debates inner arguments with himself/herself.)

5. Invite your students to consider how a soliloquy - that is, talking to oneself - might occur in everyday life. Ask your students: Are soliloquies something you only see in plays? Are there any moments in everyday life when people might engage in a soliloquy? (Answers will vary, but you should guide students to realize that people do talk to themselves - both in their heads and sometimes out loud.)

6. Next, ask students: What are some things you might talk to yourself about? (Students may offer suggestions, such as problems they've encountered with friends or parents, long-term life decisions - for example, where to go to college - or near-term decisions - such as whether to take on a job after school).

7. Using the examples offered by your students, ask: Why does it help to talk out loud to yourself when you’re thinking about these kinds of problems? What does talking out loud to yourself help you to do? (Accept all answers, and guide them to realize that in this kind of self-talk, you can explore options, imagine the consequences to various actions, and give yourself the time to figure out how you feel about the issue).

8. Explain that a soliloquy is a playwright’s way of representing this kind of talking out loud—but that it’s also a way to reveal character. Tell them that in the remainder of the lesson, you’re going to look more closely at Hamlet’s famous soliloquy to see how Shakespeare uses it to shed light on his character and explore the problems with which Hamlet is dealing.

LEARNING ACTIVITY

1. Introduce the next video segment by telling your students that shortly, you’ll be taking a close look at the text of the speech. Tell them you’d like them to think about the questions with which Hamlet is wrestling. Ask them to think about the following questions as they watch the segment: What is Hamlet asking in this speech? What sort of issue is he trying to figure out?

2. Play the segment “The Big Question: ‘To Be or Not to Be?’” (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: What is Hamlet asking in this speech? What sort of issue is he trying to figure out? (Hamlet is asking, “What is the point of life?” He's also trying to decide whether or not he should simply commit suicide. Reinforce the segment’s representation of suicide as particularly forbidden and traumatic in Shakespeare’s culture.)

4. Tell your students that before they look at the speech, they’ll need to think about why Hamlet has come to the point where he’s asking these questions. Remind them of the context of the speech (or, if you feel students are prepared, ask them to recall what has happened in the play until this point). Main points should include:

   - Hamlet is the prince of Denmark. His father has recently died, and very soon after his death, his mother married Hamlet’s uncle, Claudius.
   - Hamlet still wears black and is grieving his father, but he is told by Claudius that it’s time to stop grieving.
Hamlet hears a report that some sentries have seen the ghost of his father during their watch. Hamlet joins them and sees his father’s ghost. The ghost tells Hamlet he was murdered by Claudius, which confirms Hamlet’s suspicion. The ghost tells Hamlet to avenge his death.

Hamlet has decided to act as if he is insane while he is learning more about the situation at court and deciding how to avenge his father’s death.

Claudius has asked two of Hamlet’s friends, Rosencranz and Guildenstern, to spy on Hamlet to determine why he has been acting so strangely.

5. Once you have established the context of the soliloquy, distribute the handout of the soliloquy from Act III, Scene i. Tell your students that you are going to read the speech out loud together several times.

6. Introduce the first reading by explaining they should try to form a sense of what problems Hamlet is wrestling with here. As they read, ask them consider these questions: What does Hamlet mean when he says, "To be or not to be: That is the question"? What different answers to this question does he explore? Tell them they should also circle any words they don't understand or find unfamiliar.

7. After reading, ask the students to identify any words with which they had trouble. You may wish to project the speech so the class can identify the words together. Work through the speech, guiding them as they figure out the meaning of the unfamiliar terms. You may wish to consult the Teacher’s Edition version of this soliloquy, which glosses unusual terms, or use the footnotes in your class’s edition of the play.

8. When you have finished deciphering the unfamiliar words, return to the questions you asked the students before the reading: What does Hamlet mean when he says, "To be or not to be: That is the question"? What different answers to this question does he explore? At this point, students may not have a detailed understanding of the speech, but guide them to discovering that the speech is about deciding whether or not to continue living, and that Hamlet explores the options of whether death would offer a peaceful alternative to the stresses of life or a fearful punishment in the afterlife.

9. When you are finished exploring these questions, tell students you are going to read the speech out loud as a class again. This time, you’d like them to pay attention to the double slashes (/ /) in the version of the speech they have been reading. Tell them these slashes help mark where Hamlet finishes one thought and begins another. Point out that when they're trying to interpret a soliloquy, it can be very helpful to try to break the speech down in this way.

10. Divide the class into two halves. Assign one half to read the first section (up to the first //) aloud. When they finish, the second half will read the second section. The two halves of the class should continue to alternate until the class has read the entire speech aloud.

11. When you have finished, tell the students you’re going to read the speech one more time. This time, tell them you’d like to have one student read at a time. Ask for volunteers to read each section of the speech, as divided by the slashes. Ask the other students to read along silently, and to look for all the reasons Hamlet lists that people might consider suicide, and the one reason why he thinks people wouldn't. Also ask them to mark any lines they still find confusing.
12. After the reading, ask students to discuss what they have discovered. Remind them what you asked them to look for before: The reasons why people might consider suicide, and the one reason they would decide not to. (*Reasons to consider suicide would be to escape oppressors who treat one unfairly, authority figures who are rude, the pain of love that isn’t returned, the lack of justice in society, the rudeness of people in official positions, and the way good people are treated badly. The main thing Hamlet finds to argue against suicide is the fear of what comes after death.*) Ask your students if they have identified any lines they don’t understand and help them decipher such lines.

13. When you have finished this discussion, break the class into groups of four or five students. Explain that you’d like each group to create a modern-day paraphrase of the speech. Tell them they should use the marks they’ve made to help them break the speech into distinct thoughts or parts of the arguments. Explain that since Shakespeare wrote four hundred years ago, sometimes doing a word-for-word translation doesn’t work very well. Instead, they should focus on what each section as a whole is saying, and try to come up with a modern-day equivalent.

14. As the students are working on their paraphrase, make yourself available to help them decipher the more difficult words, metaphors, and complicated syntax. Use the Teacher’s Edition of the soliloquy from Act III, Scene i to assist you.

15. When the students have finished writing their translations, ask each group to read its version aloud. Note any interesting similarities or differences among the versions, and clarify any sections of the speech that seem to have given your students particular trouble.

16. Introduce the third video segment by telling students that now you’d like them to think about why Shakespeare might have decided to write this soliloquy for Hamlet. As they watch, ask them to consider the following questions: Based on this speech, how would you describe the character of Hamlet? What does the speech reveal about him? What does the soliloquy show us that a scene with other characters couldn’t?

17. Play the segment “Many Different Hamlets” (Access the video segments for this lesson at the Video Segments Page.)

18. After viewing the segment, pose the questions you asked students to think about: Based on this speech, how would you describe the character of Hamlet? What does the speech reveal about him? What does the soliloquy show us that a scene with other characters couldn’t? Ask them to formulate their answers in a paragraph as an in-class writing activity. Allow students the flexibility to generate their own interpretations of the character, stressing that, as was described in the segment, this character can be read many different ways. Help them to think about the topic by asking follow-up questions:

- How would this speech be different if Hamlet had this discussion with his friend Horatio? What does it tell us about Hamlet that instead he thinks of these things on his own? (*The fact that this is a soliloquy underscores how isolated Hamlet feels. He has to puzzle things out on his own, rather than turning to his friend. He feels there’s no one at the court who he can trust.*)

- How would you characterize someone who thinks about his life in this way? (*Hamlet is very philosophical. It’s not enough for him that he feels the way he feels. He also strives to understand what he feels and to find solutions by thinking through issues. Some students may think he is obsessive.*)
• What kinds of arguments does Hamlet pose as he thinks through his topic? *(In his arguments, Hamlet goes beyond his own experience, and tries to find some general rule for all people. He sees his own experience as one that reflects the experience of all of humankind.)*

19. After all students have finished writing, ask a few to share their interpretations. Note any similarities and differences, and ask students to comment on them.

CULMINATING ACTIVITY

1. Once you are done with your discussion, tell your students that analyzing soliloquies in this way can help them form their own interpretations of the play and its characters.

2. Either as an in-class writing assignment or as homework, have students choose one of Hamlet's other soliloquies and do the same analysis and modern-day translation they did in class with the soliloquy from Act III, Scene i. The soliloquies they can choose from are:
   - Act I, Scene ii "Oh, that this too too solid flesh" – Hamlet is at court, and it is noted that he is still grieving his father and wears all black.
   - Act II, Scene ii "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" – Hamlet has just watched one of the players perform a speech from a play.

3. Explain they should:
   - Summarize the context of the soliloquy, explaining what has happened just before to motivate this soliloquy.
   - Break the speech into complete thoughts, as you did in class with the "To be or not to be" speech. Ask them to clearly mark the different thoughts, and to be prepared to submit the marked-up speech with their written exercises.
   - Write a modern-day version, as they did in class for the other soliloquy.
   - Answer the questions: What do we learn about Hamlet in this speech? What do the lines and arguments reveal about him? What action do you expect to follow from the ideas considered here? *(Answers should include Act I, Scene ii soliloquy: We learn how badly Hamlet feels about his mother's remarriage, that it's already got him thinking of suicide, and that it makes the world seem unsatisfying. He uses images from mythology that make his father sound very heroic and characterizes the depth of his love for him. He also establishes that he feels he cannot speak freely at court. Act II, Scene ii soliloquy: Hamlet has watched the traveling player recite a scene from a play about the Trojan War, and he berates himself that the actor seems to feel more passion for the imagined situation than he does for the actual tragedy in his life. Students may note that Hamlet is very likely to get caught up in his own words, rather than in acting. But students may also identify this as a speech in which Hamlet feels motivated to take some kind of action.)*

If students are doing this exercise as homework, distribute the Assignment handout to guide them.

4. Collect the students’ writing exercise for an assessment of the lesson.