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Unit of Study

Dr. Warner

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You Are Not Alone: Processing Grief Through Shared Stories

Rationale

As a young high school student, I suffered a tremendous amount of loss in a very short amount of time. I lost a family pet, my grandfather, my aunt, and a year later my father-in-law. I suffered depression because I felt alone. My family suffered with me, but I felt like no one in my school understood what I was going through. As I grew closer to my friends after high school I found out they had been suffering just as much as I was. None of us discussed it because we thought no one else would understand. In sharing our stories, my friends and I felt like we had achieved catharsis. I learned that loss is universal, and I learned that every person can empathize with grief in one form or another. If teachers provide students an outlet for expressing their pain then students will be able to form healthier bonds with each other.

High school is a precipice where parents expect their children to make the leap from childhood to adulthood. Students struggle with classes, hormones, relationships, and expectations, and school teaches them to cope with all of these stresses. It does not, however, help them cope with loss. Students are expected to go to their parents or their therapists in order to process grief, but students feel isolated if the discussion of grief is confined to the home. Death and loss unite the human experience; by having students dissect these topics in class, teachers can inspire them to connect with one another. The unit I have outlined will guide students in tackling the tougher questions surrounding death, provide them a space to discuss scary topics without judgment, and provide students the opportunity to share their own stories in an effort to reach catharsis.

The focus of this unit will be on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but it will incorporate young-adult

literature to make this canonical work approachable. Hamlet suffers after the death of his father, and his thoughts circle this grief throughout the play. He ponders how man's substance can be reduced to a “quintessence of dust” and struggles with the choice between “to be, or not to be”(2.2.269,3.1.55). In Hamlet's final moments, he pleads for Horatio to spread his memory. Hamlet's cryptic last lines, “the rest is silence,” are punctuated by the sounds of his dying, and they leave the audience to question if death truly is silent(5.2.336). Hamlet acts as a cautionary tale about the dangerous self-perpetuating cycle of grief and isolation.

The power of this play *comes* from Hamlet's isolation. Rather than share his true feelings with the other characters of the play, he shares his feelings with the audience. He festers over the secret thoughts of his loved ones, and chooses to enact vengeance rather than discuss matters with them. If he did take the time to share his pain, he would see that every character suffers; Claudius wracks himself with guilt over killing his brother, Gertrude stresses about the mental health of her son, Polonius expresses anxiety over the prospects of *his* son's future, and Ophelia and Laertes *both* suffer at the hands of Hamlet. This unit will explore where Hamlet goes wrong, and it will help students tackle the bigger questions behind mortality and morality. Ultimately, the play *Hamlet* does not seek to answer these questions but rather inspires the audience to wrestle with hard truths themselves. The only way to reach an answer is to share our stories.

Though 9th and 10th grade students would find a course on grief useful, the centerpiece work of the unit would need to change for younger students. Shakespeare's works require in-depth critical thinking and a strong grasp of the English language, so 11th and 12th grade students would get the most out of this unit's content. The young-adult literature surrounding Hamlet incorporates books for students young enough to read *Harry Potter*, by J.K. Rowling, to students old enough to read *History is All You Left Me*, by Adam Silvera. Teachers can cut the list down to literature suitable to their students, or add books that fit a centerpiece more appropriate for the grade they are teaching.

Introducing the Unit

Open the introductory class with music that, for you, defines grief and loss. It is up to each teacher to decide which song would best ease their students into discussing grief. I would use the song “Spiritual State,” composed by Jun Seba. The album titled after this song is the final work of Jun Seba, who passed suddenly in a car accident in his thirties. After letting the students listen to the song you have chosen, describe why it holds sentimental value or why it might relate to grief. I would describe how important his music was for me, especially in getting through high school, and I would share the sorrow of never hearing new music from my favorite composer again.

If you are comfortable sharing a more personal anecdote, discuss someone that you have lost. If you have not lost someone personally, describe a death that affected you in some way. For example, the death of Robin Williams affected me and my siblings. He reminded us a great deal of our own father, and his role in “Mrs. Doubtfire” bonded him to us when our family went through divorce. I recommend sharing your own personal story with students at the beginning of the unit because it will help them feel more comfortable sharing their own stories with the class.

First quick-write:

Have your students do a two-part quick-write about someone or something they have lost. The students should write for five minutes as if introducing the reader to the person. For example, “This is my Aunt Sarah. She is 24 years-old. . .,” or, “This is my blanket, it has been with me since childhood. . .,” etc. Ask them to write as if the person or thing were still there with them.

After five minutes, have the students focus their attention away from describing what they have lost to instead describing how losing them/it has affected them. Have them write for another five minutes. The purpose of this quick-write is to get students accustomed to writing about personal instances, but it also helps build up the idea that everyone in class has lost someone or something. Encourage students to share what they wrote about afterward. Take ten to twenty minutes discussing everyone's experiences. By sharing their stories, students can find commonalities with each other. After

the quick-write, introduce the unit's overarching questions.

Questions:

- What does it mean to die?
- What do we leave behind?
- How do we cope with loss?
- How can we help others cope with loss?
- How do we find catharsis?

Give a quick overview of how *Hamlet* relates to these topics. Hamlet ponders the meaning of death, worries about the legacy he will leave behind, and does not find healthy ways of coping with the death of his father. Afterward, pass around a sign-up sheet for in-class readings that will start the next day. You should also provide percentages that each assignment is worth. These percentages represent the level of importance each assignment should hold for the students.

Unit Grade Breakdown:

Music Assignment (5%)

Quick-writing (20%)

Class Participation (25%)

Outside Reading Part 1 and 2 (40%)

Final Project (10%)

Dissecting *Hamlet*

Music Assignment(5%):

Students should send you music that relates to the unit's theme before the next class. At start of class, play two of the songs from the list and have the student who sent them explain their significance. This assignment helps students feel more comfortable sharing their experiences, and it will make up 5% of their grade for the unit.

Poems as a method of understanding grief:

To introduce students to more canonical works that tackle grief, consider introducing them to poetry. Have students read poems that connect to the themes seen in *Hamlet*. They can then discuss these poems during their regular discussion time, especially if the teacher provides a prompt to go off of.

“The Fish,” by Elizabeth Bishop, shows students that figurative language can be used to express grief when a simple explanation cannot. The narrator sits alone and catches a fish whose imagery is reminiscent of a father-figure. Have students point out the word choice that signifies the fish is a representation of her father, and discuss with the students how inventive use of language can help them express themselves. This poem works as a great introductory poem for Hamlet's longer soliloquies. Hamlet uses extended metaphor to express his concerns about death, so going over “The Fish” is good practice.

“My Papa's Waltz,” by Theodore Roethke, is an ode to a father whose gruff countenance leaves the narrator with mixed feelings. The narrator loves his father, but the waltz that is emblazoned in his memory is difficult and painful. Roethke's poem shows students that grief can be both a mixture of regret and relief, and their feelings do not have to be black and white. This poem gives stark contrast to the gilded way that Hamlet describes his father, and it offers a perspective that students can use to dissect Hamlet's state of mind. This poem provides insight into characters like Claudius as well. Claudius kills the king, but Hamlet catches him praying that he could take the action back. Memories

of loved ones are never clear, and students might need resources like this poem to help them sort out their own.

“Because I Could Not Stop for Death,” by Emily Dickenson, shows a figurative representation of death. Have your students discuss the images she provides and relate them to the themes of the unit. Assigning this poem just after Hamlet's “to be or not to be” speech gives a worthwhile contrast between his obsession over death and Dickenson's calm acceptance. This poem also provides a jumping-off point for discussion of Hamlet's death in Act 5 Scene 2. The students should compare Hamlet's violent end with Dickenson's.

“The Raven,” by Edgar Allen Poe, uses meter, rhyme, and repetition to build suspense. The narrator of the poem slowly goes mad as he grieves the death of Lenore. The narrator settles into eternal grief by the end of the poem, and Hamlet similarly commits himself to “bloody thoughts” near the end of the play(4.1.65). This poem lets students have a little fun while also seeing more examples of the affects of grief. Assigning this poem just before reading the scene where Hamlet slays Polonius does wonders to line up both characters' descents into madness.

Class Reading:

Students will read the parts of *Hamlet* in the order they signed up for on the first day. *Hamlet* is a play, so reading aloud will help the students understand it better. Also, reading aloud provides an opportunity for students to practice their public speaking skills, and it provides the teacher with an opportunity to clarify more ambiguous moments in the text. Read one to two scenes each class so that there is enough time to discuss the major themes of the unit. Have your students write for about twenty minutes, then launch them into discussion of the scenes.

Quick-write Questions(20%):

Quick-writes will make up a large portion of the students' grades for this unit. The point of quick-writes is to focus students attention on key details in *Hamlet's* scenes. The students will have 20 minutes to find a quote in the text they just read, analyze it, then answer the questions provided.

Students will hand these in and then discuss what they wrote for the rest of class. This provides students an opportunity to practice close-reading, quote-integration, and sustained focused writing. Grading of these assignments will focus on how much writing they achieved and how well they answered the question. Mistakes in papers should be marked but not held against students' scores.

Class Discussion(25%):

A major aspect of this unit should depend on students' class participation because in-class discussion will be the most important way for them to understand the material. Students do not need to speak to earn participation points if it was their day to read, otherwise they should strive to speak twice each class to earn their full participation grade. After quick-writing, students will have the opportunity to discuss the text and generate ideas about the material. The students should lead the discussion with guidance from the teacher. If the topic gets offhand or certain students dominate the discussion, call on a student who has not spoken yet to share what they wrote about.

Proposed list of quick-write questions per scene:

- How does the death of the king affect his citizens? Who seems most affected? How are people grieving? How has Hamlet isolated himself from the other mourners? Do we trust his description of his father? What comparisons can we draw to Bishop's "The Fish," or Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz"? (1.1-1.2)
- How does Polonius' character appear? Is he a good father? Describe him.(1.3)
- Can we trust the apparition of the king? Look for descriptions of the ghost. Does anyone else see this apparition? How might Hamlet's grief cloud his judgment? How does the existence of a ghost affect our outlook on death?(1.4-1.5)
- Find one quote that describes Hamlet's emotional state. How reliable is this description? What evidence do we have that it is right or wrong?(2.1)
- What fears do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern represent for readers? Are they reliable

confidants? Do they look out for Hamlet's best interest or help him deal with his grief?

Hamlet has so many people who care about him, but he only truly confides in Horatio. Is this healthy? Does Horatio help Hamlet? If you were Hamlet's confidant, what would you say to him?(2.2)

- The “to be or not to be” speech hits the nail on the head. In your own words, paraphrase his soliloquy. Make connections to Dickenson's “Because I Could Not Stop for Death”. Why does Hamlet spurn Ophelia shortly after this speech?(3.1)
- How has grief affected Hamlet? He says he wants to pretend to be mad to hide his true intentions, but could it be possible he truly has gone mad? What signs of grief do the other characters exhibit?(3.2)
- Hamlet does not kill Claudius when he has the chance. Why does he hesitate? How do grief and regret exacerbate each other? Is Claudius evil?(3.3)
- Gertrude does not see the ghost of Hamlet's father. Does this cast doubt on Hamlet's sanity? If the ghost is not real, then what happens after death? Does Hamlet's fear of death validate or invalidate the existence of his father's ghost?(3.4)
- How do Gertrude and Claudius express grief? How do regret and grief affect each other? Does Hamlet regret killing Polonius?(4.1-4.2)
- Hamlet seems mad. Is he? How has grief led to his isolation, and how has isolation exacerbated his grief? Do we see a similar level of madness in “The Raven”? Compare and contrast these characters. (4.3-4.4)
- Describe Ophelia's song in your own words. What is her obsession in this scene? Who might she be singing about? What do the flowers represent? Is this grief, and do the people around her help her cope?(4.5)
- How does Claudius use Laertes' grief against Hamlet? Why does Ophelia kill herself? Given

Hamlet expresses fear of death, is Ophelia's suicide an act of courage or cowardice? Could someone have saved her?(4.7)

- Why does Shakespeare use two clowns as sextons? How might humor help us cope with grief?(5.1)
- Hamlet and Laertes are both grieving the loss of their fathers. How has grief led to the death of these men and the other members of the court? Why is it important to Hamlet that Horatio spread his memory? When Hamlet dies, he says that “the rest is silence”; what does he mean? Compare this to Dickenson's poem. How do their deaths differ?(5.2)

Outside Reading and Writing Assignments

There will be no written work directly about Hamlet outside of class, so students will instead have an outside reading assignment that consists of two parts. Both parts together will make up 40% of their grade for the unit.

Part 1 (15%):

Each student must read a different book from an approved list. I have attached an example of a list meant to entice students into reading. After they read the book of their choosing, they will then give an oral review of the book for the class. They will discuss the major themes of the book without revealing too much information, then they will connect the book to themes we have been dealing with in class. Each student should provide two passages with explanation from their book that demonstrates commonality with *Hamlet*. This should be delivered much like a book review, and they should describe it in a way to entice other readers. The presentations will take up to two class days and should come about a third of the way through the unit. Provide a grading rubric that students can follow for the presentation. No written work will be required for this first half of the assignment.

Part 2 (25%):

From the books presented in class, students will pick the one that stood out to them most. It cannot be the book they presented on, but multiple students can pick the same book. They will read it then write a text-connection paper linking themes from their choice of two works they've read this unit(including *Hamlet*). This paper should be around 2500-3000 words because the students do not have other written assignments for this unit. Provide a grading rubric that emphasizes content and understanding of the texts. The paper should follow standard MLA format and be relatively free of mistakes, but grammar and spelling should only be a small percentage of the paper's grade. The point of the assignment is to get students to understand the commonalities between characters, and thus the commonalities between each other. Having a rubric that focuses more on substance than minutia also helps encourage students to express themselves.

Closing the Unit

Final Project(10%):

Students will produce an artistic work worth 10% of their grade for the unit. This can be a poem, artwork, music(in sheet form), food, etc. They will provide a one to two page write-up about how their project connects to the major themes of the unit. At the end of the unit we will safely burn these artworks together. Each student will come up and describe their work in detail. They will describe what the work is, why this work matters to them, and why they want to let it go. Afterward, they will throw it into the fire. If a safe fireplace is not available, then a shredder works too. As for food, eating it is also a way of letting it go.

The importance of this exercise is to help students let go of their grief. After a whole unit dedicated to the temporary nature of life, it is important that students have the opportunity to express their own suffering in a healthy environment. By performing this ritual together, students share a bond. The hope is that by sharing our stories we will grow closer as a class and that students will feel more comfortable sharing their struggles with each other.

Approved Books List*

Author	Title – blurb (key themes)
Crutcher, Chris	<p><i>Deadline</i> –</p> <p>A book about a young boy who has a year left to live, but no one else knows. (Mortality, isolation, grief, coping skills, sharing stories)</p>
Crutcher, Chris	<p><i>Whale Talk</i> –</p> <p>A book about a mixed-race kid trying to stop the cycle of abuse. (Mortality, grief, rage, regret, sharing stories)</p>
Cross, Mimi	<p><i>Before Goodbye</i> –</p> <p>Cate and David are both living with survivor's guilt, but together they might find a way to forgive themselves. (Mortality, regret, guilt, sharing stories)</p>
Forman, Gayle	<p><i>If I Stay</i> –</p> <p>After surviving a crash that killed her whole family, a young girl has to choose between living and dying. (Mortality, guilt, isolation)</p>
LaFleur, Suzanne	<p><i>Love, Aubrey</i> –</p> <p>A young girl loses her family all at once and must learn to open up to new people in a new setting. (Mortality, grief, isolation)</p>
Lenz, Kristen Bartley	<p><i>The Art of Holding on and Letting Go</i> –</p> <p>A mountain conquered her parents, and now this young woman must conquer the aftermath. (Depression, mortality, isolation)</p>
De La Pena, Matt	<p><i>We were here</i> –</p> <p>An at-risk youth flees his half-way house with two wild friends to hop the southern border. (Mortality, regret, coping skills, sharing stories)</p>
Jemisin, N. K.	<p><i>The Fifth Season</i> –</p> <p>A story told in three perspectives of a world beset by constant calamity. (Mortality, grief, isolation, prejudice)</p>
Ness, Patrick	<p><i>A Monster Calls</i> –</p>

	A young boy finds a monster that shares stories, but the boy keeps his own a secret until it's too late. (Mortality, regret, guilt, isolation, sharing stories)
Paterson, Katherine	<i>Bridge to Terebithia</i> – Two children find a magical world on the other side of an unstable bridge. (Mortality, regret, grief, love)
Rowling, J.K.	<i>The Harry Potter Series</i> (any book) – A young wizard must find a way to stop the evil man that killed his parents. (Mortality, guilt, isolation, expectations)
Schwabb, Victoria	<i>The Archived</i> – A book about a world where the memories of the living become archived “histories”. (Mortality, legacy)
Silvera, Adam	<i>History is All You Left Me</i> – A young man must suffer through the loss of an ex whose future he always saw himself in. (Mortality, regret, guilt, grief, isolation, sharing stories)
Silvera, Adam	<i>They Both Die at the End</i> – Two young men find each other after receiving the call that tomorrow is their final day alive. (Mortality, isolation, grief, sharing stories)
Silvera, Adam	<i>More Happy Than Not</i> – <i>A young man struggles with himself in a world where unwanted memories can be surgically removed.</i> (Isolation, mortality, grief, sharing stories)
Vlahos, Len	<i>Life in a Fishbowl</i> – A man sells his life to the highest bidder after finding out he has months to live only to end up on reality television. (Mortality, isolation, privacy, grief, regret)
Zusak, Markus	<i>The Book Thief</i> – Death tells a story of a young Jewish girl in Nazi Germany desperately trying to learn to read. (Mortality, fate, sharing stories, isolation)

*Book Previews sourced from personal recollection and kirkusreviews.com.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. The Norton Shakespeare, Edition 3, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Norton and Company, 2016, pp. 1194-1283