John Golden

Where to Be or Not to Be: The Question of Place in *Hamlet*

Suggesting methods for analyzing specific scenes from a variety of films, Golden describes ways to engage students in one of Shakespeare's most frequently taught plays.

I don't really like *Hamlet*. Don't get me wrong, I love the play, the language, and the characters, but I always find it difficult to teach. Part of this is because I prefer to assign students scenes to perform as we read a Shakespeare text, but *Hamlet* doesn't divide nicely into manageable scenes, and I usually do not have enough teenage Ken Branaghs for each group to take on Hamlet's thousands of lines. And for students, things bog down with the players in act 2, and adolescents tire of Hamlet's dithering (despite my desperate refrain: "YES, YES, that's the POINT!").

But, if you've ever seen *Hamlet* performed live, you know that there's this magical moment at the beginning of act 3. Just like our students, an adult audience of *Hamlet* is usually a bit tired about now, dreaming about intermission. Then, Hamlet alone onstage says, "*To be . . .*" and the audience suddenly sits up straighter in their seats and from all over the auditorium you hear a hundred whispers, "*or not to be . . . that is the question.*" A few lit majors and *Jeopardy* fans stick with the actor in hushed tones through "*whether it is nobler in the mind to suffer . . . .*" For a few moments, regardless of the quality of the performance, the audience and the play are connected by the most famous speech in Western literature.

I love the excitement that this speech can bring to an audience, and I exploit it in my classroom as a way to dive deep into the themes of the play through these 33 lines. My main approach is to examine the choices that the actors and directors of the multiple film versions of *Hamlet* make during this scene. By analyzing and comparing these choices, students come not only to a better understanding of the play but also to a clearer sense of how specific choices affect the ways that we understand a text.

While most of the activities that I describe below focus on the one speech from act 3 of *Hamlet*, they are applicable to the study of any Shakespeare play. In fact, one year, running short on time and energy to teach a complete play, I taught The Bard's Greatest Hits by assigning these exact activities with Macbeth's "Tomorrow and tomorrow," Othello's "It is the cause," and Lear's first storm speech. The process and approach remained the same, and the great results assuaged at least some of the guilt I felt for taking a shortcut.

Part One: Theatrical Elements

One of the most important activities I do when teaching any play is to make sure that students understand the role and effects of the theatrical elements in a drama production. With a major assist from Alan B. Teasley and Ann Wilder's phenomenal book about film, *Reel Conversations: Reading Films with Young Adults*, I define these elements, as sets, props, costumes, and acting choices. Our first lesson takes place right away in my classroom. I ask them to look around the room and write down everything they see: movie posters on the walls, stacks of papers on my desk, dusty chalkboards, empty soda cans in the trash (not in the recycling bin), etc. Then, I ask them to imagine this classroom as a stage or a film set: What conclusions might you draw about the character (me) who teaches in this room? They say things like he is an overworked, over-caffeinated teacher who loves movies more than cleaning. Next, they examine my "costume"—

tie, striped shirt, three-year-old khakis—and conclude that I am an underpaid, unstylish guy unsuccessfully trying to hide a growing waistline with vertical stripes (don't try this, by the way, if you're not prepared for the brutality of teenage truthfulness). Finally, for "acting choice" they write down my typical gestures, mannerisms, and a surprising litany of ugly faces and eye rolls to conclude that I am one sarcastic, arrogant jerk. The point of this, beyond the free therapy it offers, is to have students understand how to analyze the ways that sets, props, costumes, and acting choices can lead to interpretation of character and theme.

Tired of their unrelenting assaults on me, I turn them loose on themselves and ask them to describe their rooms, typical clothes, and mannerisms, and to come to some kind of conclusion about themselves based on these choices. What do their sports posters, tattoos, piercings, hairstyles, ringtones, and smiles reveal about them?

Finally, we move on to some film clips to analyze directors' choices of theatrical elements. One of my favorite films to use with juniors or seniors is the first *Matrix* film. Playing almost any scene at random and without sound, I ask students to note the costumes, props, sets, and acting. If you've seen the film, you know that there is a direct contrast between the "real" world in the movie and the computer-constructed "matrix" world. We see the characters in cool leather jackets and sunglasses able to perform amazing physical feats in the fake world, but the same characters are dreary, tired, and have bad hair in the real world. (Alas, Keanu Reeves remains a bad actor in the real and fake worlds.) The connection between these choices of dramatic elements and the major themes and conflicts of the film is easy for students to understand.

The most important lesson students can draw from this focus on the theatrical elements is that dramatic choices are made for particular reasons and are intended to have specific effects on us as an audience. Nowhere is this more important than in analyzing a play as complex as *Hamlet*. When Hamlet says in act 1 that his "inky cloak" is "but the trapping and the suits of woe," the lines can be understood best by examining the theatrical choices of the actors and directors. And it will be through analyzing these choices that students will begin to make interpretations of Shakespeare's words.

Part Two: Reading the Speech

Whether through cultural osmosis or direct instruction, every student I have ever taught has heard the line "To be or not to be"; until prodded, not many have ever considered what it means. I've never seen so many light bulbs over students' heads as when one of them says, "Oh, he's thinking about killing himself?" After that line, however, students are pretty clueless, so one of the first things I do is show them some still pictures from a variety of film versions and ask them to make some predictions about the speech. You can access these stills at https://sites.google.com/site/ejhamlet. As students look at the images, they make guesses about the topic, tone, and conflicts of the speech. Because they see images of Gibson's Hamlet in a crypt, Olivier's on a high cliff, or Branagh's in a hall of mirrors, they tend to say things like "it's an internal conflict about death"; "he appears scared"; or, "he seems so alone."

Next, I ask them to read the speech to themselves as a professional actor delivers the lines. I like to turn the TV around to the wall—or cover the projector—so that my students only hear the voice and are not influenced by the images from the film. After they confirm or change their predictions, I ask them to read the speech silently to themselves, highlighting words or phrases in order for them to fill in a chart with three categories: What I *Know*, What I *Think* I Know, and What I Have *No Clue* About. Their filled-in charts may look something like Figure 1.

Once students make their lists, I have them jigsaw with each other to combine their lists, eventually creating one classroom list, hopefully moving a few more lines into the I Know or I Think I Know categories, though I don't push it. My feeling is that students need to know enough words to be comfortable to make good stabs at the ones they don't know. While I'm not one who thinks you need to know the meaning of every word to understand Shakespeare (I've lived a long life without knowing what a "fardel" is), I do think that students have greater success with the speech when they know more words than they don't.

After listening to the speech again, but not viewing it yet, I break students into six groups and assign them a small section from the speech (see fig. 2). For teachers differentiating their instruction, it's helpful to note that sections 4 and 5 are the most

FIGURE 1. Student Categorization of Language from "To Be or Not to Be" Speech

I Know	I Think I Know	I Have No Clue
• must give us pause	• puzzles the will	• proud man's contumely
• conscience does make cowards of us all	• bear the whips and scorns of time	• his quietus make with a bare bodkin?
• to grunt and sweat under a weary life	• lose the name of action	• the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought

FIGURE 2. Theatrical Elements Chart: Hamlet's Speech Divided by Groups with Sample Student Responses

	Possible Theatrical Elements
Group 1 To be, or not to be—that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them?	Shakes head back and forth. Drops head into hands. Stands up suddenly at "take arms against."
Group 2 To die: to sleep; No more; and by a sleep to say we end The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation Devoutly to be wish'd.	Puts head on ground in a dark graveyard. Closes eyes. Curls up on ground. Reaches out to tombstone.
Group 3 To die, to sleep; To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub; For in that sleep of death what dreams may come When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, Must give us pause: there's the respect That makes calamity of so long life;	In a hospital, wandering from room to room looking at patients. Pauses and holds finger up at "the rub." Wearing doctors' clothes.
Group 4 For who would bear the whips and scorns of time, The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely The pangs of despised love, the law's delay, The insolence of office and the spurns That patient merit of the unworthy takes, When he himself might his quietus make With a bare bodkin?	Gets angry. Holds up photograph at "despised love." Drops picture and picks up a gun on "quietus."
Group 5 Who would fardels bear, To grunt and sweat under a weary life, But that the dread of something after death, The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn No traveller returns, puzzles the will And makes us rather bear those ills we have Than fly to others that we know not of?	Falls down on "weary life." Sounds frustrated at "puzzles the will." Stands up slowly at "fly to others."
Group 6 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all; And thus the native hue of resolution Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, And enterprise of great pith and moment With this regard their currents turn awry And lose the name of action.	Throws knife down on "cowards." Whispers the final line and slumps down in his chair.

challenging for students and they have an easier time with sections 1 and 2. In groups, students read their section a few times and share a short paraphrase of their assigned lines with the whole class. Still in their groups, students are then asked to imagine themselves as the directors or actors of a film version of their assigned section of the speech and to identify the theatrical elements they would choose. They should consider facial expressions, gestures, and movements appropriate for their lines, but also costumes, props, and sets for the overall scene. Last, I like to show students still images from various film versions and ask them to make a guess about what line from the speech the actor is delivering at that moment. Students should have a reason for their guess based on the theatrical elements they can observe. You can access a PowerPoint of these images with the correct lines identified at https://sites.google.com/site/ejhamlet. When we begin watching the film versions described below, we return to this chart to compare students' predictions and choices with those of the actual film directors.

Normally, this is a good time for an informal writing assessment about the students' knowledge of the speech. I ask them to respond to prompts about theme, tone, characterization, or conflict. It is also the place where I almost always require students to begin memorizing the speech. I know that there is professional debate about the educational value of memorization, but I assign it anyway. Not only does memorization encourage close reading of the text, but also I think of it as giving my students a gift that will stay with them for life. I've had many students come back years after graduation and deliver the speech to me—though admittedly they are usually a little angry at me that they still have it memorized.

Part Three: Viewing the Speech

Once students have become at least comfortable with the speech through the activities above, I begin showing them clips of the scene from various films. Because each is usually only about four minutes long, I can examine two to three clips in one class period with plenty of time for discussion and analysis. As students watch, I start by giving them only one specific element to look for: delivery of lines, setting, costumes/props, cinematic choice, etc. I tend to play each clip twice, adding one more element each time; once we have seen three or four clips, they should be able to look for all or most of these theatrical elements.

This is a great opportunity to have students work in groups again since they can each look for a different element to bring to their group discussions. See Figure 3 for the kinds of questions I like to ask students once we have viewed at least two clips. I've described here the clips that are easiest for teachers to locate. I found them all in my public library, at Amazon, at Netflix, or on YouTube. They are listed below by year of production and the name of the actor portraying Hamlet with the director's name in parentheses.

FIGURE 3. Discussion Questions for Film Versions of Hamlet

1. What is the effect of the choice of setting? In other words, why is Hamlet high on a cliff (Olivier), in a Blockbuster (Hawke), in a mausoleum (Gibson), and so on? What specific lines from the speech do you think inspired the directors to choose these settings? What are some commonalities that you noticed about the settings among most of the versions you saw? Compare the settings in at least two versions. Which one more effectively captures your interpretation of the speech? Why?
2. Examine the use of costumes and props. What tends to be in common about the clothes that Hamlet is wearing? Why? Choose at least two versions and explain the differences between the costumes by focusing on the effects that are created through these choices. Why does Hamlet sometimes have a dagger? When and how is it used similarly and differently in some versions?
3. Although in every version, Hamlet is alone onstage, in some versions, it is either explicitly stated or implied that Claudius and Polonius might be watching him. How does an interpretation of this scene change if Hamlet knows he is being watched? Also, some of the Hamlets deliver the speech inside the castle, while some are outside. What different interpretations can you make about these location choices?
4. Think about each actor's performance of Hamlet: his voice, gestures, movements, and facial expressions. What is common among all or most of their performances? Were there lines that were performed similarly or in strikingly different ways? Why? What is the effect? What delivery of a line was most as you expected? Which one do you think most effectively captures your interpretation of the line? Why?
5. Examine the cinematic choices that each director makes during the speech. What lighting is used? When is Hamlet filmed in a close-up and when in a long shot? Why?

Laurence Olivier (1948, Laurence Olivier)

1:01:02–1:07:22 on DVD (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTG0vXniDQY&feature=related)

Olivier reverses the scene order by having Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia occur immediately before the "to be or not to be" speech, instead of afterward. So the scene actually begins with Ophelia on the ground as the camera moves away from her and begins moving up the steep steps of the castle. The music and the speed of the camera are dizzying and chaotic. The tone shifts dramatically and the music slows as the camera finds Hamlet, moving to a close-up of his head and through him to the view he is seeing: a sharp cliff and swirling water below. We do not see this Hamlet saying the lines at first, but we are getting his thoughts through interior monologue. The "to be or not to be" speech is shown with cuts back and forth to the water below, out of focus and disorientating. He reaches for his dagger on the line "And by opposing end them?" At times, this Hamlet speaks the lines aloud and sometimes not. He comes out of his thoughts dramatically (students say "comically") with the line "perchance to dream." And though at one point he holds his dagger to his chest, it slips (a Freudian one?) out of his hand at the line: "Than fly to others that we know not of?" He eventually turns away from his cliff's perch and walks slowly into the fog, having lost "the name of action."

Laurence Olivier (1948): Perched high on the cliff, dagger in hand, Hamlet faces his choices.

Richard Burton (1964, Bill Colleran and John Gielgud)

1:19:00–1:21:20 on DVD

This version is presented on a bare stage, as if the audience were watching a rehearsal of the play. Hamlet bounds onstage, nervous. The famous line is quick, delivered as he looks around, shifting his feet back and forth. The pace of his delivery slows and the tone becomes more melancholy as he connects sleep and death. He descends the stage and sits on a chair as he talks of making "quietus." He seems to fold into himself at the end of the speech; he is resolved to his inaction. He barely looks up as Ophelia enters and acknowledges her halfheartedly.

Innokenti Smoktunovsky (film titled *Gamlet*, 1964, Grigori Kozintsev)

0:46:17–0:49:15 on DVD

The camera pans and finds this Russian Hamlet standing still with eyes downcast at the shore of the sea crashing behind him. Like Olivier, this actor does not speak the lines, but we are hearing his inside thoughts. He does, however, appear to be looking almost directly into the camera at the beginning of the speech, talking directly to us. On "to die, to sleep," he moves *toward* the sea. But as he approaches the sea, his way is completely blocked by a huge boulder jutting out of the ocean; he remains standing in front of it, gazing past it to the sea. He turns away from the boulder and the sea on the lines "the dread of something after death . . . ." The scene ends with a low angle, long shot of "Gamlet" as he slowly, wearily ascends the steps back up to the castle and his fate. The final sounds we hear are the sounds of the waves continuing to crash on the shore.

Mel Gibson (1990, Franco Zeffirelli)

0:49:10–0:53:02 on DVD (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwFzvg3L2Qg&feature=related)

The speech takes place in what appears to be the royal family's mausoleum. Hamlet descends the stairs as he says the famous first line, moving from light to dark, but he pauses momentarily before moving fully into the main chamber. Hamlet looks around at the bones and skulls that litter the crypt on the lines "To die, to sleep." In fact, he delivers much of the speech in front of a coffin with a figure in frozen repose on top, dead, surely, but seemingly

asleep. As he talks about the "calamity of such long life," he moves toward a light that comes from somewhere above, and stands half bright, half dark until: "conscience does make cowards of us all." And while he begins to move out of the crypt at the last line, he pauses at the bottom of the stairs; the scene fades to black with him still down there.

Kevin Kline (1990, Kevin Kline)

1:05:00–1:09:03 on DVD (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwd98zMxKEg&feature=related)

Like the Burton version, this is a filmed stage performance and it too takes place on a simple bare stage. Hamlet is clearly disheveled: his hair mussed, and shirt untucked and opened wide at the neck. Though his appearance is wild, his delivery is calm, slow, and methodical, pausing only at "to die . . . to sleep." We notice now that the camera is slowly moving forward, closer and closer to him. The camera continues forward until we see only Hamlet's face; everything else is eliminated from the frame; only now can we see the tears in his eyes and a single drop streams down his face at the line: "And thus the native hue of resolution . . . Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought."

Kenneth Branagh (1996, Kenneth Branagh)

1:33:12–1:36:17 on DVD (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-JD6g0rARk4)

Branagh makes it clear that Claudius and Polonius, and maybe Ophelia, are watching Hamlet as he delivers his soliloquy. It takes place in a large, ornate room with a chessboard floor. There are the loud sounds of his footsteps, and Hamlet looks around, suspicious, perhaps. A panel opens up and we see Claudius spying on him. Hamlet stares at the reflection of himself as he begins, "To be or not to be." He appears calm and methodical, even in his delivery. Through most of the speech, the audience sees mainly the reflected Hamlet; we see the real Hamlet only from behind and the side. He moves closer to his reflection—and us and Claudius—as the speech goes on. The music begins slowly and quietly, almost imperceptible at first. He pulls out a knife on the line "his quietus makes" and holds it toward his reflection—and Claudius. By the end of the speech, the camera moves fully into the reflected Hamlet; there is no real Hamlet in the shot anymore.

Ethan Hawke (2000): Faced with so many choices, Hamlet misses the obvious one: Action!

Ethan Hawke (2000, Michael Almereyda)

0:40:06–0:42:36 on DVD (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0M9UjZXex2E&feature=related)

In this modern adaptation, the director chooses to have Hamlet deliver the speech in an empty Blockbuster video store, wandering through the aisles as if he were looking for a movie to rent. Like the Olivier and Smoktunovsky versions, he does not speak most of the lines aloud. He looks weary and worn down in his black suit contrasting with his knit hat. Ironically, Hamlet spends most of his time in the "Action" section, and a TV is playing a scene from *The Crow 2*, a film in which the lead character successfully avenges the murder of his son ruthlessly and without hesitation. A sign over Hamlet's head reads, "Go Home Happy." As he bemoans losing "the name of action," we see a scene from *The Crow 2* with the protagonist engulfed by flames.

Part Four: Transforming the Speech

The basic philosophy about teaching Shakespeare that I've learned from the Folger approach is that for students to understand Shakespeare, they have to read it, hear it, view it, and perform it. I'd like to add one more requirement: they have to *transform* it. For some teachers, this means transforming the language of Shakespeare into contemporary language, or into a rap, or into text messaging, for example.

While I absolutely see the value in this type of exercise, it always feels a little presumptuous to do this to Shakespeare's words, which are just fine the way they are, and to me, the results of these language transformations often seem funny when the original is tragic.

So, as a final activity I ask students to change the setting of Hamlet's soliloquy to a new location. Reflecting on the film versions we viewed, I ask students to consider why the directors chose the locations they did. How do the cliffs, mirrors, caskets, and Blockbuster videos reflect the theme, tone, and conflicts of the speech? As a class, we brainstorm new locations for Hamlet to deliver the lines in different categories: our school, your neighborhood, your house, other countries and cities, historical time periods, and so on. Then, I have students describe, storyboard, or even film their Hamlet transformations with all the theatrical choices that a real director and actor would need to make. Some of the results I've received are Hamlet in a school hallway, stock still as classmates taunt him as they pass by; Hamlet standing on the rails of a bridge looking over the edge; Hamlet as a hospice doctor; and, memorably, Hamlet as a terrorist. As a part of these transformations, students need to explain how their theatrical choices relate to the themes and conflicts found in the speech. I also want them to be able to explain how their interpretations are similar to or different from other filmmakers' choices.

The power of this type of transformation and of all these activities is that students begin to see how the long-dead Shakespeare can still be alive in today's world. And of that, there really is no question.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION — **Joyce Bruett, RWT**

Golden uses Hamlet's speech in his classroom to show how choices in language and presentation affect how readers understand a text. In "Exploring Setting: Constructing Character, Point of View, Atmosphere, and Theme," students read canonical and noncanonical texts and examine how language is used to create setting and, in turn, how setting constructs other elements in a literary work. The lesson offers extension opportunities through formal essays, film reviews, and poetry analysis. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=1094